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THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC) AND THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF INTERNAL CONFLICTS

■ INTRODUCTION

It has been painful, almost heart breaking, that nowhere in Africa – except for South Africa – the colonial rule was as absolute and savage as it was in the Belgian Congo. The colonization of what is currently known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) by the Belgians was one of the most brutal. Though Belgium was a relatively weak power in comparison to other European colonizers, it managed to appease its neighbors by not venturing into territories outside central Africa (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002).

King Leopold II's interest in the Congo was driven by a desire for wealth and prestige. At a time when European powers were competing for colonies, Leopold sought to establish his own personal empire. He portrayed his rule over the Congo as a civilizing mission, promoting the idea of bringing „light” to a „dark” continent. Beneath this ideological façade of a „civilizer” laid a ruthless pursuit of profit, primarily through the extraction of natural resources.

■ INDEPENDENCE AND THE CONTINUATION OF PILLAGE OF AFRICA

In the early 1960s, at the onset of independence, Ghana's respected statesman Kwame Nkrumah acknowledged the Congo as the „heart of Africa”, occupying a pole position in the continent's „future political fortunes”. Regrettably the fate of the country was different. The country has not escaped the paradox of poverty in abundance – the resource curse! The wealth of the nation has

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attracted global, regional and in-country speculators, investors, predators and abductors.

Their local agents, following directives from the US government, got the popularly elected Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, the country's first nationalist and unapologetic revolutionary leader, executed by a firing squad on the 17th January 1961, soon after independence. Lumumba had to be led away by both Belgium as a colonial power, and the US as the guardian of global imperialism. The levers of power transited to local vicious collaborators. The heart of Africa has never been the same again since.

■ INDEPENDENCE AND NEO-COLONIALISM

From time to time, elections have been held to legitimize political power in the DRC, as elsewhere in Africa. No doubt there have been incremental changes in terms of regime legitimacy every time elections have been held. The elections somehow politically legitimize the continued plunder of Africa under the rule of „democratically elected” leaders. Such elections are often fought by political parties organized largely on regional, ethnic or religious lines. That is why it is often assumed that the common denominator of conflicts in the African politics revolves around ethnic identity and the irrationality of forcing people with no common history to live within one nation-state. This may appear to be true; but only superficially. In the DRC, the rains began to beat us in the late 19th century. In this essay, I will attempt to demonstrate how, during the scramble for Africa, the „dark continent” was dismembered and shared as colonies by European powers primarily on the basis of what each colony offered in terms of resources, trade and human capital.

Walter Rodney's book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Rodney 2018) gives a useful analysis of this phenomenon: „Colonialism was not merely a system of exploitation, but one whose essential purpose was to repatriate the profits to the so-called mother country”. Belgian colonization of the Congo was both typical and atypical compared to African countries ruled by the French, British, Germans or even the Dutch in South Africa.

The Belgians had no inclination or capacity to politically or culturally assimilate the colonized society into the so-called Western civilization. Having brutally seized the landmass as his personal property in 1885, King Leopold II treated Congo as a real estate that could be leased and auctioned according to his whims. Initially, the DRC's wealth was realized through the rubber trade. The late 19th century saw a surge in demand for rubber, particularly for use in industrial applications and consumer goods. Leopold II's administration enforced a system of forced labor, compelling Congolese villagers to collect rubber in brutal conditions. The regime employed violent tactics to maintain control and enforce production quotas, leading to widespread suffering, mutilation, and death.

The extraction methods were horrifyingly exploitative. Reports from missionaries and travelers documented atrocities committed against the Congolese, including punitive raids and the killing of those who failed to meet the rubber quotas. These brutal practices resulted in a significant decline in the population and a legacy of trauma that would haunt the region for generations.

The world had been conveniently silent when it came to the brutalities that had been going on in the DRC under the Belgian rule. In the book *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Adam Hochschild chronicles this sad chapter in history, observing that „the world we live in is shaped far less by what we celebrate than by the painful events we try to forget. Leopold's Congo is but one of those silences of history”. The author is particularly candid: „From the colonial era, the major legacy Europe left to Africa was not democracy (...) it was authoritarian rule and plunder. On the whole continent, perhaps no nation has had a harder time than the DRC in emerging from the shadow of its past”.

Despotism has its sell-by-date. National and international pressure drove Belgium to concede and reluctantly grant „independence” to Congo in 1962. But it hasn't given up yet, decided behind the scenes to stir up discontent and uncontrolled rebellion, deception, which eliminated Patrice Lumumba. Further lending credence to Walter Rodney's assertion „the metropolitan capitalists had no intention of allowing rivals to arise in the dependencies”. In the DRC the flag independence simply caused perpetual political chaos and instability. A trend that has continued for decades with few interregnums of stability under military or civilian rule. The UN reports 6 million deaths and 7.2 million internally displaced persons since 1996 in an unending international conflict that has sucked in the neighboring states of Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and Kenya. With huge reserves of mineral deposits that greedy multinational corporations already have access to on their own terms, the chaos simply provides an opportunity for these corporations, strongly supported by their „home governments”, to systematically and continuously pillage resources in the turbulent republic. 22 years ago, a brutally honest dossier in the „Guardian” (2002) exposed British companies helping to plunder resources in the war-torn African country.

