

Belgian Colonialism in Africa

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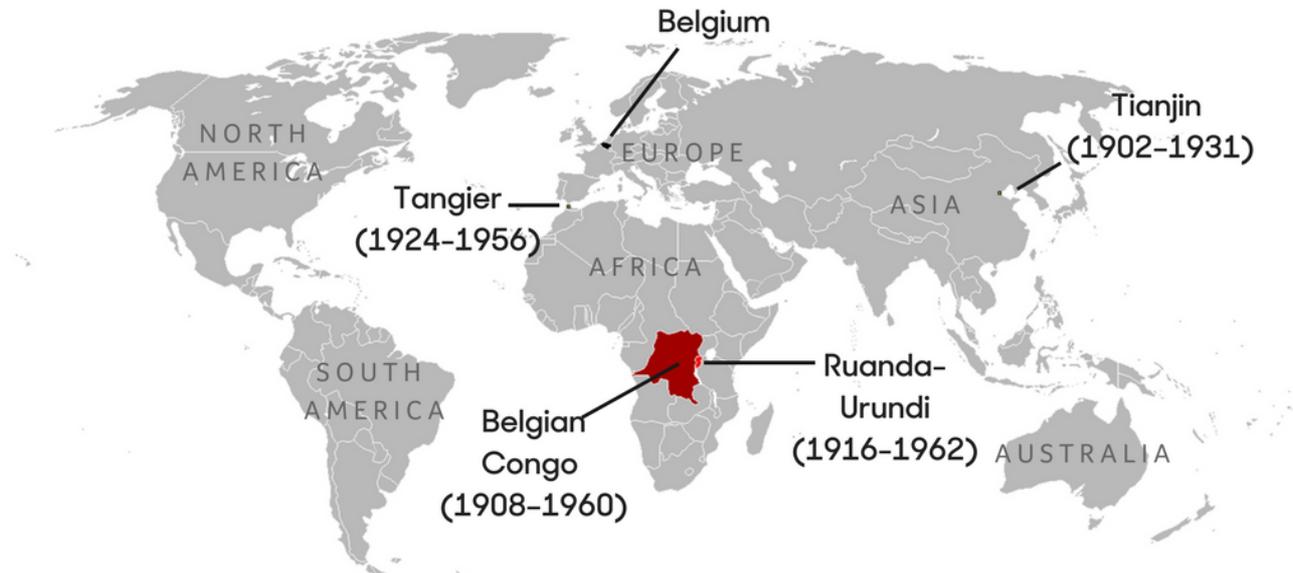
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Soldiers march in a parade in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 30, 2010, on the day of the country's 50th anniversary of independence from Belgium. Photo by: Olivier Polet/Corbis via Getty Images

Belgium is a small country in northwest Europe that joined Europe's race for colonies in the late 1800s. Many European countries wanted to colonize distant parts of the world in order to extract their resources. Their goal was also to "civilize" the inhabitants of what were seen as less-developed countries.

When Belgian King Leopold II came to power in 1865, he believed that colonies would greatly increase Belgium's wealth and prestige. His actions in Africa, which were greedy and cruel. They continue to affect the welfare of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi today.



Belgium's Colonial Possessions

Exploration of Congo River Basin

One area of interest was the Congo River Basin in central Africa. European adventurers had a hard time exploring and colonizing this area due to the steamy tropical climate, disease and the resistance of local Africans.

With the intention of seizing control of the region, in the 1870s King Leopold II created an organization called the International African Association. The group claimed to be a scientific and charitable organization that would greatly improve the lives of native Africans. Its goals were to convert them to Christianity, end the slave trade by Muslim groups in East Africa, and introduce European health and educational systems.

Leopold sent the explorer Henry Morton Stanley to the region. Stanley successfully made treaties with native tribes, set up military posts, and forced most Muslim slave traders to leave. In the process, Stanley was able to acquire millions of square miles of central African land for Belgium.

However, most of Belgium's government leaders and citizens did not want to spend the enormous amount of money needed to maintain such distant colonies. Other European countries weren't interested in the region either. In 1884 and 1885, the European powers held the Berlin Conference to establish ground rules for colonizing Africa. Leopold was given

control of the region, which became his own private property. In return, European countries were allowed to trade in this newly formed state without paying any fees. The area was nearly 80 times larger than Belgium, and Leopold named it the Congo Free State.

Brutal treatment of native Africans

King Leopold promised that he would develop his private property to improve the lives of the native Africans. He quickly ignored all of his Berlin Conference guidelines. He began to take advantage the region's land and inhabitants. Due to industrialization, goods such as tires were now desired in large numbers in Europe. John Boyd Dunlop had just invented an inflatable tire in 1887 and now rubber had become valuable. Native Africans were forced to produce ivory and rubber, and Leopold's army mutilated or killed any African who didn't produce enough. The Belgians burned African villages, farmland and rainforest, and kept women as hostages until rubber and mineral quotas were met. Due to this brutality and European diseases, about 10 million people died. Leopold took the enormous profits and built lavish buildings in Belgium.

