

## **Belgian policies and impacts**

Foreign encroachment on the area increased during the 19th century. In 1816 British explorers attempted to follow the Congo River inland, reaching a point between present-day Matadi and Kinshasa, before illness forced them to retreat. Scottish explorer and missionary David Livingstone, who brought the injustices of the Zanzibari slave trade to the attention of Europe, reached Lualaba River from the east in 1871. Growing European interest in Africa as a source of wealth was stimulated by the accounts of explorers, notably Anglo-American journalist Henry Morton Stanley, who explored the Congo between 1874 and 1877. The first explorer to fully investigate the river, Stanley descended the Congo River system from the upper Lualaba to its mouth, traveling more than 2,600 km (more than 1,600 mi).

Upon his return to Europe, Stanley petitioned the British government to colonize the region, but he was refused. However, King Leopold II of Belgium engaged Stanley to return to the Congo to set up trading stations and establish relations with the native chiefs. This territorial acquisition was pursued under the guise of an ostensibly philanthropic organization, created and controlled by Leopold, with the stated purpose of promoting the exploration and “civilization” of Central Africa in order to end the slave trade. Stanley founded a number of posts, including Léopoldville (now Kinshasa), and secured for Leopold the rights to extensive regions bordering the Congo River.

Conflicting territorial claims advanced by various nations, notably Portugal and France, around the mouth of the Congo led in 1884 to the Berlin West Africa Conference. The conference, which was attended by representatives of all European powers with colonial interests in Africa, outlawed the slave trade and established rules for the division of the continent of Africa among them. Leopold’s personal sovereignty over the region, now called the Congo Free State, was recognized in 1885.

Leopold quickly occupied his territory with Belgian soldiers and traders and commissioned the construction of railways around unnavigable sections of the Congo River. According to agreements reached at the Berlin conference, the Congo Free State was to be open to the trade of all nations. After Leopold laid claim to all the ivory and rubber trees in the Congo in the early 1890s, however, there was little else for any nation to trade. Rubber proved to be the most lucrative product in the Congo. Starting in the early 1890s, Congolese people were systematically forced to collect rubber as the only means of paying new taxes levied on them. Ironically, in the same period that this system of virtual slavery was imposed by the colonists, the Belgian colonial army, the Force Publique, destroyed the Zanzibari slave trade in the eastern Congo. The violent suppression of the slave trade and the new system of forced labor caused severe hardships in the region. As colonial rule was asserted, minor local uprisings were quelled, including three mutinies by Congolese members of the Force Publique.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the administration of the Congo Free State became increasingly oppressive in its exploitation of Congolese workers, and word of the exploitation led to international protest. Reports by British diplomat Roger David Casement and journalist E. D. Morel publicized the lack of development in the Congo and the regular use of torture by Leopold’s rubber collection agents. Public opinion forced Leopold to establish a commission of inquiry in

1904. The commission revealed that the Congolese were victims of a slave labor system and other human rights abuses.

The king instituted certain reforms, but these proved ineffective. As a result, in 1908 the Belgian parliament voted to annex the Congo Free State, making it a colony that became known as the Belgian Congo. While the most unfair labor practices were eliminated, most Congolese people fared little better under the new administration.

During World War I (1914-1918) Congolese troops aided the Allied cause in Africa, conquering the German territory of Ruanda-Urundi (now Rwanda and Burundi). After the war Belgian colonialism changed greatly. Labor practices were liberalized, and schools and hospitals were established. The standard of living rose significantly. However, the Belgian colonial attitude toward the Congolese remained extremely paternalistic. The Africans were treated like children, disciplined when judged to behave disobediently or immorally, and taught to abandon traditional lifestyles in favor of laboring on colonists' farms. In addition, the Congolese were not taught modern technical or administrative skills.

Substantial industrialization and urbanization took place in the colony during World War II (1939-1945). This process was particularly marked in the uranium, copper, palm oil, and rubber industries. Uranium from the Congo was used to develop the first atomic weapons. During the postwar years, industrial productivity increased, and a limited series of reforms, designed to prepare the Congolese for eventual self-government, was initiated. Africans were allowed to own land, and a very small number of Africans, under extremely subjective criteria, were officially recognized as having the same legal status as white colonists. Municipal council elections, the first ever for the Congolese, were scheduled for December 1957. The Belgian government believed these reforms would be the first step in a prolonged, gradual movement toward Congolese autonomy. However, the social and cultural effects of colonialism and rapid modernization had left the colony unbalanced economically and inexperienced politically.

In the December elections, Congolese Africans won 130 of 170 local municipal council seats. Political parties, which were not permitted in these elections, were allowed to operate only after violent nationalist riots in Léopoldville in January 1959. As political parties quickly sprouted across the colony, the Belgian government announced a schedule for national elections, which were to inaugurate limited autonomy. But a congress of leading nationalist parties insisted upon immediate full independence. The two principal parties were the Abako (Bakongo Alliance), led by Joseph Kasavubu, and the Congolese National Movement, led by militant nationalist Patrice Lumumba. Belgium, faced with rapidly escalating tensions and nationalist unrest, agreed to relinquish the unprepared colony. In preindependence elections in May 1960 some 40 parties presented candidates. Lumumba's Congolese National Movement showed the greatest strength, followed by Abako. By agreement between the two leading parties, Lumumba became prime minister, and Kasavubu became president. The independent Republic of the Congo was proclaimed in Léopoldville on June 30, 1960.