Belgian Colonialism in Africa

Belgium is a small country in northwest Europe that joined the race for colonization in the late 1800s. Many European countries wanted to colonize distant parts of the world in order to extract resources and "civilize" their residents.

Belgian King Leopold II came to power in 1865. He believed that colonies would greatly increase Belgium’s wealth and prestige. Leopold’s actions in Africa were greedy and cruel, and they continue to affect the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi today.
Exploration of Congo River Basin

European adventurers experienced great difficulty in exploring and colonizing the Congo River Basin in central Africa. The climate was hot and steamy and disease was widespread. Europeans also met with resistance, as local Africans were not exactly keen on giving up their territories and way of life.

Leopold hatched up a scheme to take over the region, and in the 1870s he created the International African Association. This group claimed to be a scientific and charitable organization that would greatly improve the lives of Africans. Its mission was to convert them to Christianity, end the slave trade by Muslim groups in East Africa, and bring European health and educational systems.

Leopold sent the explorer Henry Morton Stanley to the region. Stanley made unfair 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 miles of land for Belgium.

Yet, most Belgians did not want to spend the enormous amount of money needed to maintain distant colonies. Other European countries weren't interested in that region of Africa either. In 1884 and 1885, the European powers held the Berlin Conference to establish ground rules for colonizing Africa. During the conference, the region, which was nearly 80 times larger than...
Belgium, became Leopold's own personal state. He named it the Congo Free State. In return for other European countries allowing him to have Congo, Leopold let European countries trade in the region without paying any fees.

**Brutal treatment of native Africans**

Leopold had promised to develop this state to improve the lives of the native Africans. He quickly ignored all his promises. Europe was going through industrialization, so Europeans needed goods such as tires in large numbers. John Boyd Dunlop had just invented the tire in 1887 and rubber became valuable. King Leopold forced the Africans in the Congo to produce ivory and rubber. His army mutilated or killed any African who didn't produce enough. The Europeans burned African villages, farmland and rainforest, and kept women as hostages until quotas were met. Due to this brutality and European diseases, about 10 million Africans died. Meanwhile, Leopold took the enormous profits and built fancy buildings in Belgium.

**The Belgian Congo**
King Leopold tried to hide this abuse from the international public. However, many learned of his actions 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 the king to surrender his personal country in 1908. The region, now under the control of the Belgian government, was renamed the Belgian Congo.

The Belgian government and Catholic missions did try to help Africans by improving health and education and building infrastructure. But the Belgians also kept exploiting the region for gold, copper and diamonds.

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

By the 1950s, many African countries opposed colonialism and supported equality under the Pan-Africanism movement. One of the ideas of Pan-Africanism was that African nations around the world should work together.

By then, the Congolese had some rights, such as owning property and voting in elections. They began to demand independence. Belgium came under pressure from the United Nations and wanted to avoid a long, deadly war. It granted independence to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or the 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 kept facing troubles. It has experienced corruption, economic troubles and civil war. Two civil wars in the DRC have turned into the world's deadliest conflict since World War II. Millions died from war, famine or disease, and millions more became refugees.

**Ruanda-Urundi**

The 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 came under the rule of Belgium. Inhabitants were forced to pay taxes, grow cash crops such as coffee, and were given very little education.

However, by the 1960s, Ruanda-Urundi also began to demand independence. As Belgium ended its colonial empire, it granted Rwanda and Burundi independence in 1962.

**Legacy of colonialism in Rwanda-Burundi**

The most important effect of colonialism in Rwanda and Burundi involved the Belgians' ideas about race. Most people in these countries belong to either the Tutsi or the Hutu ethnic group. The Belgians thought that the Tutsis in Rwanda were racially superior to the Hutus. They believed this because the Tutsis had more “European” features.
The Belgians only let Tutsis be educated and participate in the government. The unequal treatment caused deep resentment among the Hutus. The tension between the two groups erupted into the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which a group of Hutus attacked the Tutsis. About 850,000 people were killed.

**Past and future of Belgian colonialism**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi were enormously affected by the greedy ambitions of King Leopold II of Belgium. All three countries experienced exploitation, violence and poverty. Perhaps, one day, their rich sources of minerals will bring permanent peace and prosperity to central Africa.