The Belgian Congo



Leopold tried mightily to conceal this abuse from the international public. However, many countries and individuals learned of these atrocities by the early 1900s. Joseph Conrad set his popular novel "Heart of Darkness" in the Congo Free State and described the abuses by Europeans.

The Belgian government forced Leopold to surrender his personal country in 1908. The government itself took over and renamed the region the Belgian Congo. The Belgian government and Catholic missions tried to aid the inhabitants by improving health and education and building an infrastructure, but the Belgians still exploited the region's gold, copper and diamonds.

Independence for the Democratic Republic of the Congo

By the 1950s, many African countries embraced anti-colonialism, nationalism and equality under the Pan-Africanism movement. One of the ideas of Pan-Africanism was that people of African descent all around the world were facing similar struggles. It advocated unity among the different African nations.

By then, the Congolese had some rights, such as owning property and voting in elections. They began to demand independence. Under pressure from the United Nations, and in order to avoid a long, deadly war, Belgium granted independence to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) on June 30, 1960.

Today, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the third largest country in Africa and has approximately 70 million citizens. Its capital is Kinshasa, formerly named Leopoldville. However, the DRC has experienced corruption, inflation and several regime changes. Inflation is when the value of a country's currency decreases, so more money is needed to buy the same goods. Two civil wars in the DRC have become the world's deadliest conflict since World War II. Millions have died from war, famine or disease, and millions more are now refugees.

Ruanda-Urundi

The current countries of Rwanda and Burundi are the Belgian Congo's neighbors to the east. They were once colonized by the Germans, who named the region Ruanda-Urundi. After Germany's defeat in World War I, Ruanda-Urundi was made a protectorate of Belgium. Belgium also exploited the land and people of Ruanda-Urundi. Inhabitants were forced to pay

taxes and grow cash crops such as coffee, and were given very little education. However, by the 1960s, Ruanda-Urundi also began to demand independence, and Belgium ended its colonial empire, granting Rwanda and Burundi independence in 1962.

Legacy of colonialism in Rwanda-Burundi

The most important legacy of colonialism in Rwanda and Burundi involved the Belgians' obsession with race. The Tutsi and the Hutu ethnic groups are the largest ethnic groups in the region. The Belgians believed that the Tutsis in Rwanda were racially superior to the Hutus because the Tutsis had more "European" features. The Belgians allowed only Tutsis to be educated and participate in the government. The tension between the groups remained after Belgian colonialism, and erupted into the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which a Hutu group attacked the Tutsis. Around 850,000 people were killed.

Past and future of Belgian colonialism

The economies, political systems and social welfare in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi have been enormously affected by the greedy ambitions of King Leopold II of Belgium. All three countries have been exploited, and experienced violence and poverty. Perhaps, one day, their rich sources of minerals will bring permanent peaceful prosperity to the interior of Africa.

Quiz

1 Examine the image at the top of the article.

Which statement BEST explains why the image is included with the article?

- (A) It shows that there are many female soldiers in the DRC today.
- (B) It shows that the DRC is proud to celebrate its independence from Belgium.
- (C) It shows that there are still effects of Belgian occupation in the DRC.
- (D) It shows that the DRC has continued to struggle since gaining its independence.

2 The map in the section "Exploration of Congo River Basin" shows that Ruanda-Urundi became a Belgian colony after the Congo.

Based on the article, what is the explanation for this detail?

- (A) Leopold's explorers had a harder time reaching the area of Ruanda-Urundi.
- (B) European powers granted Leopold control of the area at the Berlin Conference.
- (C) Leopold grew interested in the area after rubber was discovered there.
- (D) European powers gave the area to Belgium after Germany lost World War I.

3 Read the paragraph from the section "The Belgian Congo."

Leopold tried mightily to conceal this abuse from the international public. However, many countries and individuals learned of these atrocities by the early 1900s. Joseph Conrad set his popular novel "Heart of Darkness" in the Congo Free State and described the abuses by Europeans.

Why does the author include this paragraph in the article?

- (A) to contrast Conrad's view of the Congo with most Europeans'
- (B) to illustrate that Leopold was a failure as a colonial ruler
- (C) to explain what caused Leopold's rule in the Belgian Congo to end
- (D) to describe the importance of Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"

- 4 A reader of the article suggested that the author included the section "Legacy of colonialism in Rwanda-Burundi" to emphasize that the effects of colonialism continue to impact the area.

Is this correct? Which sentence from the section supports your answer?

- (A) No; The Tutsi and the Hutu ethnic groups are the largest ethnic groups in the region.
- (B) Yes; The Belgians believed that the Tutsis in Rwanda were racially superior to the Hutus because the Tutsis had more "European" features.
- (C) No; The Belgians allowed only Tutsis to be educated and participate in the government.
- (D) Yes; The tension between the groups remained after Belgian colonialism, and erupted into the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which a Hutu group attacked the Tutsis.