



Colonial History of the Congo: 1885-1960

12 MINUTE READ

Key terms

Colonialism- The practice of financial, cultural, and resource domination of a people by a foreign nation.

Imperialism- The strategic and targeted practice of dominating a group of people and/or land through violent occupation and resource extraction. Imperialists force economic, political, and cultural control usually through the violent loss of life. (Ex: Britain, France, Spain, etc. are the OG imperialists. The United States has emerged as an imperialist force over the last 300 years)

Indentured laborers- An exploitative contract between a laborer and their employer. The laborer agrees to sell their labor without pay, often in exchange for meager housing and scraps of food. (Ex: After chattel slavery was abolished, many “freed” Black people were forced to enter indentured servitude)

Kingdom of Kongo- A Kingdom in Central Africa which was founded in 1390 and fell in the early 1900s. The kingdom covered parts of present-day Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Republic of Congo.

Raw goods- The basic materials needed to make millions of goods, services, and energy. (Ex: Wood, cotton, aluminum, cobalt, clay)

Scramble for Africa- A historical period in which European powers drew borders and split the continent of Africa into various territories that they controlled as colonies of their empires.

Basic History

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is located in Central Africa and is the second-largest country on the continent, and the largest country in sub-Saharan Africa. Over 250 distinct ethnic groups live within its borders which has created interpersonal conflicts throughout the past century.

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Today, in the DRC nearly 6 million people, half of whom are under 18 years old, have been internally displaced, and militant groups are fighting over land, as well as access to mines and natural resources, such as diamonds, cobalt, zinc, coltan, and copper. *How did we arrive at this current situation? How do we move forward?*

Kingdom of Kongo and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

The Kingdom of the Kongo, located in west-central Africa, was one of the largest and most powerful empires on the African continent during the 17th century. As imperialist activity in the region expanded, competing colonial regimes were fighting for territory.

In 1482, Portuguese colonizers and Catholic missionaries, led by Diogo Cao, entered Central Africa and facilitated the baptisms and religious conversions of local rulers in the Kongo. While the Kingdom of Kongo had its own domestic slave markets, the Portuguese exploited this and sold approximately 5 million West Central Africans into slavery.

King Leopold and the Congo Free State (1885-1908)

For the next 380 years, Africans of the Kingdom of Kongo came into routine contact with Europeans until the Kingdom fell. Colonial expansion accelerated in November 1884 with the Berlin Conference. Also known as the Congo Conference, thirteen European countries and the United States of America held a meeting in Berlin to create borders on the African continent and divide up land amongst themselves. No Indigenous Africans were allowed to attend the conference, which cemented Africa as a playground for Western powers.

During this conference, Leopold II, the king of Belgium, convinced the other European powers to give him control of the Congo region. He claimed that he would end slavery, promote free trade, and spread Christianity— this was far from the truth. Once in control of the Congo Free State, Leopold II was the sole private owner. His ultimate goal was to extract natural resources, like rubber and ivory, from the area and “civilize” the people of the Congo.

Leopold II organized an all-white private army to oversee rubber plantations and ivory mines. On several occasions, the army had to suppress rebellions. Under his control, around 15 million Congolese people, half of the population, died from punishment, disease, torture, and malnutrition. One of the cruelest forms of punishment was cutting the hands off of Congolese men who failed to meet the daily rubber collection quota.

The Congolese genocide carried on for 23 years and completely destroyed the heritage, culture, and economic prosperity of the Congolese people. In 1905, the international community finally began to investigate the abuses that had taken place at the hands of King Leopold II. Three years later, in 1908, Leopold II finally renounced his rule over the Congo Free State and handed

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the territory over to the Belgian government, renaming it the Belgian Congo until independence in 1960.

Belgian Congo: The Colonial Trinity (1908-1960)

Belgian rule of the Congo was based on the concept of the Colonial Trinity: state, missionary, and private-company interests. Congolese natives had no role in legislation, except for traditional rulers who were used as agents of the Belgian government to collect taxes and suppress any rebellions.

The colonial government and private foreign corporations became closely tied, and the state facilitated strike breaks and other forms of marginalization to continue their colonial rule. During this time, a majority of the Congo's plantations were created to harvest cotton, palm oil, coffee, rubber, and cocoa.

In other parts of the colony, Belgian officials and private companies opened mines that would further extract natural resources from the Congo. Gold, diamonds, copper, tin, cobalt, and zinc were mined by Congolese natives. Congolese men and women were forced to work in mines as indentured laborers under contracts that lasted between 4 to 7 years.

After the end of World War II, many white Europeans moved to the Congo to invest in and oversee the production of raw goods. Congolese society became racially segregated, as Congolese natives were treated as second-class citizens in every aspect of life. By the 1950s, revolutionary groups were starting to form in the Congo.

These nationalist movements, which rejected Belgian and Western rule, were largely led by the educated Congolese elite. One of the most influential of these groups was the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC): a nationalist, anti-colonial, united front that advocated for a centralized and unified Congolese identity and nation.

The MNC was founded and led by Patrice Lumumba and worked to achieve independence "within a reasonable" time. Under Lumumba's leadership, the party adopted militant tactics which culminated during the Léopoldville riots on January 4, 1959, also known in the Congo as the Day of the Martyrs. This three-day uprising claimed the lives of around 500 Congolese revolutionaries and was a turning point in the independence movement.

The Belgian government announced on January 13, 1959, that Congolese independence was a primary goal of its reforms moving forward because the nationalist movement was impossible to contain. Freedom finally came on June 30, 1960, after Belgian and Congolese political leaders negotiated independence at a Round Table Conference.

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After this conference, Lumumba became the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo and stayed in office for four months until he was ousted in a coup led by US-backed politician Joseph Mobutu.

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Thornton, J. (2001). The origins and early history of the Kingdom of Kongo, c. 1350-1550. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 34(1), 89–120. doi:10.2307/3097288

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