The paper cited Barclays Bank, De Beers and Anglo American. It is brutally honest: so lucrative and elaborate was the looting that there were attempts to prolong the fighting by stirring conflict between rival militias and rebels. In the words of a panel involved in the enquiry, „those [criminal] groups will not disband voluntarily. They have built up a self-financing war economy centered on mineral exploitation”. In a research article on cobalt and corruption Anderson (2023) is curt: „the history of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is littered with foreign influence and corruption. While colonial forces sought for diamonds and rubber, the nation's abundance of cobalt, a key metal in cellphone and electric vehicle construction, has fueled a recent flurry of international interest”.

While the rubber boom defined the early years of Leopold's rule, the DRC's mineral wealth — particularly copper, cobalt, and diamonds — began to attract attention in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Congo is endowed with vast mineral resources, which were not extensively exploited during Leopold's reign but laid the groundwork for future extraction. Leopold's regime invested in infrastructure to facilitate the transport of these resources. Railroads and ports were developed, but these projects primarily served colonial interests rather than contributing to local development. The focus remained on maximizing profit for Belgium, with little regard for the well-being of the Congolese people.

The extraction of resources under Leopold II had catastrophic economic and social consequences for the DRC. While the colony generated immense wealth for Belgium, little was reinvested in local infrastructure or social programs. Education, healthcare, and other essential services were largely neglected, resulting in a population that was unprepared for the complexities of modern governance and society.

Moreover, the legacy of exploitation set the stage for future conflicts. The brutal practices of the colonial regime fostered deep-seated grievances among the Congolese, which would later erupt into violence during the struggles for independence and beyond. The lack of political development and trained leadership meant that when the DRC gained independence in 1962, it met a significant instability, a situation exacerbated by external interests vying for control over its mineral wealth.

In the Eastern Congo, particularly in the Kivu province, where the Goma city is situated, mining interests, both local and foreign, encourage and tolerate political chaos. Under such chaos they pay no taxes to the state and pillage as much as they want. It is a situation of permanent primitive accumulation. The historical exploitation during colonial times established patterns of resource extraction that persists today. Foreign interests often continue to dominate, perpetuating a cycle of underdevelopment and dependency.

Of the theories advanced to explain the mechanics of colonial systems, currently the most popular is the one in which the main pillar of imperialism is collaboration. Put simply, the theory contends that no imperial power can rule a subject people without affording consultation and conceding a large measure of consent to the governed. The consent of the governed is secured either soon after military conquest or as part of the continuing process of imposing – or superimposing – foreign rule over traditional rulership.

Belgium's colonial rule over the Democratic Republic of the Congo is often cited as a particularly harsh and exploitative period in history. Below are some of the key indicators that underline why the Belgian rule is viewed as detrimental to the DRC and they are discussed below.

First, it is worth noting that the primary goal of the Belgian colonization was the extraction of natural resources, particularly rubber and minerals. The Congolese people were forced to work in brutal conditions, leading to widespread suffering and death.

Second, the regime used violent tactics to control the population. Under King Leopold II there were severe punishments for those who did not meet rubber quotas, including mutilation and killings, the origin of violent suppression later to be witnessed throughout the years.

Third, Belgian authorities showed little respect for Congolese culture and traditions. Education was often limited and focused on indoctrination rather than the empowerment of the local population. Hence, Belgians polluted completely the Congolese culture.

Fourth, although the colony generated significant wealth for Belgium, little of this wealth was reinvested in the DRC. Infrastructure development primarily served the interests of the colonial administration rather than benefiting the local population.

Fifth, the Belgians did not prepare Congolese people for self-governance. When independence was finally granted in 1960, the country faced significant political instability, partly due to the lack of trained leaders.

These factors contributed to a legacy of underdevelopment and conflict that has persisted long after independence. King Leopold II's exploitation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a stark reminder of the destructive potential of colonialism. His focus on resource extraction, particularly on rubber and minerals, led to immense suffering and underdevelopment in the region.

The consequences of King Leopold's brutal regime are still felt today, as the DRC continues to grapple with the legacies of colonial exploitation and conflict over its rich mineral resources. Understanding this history is essential for addressing the ongoing challenges faced by the Congolese people and for promoting a more equitable and just future.

The legacy of Leopold II's mismanagement left deep scars on the DRC, contributing to ongoing challenges in governance, human rights, and economic stability. For a detailed exploration of this dark period, *King Leopold's Ghost...* by Adam Hochschild (1998) is an excellent resource, providing a comprehensive account of the atrocities committed during this colonial era.

The DRC gained independence from the Belgian colonial rule on June 30, 1960. However, the transition from colonialism to self-governance was fraught with challenges, leading to decades of political instability, economic turmoil, and social strife. In this essay, an attempt has been made to examine the key events and factors that shaped the DRC's post-independence trajectory, highlighting the ongoing struggles that the country continues to face today.

