

## DBQ: Perspectives on the Belgian Congo

### ASSIGNMENT DIRECTIONS

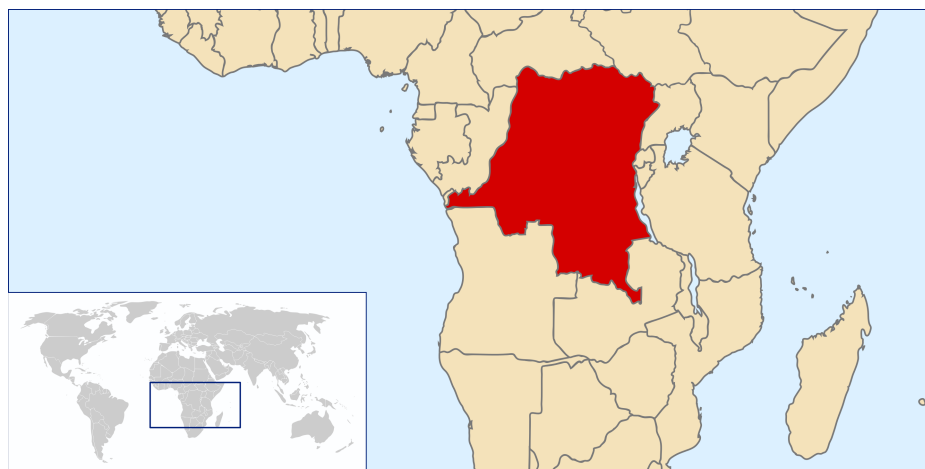
As you read, consider the following question: how were the Congolese people affected by Belgium's colonial rule?

## DBQ: Perspectives on the Belgian Congo

### Background information

The Democratic Republic of Congo is located in the center of Africa. It contains a huge area of rivers and rainforests known as the Congo River Basin.<sup>1</sup> The Congo River is the second largest river in the world when measured by the amount of water that flows through it. North of the Congo River Basin are plains and hills that are covered with forests and grasslands. To the east is the Great Rift Valley, which rises to around 12,000 feet.

The Congo has a very long rainy season. In fact, it is the rainiest place on Earth. The Congo is home to some of the most beautiful plants and trees in the whole world. It is also home to lions, leopards, elephants, giraffes, mountain gorillas, and all sorts of exotic birds.<sup>2</sup> Beneath the ground, Congo is also rich with resources. Diamonds,<sup>3</sup> copper, zinc, and cobalt are all mined in the Congo.



The Congo is shown in red on the map of Africa above.

The Congo was ruled by the European country Belgium<sup>4</sup> from 1885 to 1960. King Leopold of Belgium was the ruler from 1885 to 1908. Under his rule, the country was called The Congo Free State.

Under King Leopold's rule, the Congolese were treated very badly. King Leopold viewed them as children who had to be trained and controlled. They had no role in running the government, and their chiefs were used by the Belgians to collect taxes and round up people to work on rubber plantations.

**QUESTION 1   DOK 3   STANDARD RH.2   WH.07**

Was "Congo Free State" an appropriate name for the Congo under King Leopold's rule? Why or why not?

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Pressure from other European countries forced King Leopold to make changes, but things were not much better for the Congolese people in the Belgian Congo. In the 1950s, other African colonies began making plans to become independent countries. France and the United Kingdom worked with their colonies to make this happen but not Belgium. The Belgian government continued to act like a harsh parent over those that they considered to be their African “children” in the Congo.

After World War II, many European and American companies began spending money in the Belgian Congo. Large plantations were developed to cultivate cotton, oil palms, coffee, cacao, and rubber. There was also a huge investment in mines.

All of the work in the mines and on the plantations was done by Congolese people. The working conditions were very bad, and the pay was very low.

The Congolese had resisted the harsh treatment from their Belgian rulers from the beginning. There was a large revolt in the eastern part of the country in 1919 that lasted for four years. Religious groups were even organized around opposition to the Belgians. Resistance increased during the difficult years of the Great Depression (1931-36) and the Second World War (1939-45).

During the 1950s, resistance groups became more organized. In 1958, the first native political party, the Congo National Movement, began. The following year, there were riots, which led to fighting between the Congolese and the Belgian army. With chaos breaking out, the Belgian government suddenly gave in. The Congo became an independent republic on June 30, 1960.

