Belgian Colonialism in Africa

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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 the north Europe. More than 100 years ago, it joined the race to set up colonies around the world. Colonization means taking control of another land for its precious goods and changing the culture of people who live there.

Belgium was ruled by King Leopold II from 1865 to 1909. He believed that colonies would make Belgium much richer and more powerful. King Leopold took over many lands in central Africa. His actions were greedy, cruel, and they left a terrible mark on those areas.
Exploration of Congo River Basin

The Congo River Basin in central Africa had many precious materials. This is the area that is crossed by the Congo River. Leopold came up with a plan to control the region, and he created the International African Association.

This group said it would help make the lives of Africans better. It said it would also make them Christians, end the slave trade by Muslim groups in East Africa and help with schooling and health. Because of the slave trade, Africans were being captured, bought and sold as slaves.

But this was not really what Leopold cared about. He sent the explorer Henry Morton Stanley to the region. Stanley made unfair deals with African tribes and had soldiers take over new lands. He did force most Muslim slave traders to leave. But in the end, Stanley took over millions of miles of land for Belgium.

Most Belgians did not want to colonize this area. None of the other European countries did either. Controlling land so far away was expensive, so these countries decided to let Leopold take the land for himself. Finally, his plan had worked. The region became his own personal state and it was about 80 times larger than Belgium. He called it the Congo Free State.

Brutal treatment of native Africans

King Leopold was supposed to make the lives of Africans better, but he really wanted money. John Boyd Dunlop had just invented an inflatable tire in 1887. Suddenly, rubber became valuable. Leopold forced Africans to gather rubber and ivory, which is precious animal bone. Leopold's army killed Africans who didn't make enough.
The Europeans also burned African villages, farmland and rainforest. About 10 million Africans died from this brutal treatment and from sickness. Meanwhile, Leopold II took the money and built fancy buildings in Belgium.

**The Belgian Congo**

King Leopold tried to hide what he was doing from the world. But many learned of his actions. At that point, the Belgian government turned against him. It forced Leopold to give up his personal country.

The government took over the region for itself and called it the Belgian Congo. The Belgian government built schools, hospitals and roads. But the Belgians kept mining the region’s gold, copper and diamonds.

**Independence for the Democratic Republic of the Congo**

About 50 years later, many African countries were fighting against colonialism. By then, the people of the Belgian Congo had more rights than they used to. They were able to own property and vote for their rulers. They began asking for independence.
Many around the world also wanted colonialism to end, and convinced Belgium to give up the territory. The country was now free, and it was called the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC.

Today, the DRC is the third largest country in Africa and has about 70 million people. Its main city, which used to be called Leopoldville, is now called Kinshasa.

Becoming free did not stop people in the DRC from suffering. The country had been mistreated for a long time, and many groups fought against each other. Millions have died from war, poverty and sickness. Millions more have been forced to run from their homes because of the violence.

**Ruanda-Urundi**

Rwanda and Burundi have also suffered a great deal. These are countries to the east of the DRC. They used to be one German colony, and were named Ruanda-Urundi. After Germany lost World War I, Belgium took over the region.

Belgium forced Africans to pay taxes and did not give them much education. Taxes are money that people have to pay their government. Later, Ruanda-Urundi began to demand independence. When Belgium ended its colonial empire, Ruanda-Urundi became the two countries of Rwanda and Burundi.

**Legacy of colonialism in Rwanda-Burundi**

Tutsis and Hutus are the two biggest groups in the area. The Belgians thought that certain races were better than others. They thought that Tutsis were better than Hutus because the Tutsis looked more European.

The Belgians said only the Tutsis could go to school and be part of the government. The Hutus were angry because they were treated so unfairly. Many years later, the differences between the two led to the Rwandan genocide. A genocide is when one group of people kills another group in large numbers. In this case, a group of Hutus attacked the Tutsis and 850,000 people died.

**Past and future of Belgian colonialism**

The DRC, Rwanda and Burundi were affected by the greed of King Leopold II of Belgium. All three countries were made poor, and went through a great deal of violence. But they all still have precious goods. Maybe, one day, these will bring peace and wealth to central Africa.