Upon gaining independence, the DRC faced significant political challenges. The newly formed government, led by Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, was unprepared for the complexities of self-governance. Lumumba's vision for a unified and independent Congo clashed with regional interests, particularly in Katanga, a resource-rich province that sought to secede. The power struggle between Lumumba and various regional leaders set the stage for conflict and instability.

The immediate aftermath of independence was marked by chaos. The military, largely composed of former colonial troops, was untrained and disorganized. In July 1960, just weeks after independence, a coup attempt led by General Joseph-Désire Mobutu (later Mobutu Sese Seko) and the secession of Katanga plunged the country into crisis. Lumumba's government struggled to maintain control, but foreign powers, including the United States and Belgium, became increasingly involved, basically taking over the control of government under the guise of fearing the rise of communism in the region.

In September 1960, Mobutu staged a coup that effectively sidelined Lumumba. Lumumba was arrested and later assassinated in January 1961, an act that drew international condemnation and highlighted the nefarious role of foreign interests in Congolese affairs. Mobutu consolidated power and established an authoritarian regime, ruling for over three decades.

Under Mobutu's leadership, the DRC was renamed Zaire, and he implemented a policy of „Zaireanization”, which aimed to replace foreign influence with local ownership. However, this policy led to widespread corruption and economic mismanagement. The regime's focus on personal enrichment and patronage networks resulted in the depletion of the country's resources and a decline in living standards for the majority of the population.

The DRC is rich in natural resources, including copper, cobalt, diamonds, gold, and coltan, yet the vast wealth generated from these resources has not translated into improved living conditions for the Congolese people. Instead, the economy suffered under Mobutu's corrupt administration, exacerbated by falling commodity prices in the 1980s. Infrastructure deteriorated, healthcare and education systems collapsed, and poverty became pervasive.

The social fabric of the DRC was further strained by ethnic tensions and regional disparities. Mobutu's regime favored certain ethnic groups, leading to marginalization and resentment among others. This division laid the groundwork for future conflicts, as various factions began to vie for power and resources.

The 1990s brought new challenges to the DRC. In 1990, facing international pressure and internal dissent, Mobutu promised political reforms. However, these efforts were largely superficial, and discontent grew. In 1997, a coalition of rebel forces led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila ousted Mobutu, marking the end of his long rule.

■ THE REIGN OF KABILA AND CONTINUED UNDERDEVELOPMENT AMID PLENTY

Kabila's ascendance to power was short-lived. His failure to address the country's deep-seated problems led to the outbreak of the Second Congo War in 1998, which drew in several neighboring countries and resulted in millions of deaths. The war was fueled by competition over the DRC's abundant resources, with various armed

groups vying for control. The conflict left the country in ruins, with a devastated economy and a fractured society.

In the early 2000s, peace agreements led to a semblance of stability. The transitional government was established, and elections were held in 2006, marking the first democratic vote since independence. However, the DRC continues to grapple with numerous challenges. The political landscape remains unstable, with ongoing violence in eastern regions fueled by armed groups and militias that politically camouflage the continued pillage of the country's minerals by external and local interests.

Corruption remains endemic, and the exploitation of natural resources often occurs at the expense of local communities. Despite the DRC's rich mineral wealth, most of its population lives in poverty, and basic services such as healthcare and education are severely lacking. The abundance of cobalt, copper, and diamonds, attracting multinational corporations and foreign governments, is only relevant to the poorly paid local labor that helps in the mining and transport of these resources.

■ CONCLUSIONS

The DRC's strategic location and resources have made it a focal point of regional and global geopolitical dynamics. During the Cold War and beyond, foreign powers supported various factions to maintain influence, often exacerbating internal conflicts. While foreign aid aims to foster development, it can also entrench corrupt governance and mismanagement. Conditionalities attached to aid can serve the interests of donor countries rather than addressing local needs.

International interests in the DRC's resources have fuelled conflicts, as different groups vie for control. This has led to humanitarian crises and has made the country a battleground for proxy wars. Trade policies and agreements often favour the extraction of resources rather than sustainable development, limiting local economic growth and self-sufficiency.

Foreign investment has often neglected environmental sustainability, leading to degradation that disproportionately affects local communities, contributing to social tensions. Overall, the interplay of international interests with local dynamics has created a complex political economy in the DRC, characterized by both opportunities and challenges for its development.

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From the time it was colonized to the present day, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has neither experienced democracy nor lasting peace and stability. Instead, it has all the qualitative attributes of a fragile state. Empirically, the beginnings of a fragile state are linked to rebellions which led to civil wars and thereafter took on a long-run trend with the capture and exploitation of resources. For example, diamonds in Sierra Leone, oil in Sudan and South Sudan and rare metals in DRC. Fragility stems from being in conflict repeatedly, a sign of a vicious cycle where conflict generates grievance and grievance generates further conflict. However recurring conflicts are also often driven by greed for resources whose control can fund a conflict ad infinitum especially if the resources are in demand globally. Hence the conflict becomes internationalized. The entry of international players is based on predatory opportunities to control commodity exports. Because the conflict also displaces people (and creates a rebellious diaspora), especially those with influence and money, these grievances fuel the discontent of diaspora which mobilizes funds to finance the conflict further.

Keywords: civil wars; exploitation of natural resources; international actors and fragile states