**QUESTION 2   DOK 2   STANDARD RH.2   WH.07**

Why were countries like Belgium, England, and America so interested in the Congo?

- ☐ Congolese people were well educated and had a rich culture to share.
- ☐ The Congolese had invented things like silk and gunpowder.
- ☐ The Congo lies in a strategic place between European countries.
- ☐ The Congo had lots of natural resources like rubber, diamond, zinc, and cobalt.

## Document A: Leopold II writes a letter to his staff before he becomes king



*Excerpted and adapted by Actively Learn staff*

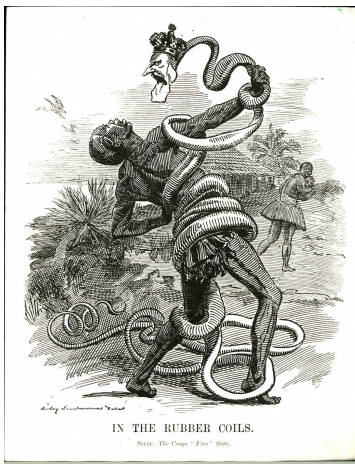
Belgium is surrounded by the sea and by France, Holland, and Prussia. That means that we cannot get more land in Europe. But, because of such new technologies as steam engines and electricity, we can travel to far away places and claim land there. Other countries have had great success in claiming colonies, so it is time for Belgium to have its own colony. Let us look for a place where we can claim the land and civilize<sup>5</sup> the people. This will show the world that Belgium is a great power.

## QUESTION 3 DOK 2 STANDARD RH.6 WH.07

According to Leopold's letter, what was the MAIN purpose in creating Belgian colonies?

- ☐ to claim more land in Europe
- ☐ to show other European nations that Belgium was powerful
- ☐ to grow rich from resources in the colonies
- ☐ to spread the message of Christianity

## Document B: Political cartoon from *Punch* magazine (1906)



From *Punch* Magazine, 1906. Artist: Edward Linley Sambourne

**Source information:** *Punch* was a British magazine that was circulated largely in the colonies as well as across Europe. In this cartoon, the snake represents King Leopold II while the person represents the common people of the Congo.

## QUESTION 4 DOK 2 STANDARD RH.7 WH.07

Who is likely the main author and audience for this cartoon?

- ☐ a Congolese person likely made the cartoon for a European audience
- ☐ a Congolese person likely made the cartoon for a Congolese audience
- ☐ a European person likely made the cartoon for a European audience
- ☐ a European person likely made the cartoon for a Congolese audience

**QUESTION 5   DOK 3   STANDARD RH.6   WH.07**

Based on the cartoon, what do you think the author's opinion was of Belgian rule in the Congo?  
Explain by referring to details in the drawing.

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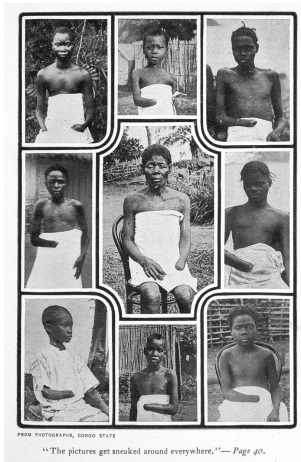
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## Document C: Image of mutilated Congolese (1905)



*Source: King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule, By Mark Twain, Boston: The P. R. Warren Co., 1905, Second Edition.*

**Source Background:** When Congolese workers could not meet their rubber quotas, the punishment was death. Belgian soldiers were required to show the right hand of their victim when they executed someone for missing their quota. The quotas were so unrealistic and these executions so common that human hands took on a value of their own, becoming a sort of currency.

## QUESTION 6 DOK 2 STANDARD RH.7 WH.07

The photos in Document C show proof of what practice?

- ☐ children in the Congo who had been attacked by wild animals
- ☐ traditional Congolese rituals of amputation
- ☐ Belgian soldiers cutting off hands when quotas weren't met
- ☐ hands being ripped off in rubber tree accidents

## Document D: An open letter<sup>6</sup> to his serene majesty Leopold II (1890)



George Washington Williams, "An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo By Colonel, The Honorable Geo. W. Williams, of the United States of America," 1890

**Source Background:** George Washington Williams (October 16, 1849 – August 2, 1891) was an American Civil War soldier, Baptist minister, politician, lawyer, journalist, and writer. Williams met King Leopold II of Belgium and was impressed. He then traveled in 1890 to the Congo Free State<sup>7</sup> (then owned by the king) to see its development. Shocked by the widespread, brutal abuses and near-slavery imposed on the Congolese, he wrote an open letter to Leopold in 1890 about the suffering of the region's native inhabitants at the hands of the king's agents. His letter sparked an international outcry against King Leopold's regime, which had caused millions of deaths.

*Excerpted and adapted by Actively Learn staff*

Good and Great Friend,

I would like to give you my ideas about the State of Congo. I have carefully studied the country and the government you have set up there.

Mr. Henry Stanley sent a white man to make treaties with the Congo chiefs. The reason given for this was that the white people were tired of the fighting between the tribes. This man used all sorts of tricks to make the chiefs think that he was much stronger than them. He had an electric battery connected to his hand by a wire. When he shook hands with a chief, the man would get an electric shock. He also told the chiefs that white men were strong enough to pull trees from the ground.

Another trick that the white man used was to take a cigar from his pocket, bite off the end, and then hold a glass lens up to the sun. The sun's reflection on the lens caused the cigar to be lit.<sup>8</sup> He then explained that the white man had power over the sun. If he wanted to, he told the chiefs he could command the sun to burn up their village.

The final trick involved giving the chief a gun with the bullet removed and telling him to shoot it at him (the white man). When he didn't get hurt, he would tell the chief that white men could not be killed.

The white man used all of these tricks to scare the chiefs into signing their villages over to the white man. Now, the natives of the Congo complain that their land has been taken away from them by force. They also say that the government is cruel. They say that they don't have any love or respect for the Belgian government or its flag. That is because your government has grabbed their land, burned their towns, stolen their property, made their women and children slaves, and done many other bad things.

Even though your government has committed robbery, lies, fraud, murder, slave trading, and other cruel treatment against them, the native people have been long suffering and forgiving. I beg the people of Belgium and their government to put an end to the terrible treatment of the people of the Congo.

Your humble and obedient servant,  
GEO. W. WILLIAMS  
Stanley Falls, Central Africa,  
July 18th, 1890.

**QUESTION 7   DOK 2   STANDARD RH.2   WH.08**

According to General Williams, how did Belgium gain access to the lands in the Congo?

- ☐ White men travelled to Congolese villages and explained how local people would benefit from industry and foreign help.
- ☐ White men were sent into Congolese villages and used tricks and threats to convince the local people to give away their land.
- ☐ Congolese villages voted in elections to allow Belgium to access parts of their land for industrial agriculture and mining.
- ☐ Congolese villages sent requests to Belgian companies to come and help industrialize their mining and farming.

## Document E: TEDx Talk "Finding purpose and home - the Congo experience" by Maman Charlotte (2014)

**Source Background:** Speakers are invited to share on topics they are experts on by the organization TED Talks. TEDx Talks are events organized locally for people to share their perspectives with people in their community. The organization TED Talks shares these TEDx speeches online. In her TEDx Talk,<sup>9</sup> Maman Charlotte spoke about her experience as a Congolese woman and her knowledge of her country's troubled history.



Screenshot from Maman Charlotte's TedTalk

*Excerpted and adapted by Actively Learn staff.*



The Congolese are very nice people. The country is beautiful. The forest is beautiful. The animals are beautiful. We are the only ones who have the Okapi, a very lovely animal. We have so many mountains. We have volcanoes. You can go Google the images of our beautiful mountains.<sup>10</sup>

Anyone who comes has good reports. Everybody who goes into the Congo gives a good report of the people. Yet, I'm surprised that there are places where women have been raped by the millions. I'm surprised this happens because our people are so nice. Despite everything they go through, the women still believe that things are going to change. And that's why I'm here today. I'm not going to cry anymore, I'm going to talk about Congo. The Congo that welcomes people, that loves people.

Someone told me one day, "You know, Charlotte, your resources are a curse to you." And my response to that person is that our resources are a blessing, a blessing to the world. They are especially a blessing to industry.

When the automobile industry started, the Congo belonged to one man: King Leopold. All 20 million of our hectares belonged to this one man. The things he did to Congo are unimaginable. You cannot even come close to imagine the things that this man did to the country. All because he needed rubber. The world needed rubber for the tires on the cars. And I don't understand why he did it. He could have just asked the Congolese to go and get the rubber and we would have done it. But he had to cut off the limbs, kidnap the wives, have them raped, and kill the children. You can go Google it. Children have no limbs. He used to say that he would give you a quota. He would give you a tin, and he said you have to fill it to a certain line, and if you didn't, they would cut the child's limbs.

We lived through that. We lived through the automobile revolution.

And we didn't even learn about this history in school. In school, I never learned my own country's history. I learned about Belgium and Europe and whatever, but never about what happened in my own country. Only when I started to research did I learn about what the Congolese people went through so that the world could have cars, and tires on cars and bicycles.

Today, there is another technological revolution. You need coltan tantalum.<sup>11</sup> This mineral goes into mobile phones. They help the phones sustain the heat of the battery. Without the chemicals, the mobile phones would blow up. And now, women and children are getting raped every day just for the sake of that. Congo is worth 23 trillion dollars in mineral wealth, but we do not see any of it. We have to ask ourselves, "Why? Is it really worth it?"

Congo is a beautiful, beautiful place. I want you to one day share this place with us. The people are really nice. The people are really wonderful. They are worth being saved. As you go home today, go with Congo in your heart. Think about those children. We have to agree that enough is enough. Our mobile phones and games and cars are not worth it.

King Leopold had our 20 million hectares to himself. And the world closed their eyes while he slaughtered the people of the Congo. And today it is happening again.

**QUESTION 8   DOK 2   STANDARD RH.2   WH.07**

Maman Charlotte says, "It is happening again today."

What does she mean by this?

- ☐ King Leopold II has taken control of the Congo again and is forcing people to work on the rubber plantations.
- ☐ Belgian soldiers are going into Congolese villages again and tricking the people into giving their land away.
- ☐ Once again, Congolese people are not seen as the kind and loving people they are but are seen as ruthless and brutal.
- ☐ Once again, Congolese people are forced into horrible conditions so the rest of the world can use its resources.

**QUESTION 10   DOK 3   STANDARD RH.7   WH.07**

Watch the video below. What details would you add to the video based on the primary sources you read? Explain why you would make these additions.

► [https://www.youtube.com/embed/K2\\_UGSVvAzs?feature=oembed&rel=0](https://www.youtube.com/embed/K2_UGSVvAzs?feature=oembed&rel=0)

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# Notes

1 MR. MATZEN

The Salonga National Park protects the largest amount of rainforest out of any reserve in the world.



2 MR. MATZEN

It is also home to the beautiful Okapi



3 MR. MATZEN

The image below shows rough diamonds before they have been prepared to be sold.



MR. MATZEN

4

This map shows how far apart the two countries are as well as their sizes in comparison.



MR. MATZEN

5

The term *civilize* here means to change a culture and way of life to be more similar to a European lifestyle.

MR. MATZEN

6

An "**open letter**" is a letter addressed to one person but made public so that others can read it as well. It is often used as a way to directly address someone you wish to critique while m...

MR. MATZEN

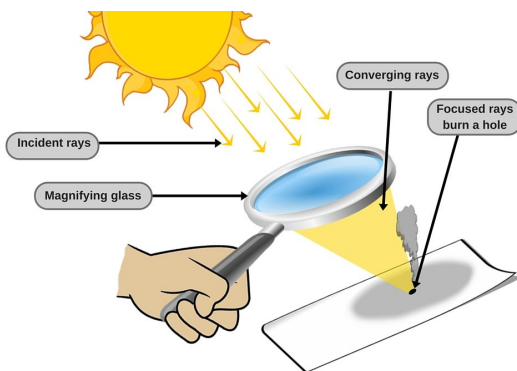
7

Williams went because he was originally interested in possibly finding employment for African Americans in King Leopold's government in the Congo Free State.

MR. MATZEN

8

This simple trick would have been astonishing to anyone who did not have experience with magnifying glasses.



MR. MATZEN

9

You can watch the entire talk using the link below.

► <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oi-JcG9mXAw>

10 MR. MATZEN

Mt. Stanley is the tallest mountain in Congo.



11 MR. MATZEN

A Congolese miner holds up coltan tantalum while standing in an area being mined. This mineral is used in cell phones (Newsweek).

