The History of Congo since King Leopold II

Student’s Name

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The history of any country is a dramatic book with peaceful and bloody chapters. Congo, a small country in the heart of Africa, is not an exception. It has experienced cruel despotism of colonization, bloody war, struggle for socialism and desperate attempts to create better life in future. This research seeks to calculate the history of Congo since King Leopold II, discuss its main points and their impact on today’s development of the country.

It is important to admit that since King Leopold II a new tragic period of Congo history began. The Belgian king recognized Congo’s potential in Ivory and natural resources. It was the most delicious slice he could take and enrich Belgian. When a Belgian government refused to support him in colonization of Congo, the king began a private colonization campaign.

In 1885 in the Conference of Berlin King Leopold II have signed the General Act under terms of which he has been obliged to provide humanitarian policies, fight with slave trade, and support philanthropic enterprises. However, it is an official version of the deal. Unofficially, the King has persuaded Bismarck to give him Congo as a free trade area in order to close a new rich area from Britain and France, the main Germany’s rivals. In this politics game where strong European countries opposed to other strong ones, it was more important than developing African tribes into a civilized nation. Thus, Bismarck agreed and the King Leopold II has easily become the owner of the rich territory as big as Belgium.

Ivory and mineral resources were the main source of profit for Belgium. The King Leopold II began to develop railroads for better mineral transportation. However, for Congo this improvement was not significant as people were in oppression of the Belgian king who applied brutal techniques and punishment in order to coerce them to increase rubber production at his own rubber plant. Inner trade was reduced to barter. "Each community was told to provide 10 per
cent of their number as full-time forced labourers, and another 25 per cent part-time” (http://www.independent.co.uk). For failing work quotas the native people were punished by a loss of one arm. There are evidences about numerous rapes and torturing people failing working quotas by black cannibal soldiers led by white officers. These facts prove that the King Leopold II has introduced a new type of slavery followed by genocide of native people. According to Dorman, the first wave of colonization killed about 10 million of native citizens by means of exploitation and disease (1905). “This rubber traffic is steeped in blood”, mentioned a writer of that time (http://www.independent.co.uk).

When finally the facts of bloody business have been leaked out more than twelve years later, the Free State of Congo was taken under the King Leopold II rule in 1908 under international pressure and criticism. Since that time the government of Belgium took a responsibility over the Belgian Congo and began a program of civilization and Christianization of native people.

By the Second World War the Belgian Congo lived a peaceful life and experienced a considerable social and economic growth. A large amount of profit earned in Congo was spent there for medicine, education, and infrastructure. New built hospitals at the big cities and medical posts in small villages made Medicare available for many Congolese. Widespread sleeping sickness has been eradicated.

The infrastructure of the big cities has been improved. New roads, ports and railroads have had a positive impact on transportation and trade. Staff working for mining companies received new houses. Many citizens were admitted to schools and received secondary or higher level of education. Thus, by the 1940s the Congo was the richest colony in Africa due to the high
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points in production and profits. Even life expectancy in 1950s was higher than today: 55 years vs. 51 years.

At the meantime, the Congolese were limited in rights of having land, vote or travel freely. Labor was mainly forced in the countryside. In the cities they had no right to occupy positions of engineers, lawyers or doctors. However, they wanted to be equal to whites. The educated class understood their miserable conditions and oppressions and required independence. A number of riots and civil disobedience blew up the whole country. The Congolese strived for independence, but they were not prepared to it.

The independence of Congo has been proclaimed in 1960 at the Brussels Round Table Conference. Patrice Lumumba, a Congolese Prime Minister has delivered an important speech revealing horrible exploitations and sufferings and promised to build a shining example of a country from African continent. Nevertheless, his words have remained words only.

During the first five years the Congo name has been changed three times. In addition, the political and social situation was unstable and volatile in the country. The province of Katanga announced independence, and Belgium with the United Nations moved troops in in response. Moving troops in can be explained by the fact that in spite of Congo independence Belgium and the United States have had their interests in the country. They continued mineral extraction there and did not want to lose this source of profit. Coup d’état might have been a good solution in a volatile situation that has occasionally emerged there.

Lumumba asked the Soviet Union for military aid. Sometime later a Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara came to Congo with one hundred soldiers to make socialist revolution. The assistance of the Soviets and Cuba to Lumumba interfered plans of the United States who considered Congo as a good source of money. Moreover, they did not want to allow the Soviet
Union to control Congo and gain profit of it. That is why president Eisenhower ordered CIA to kill Patrice Lumumba. When his plan failed, he decided to make Coup d’etat with the help of Colonel Joseph-Désiré Mobutu. It was a successful plan. Mobutu won, sent the Russian troops away and greatly pleased the U.S. president. His further ruling was marked by following the U.S. instructions that met all key matters of the U.S. foreign policy.

In other words, during this period Congo has become a battlefield between the USA and the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. The intervention of Belgium and the United States has had a single purpose to protect the richest copper and diamond mines, but not to ensure the security within a country. Keeping the soviet power out was a number one task. No one cared about the Congolese. Mobutu supported and funded anti-Communist riots in the near countries. The USA tended not to pay attention at anything else.

Mobutu was a cruel leader. He executed his rivals and accumulated power in his hands. He established a cult of his personality while corruption and buying off captured Congo’s government and hyperinflation destroyed Congo’s economy. Loans of the West did not help much. All money was pocketed and spent of luxury for private use. The country’s infrastructure was rotten and child mortality increased: 1159.

Chaos was over with the end of Cold War and fall of the Berlin Wall. Neither IMF nor the USA could lend more money. He escaped and left the country as a dustbin. Laurent-Désiré Kabila, a new Congolese leader seemed to be a ‘new breed’ of African future. Nelson Mandela believed in him, and Madeleine Albright hoped he could make Democratic Congo grow.

However, Kabila was not a leader everyone expected him to be. Paranoid tyrant was occupied only about the welfare of his friends and relatives whom he granted good jobs. In
addition, he was as cruel as Mobutu and did not learn from his mistakes. He could not resolve a conflict between Uganda, Congo and Rwanda.

In 2001 Kabila was assassinated and his son became President. A new leader negotiated international peace within a year, and established national unity. Although two-thirds of the country is peaceful, about 1,000 people die in the local conflicts daily. The country suffers from AIDS, poverty, child death. The internal debt grows day to day.

To sum it up, the history of Congo is rather dramatic. Rich lands with diamonds and mineral resources are the reason why the country is in a constant conflict. Violence has become a usual thing in Congo. It would be endless until Congolese leaders are in hands of the USA.
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References:


