Case Studies: Belgian Africa

“From Belgian Congo to Congo to Zaire”
The Congo: territory larger than Western Europe, bordered by nine countries (former colonies).
The Belgian Congo 1950s

Why look at as case study?
- Belgium’s only colony: most ‘resource rich’
- role Cold War, International Intervention
- US major player: assured new government would not succeed!
- one of first ‘challenges’ to effectiveness (of ‘new’) United Nations: UN handling ‘Congo Crisis’ controversial to this day
“King Leopold’s Ghost”:
- recent book articulates history of Congo: from Conference of Berlin (1884-5), importance King of Belgium pushing for ‘Scramble for Africa’ [see ‘Book Reviews’, “Resources”]

- colony ‘unique’: ‘feudal fief’ first to King, then Government-sanctioned companies

- looked like ‘settler colonies’: settler community attracted to manage companies, commercial agriculture; interests independent of metropole
The Belgian Congo 1950s

But for both: ‘decolonization’ not on horizon

- few educated, trained Africans; quality of both low
- spatial segregation (living, working)
- ‘domestic servant’ situation: settlers dependent on labour, Africans dependent on income
- all positions of power: in ‘settler’ hands
Colonial Development

How well developed was Congo?

- Human Resources: no African army officers, three African managers in civil service, thirty University Graduates

- first Congolese in Belgian universities: 1950s

- first universities in Congo:
  - 1954 (Catholic)
  - 1956 (lay), graduating sixteen by the time of independence
Colonial Development (cont.)

Mineral resource industries, well developed:

- copper, gold, tin, cobalt, diamonds, manganese, zinc

- all attracted massive investments from West

- economy dominated by mining: 70%
  controlled by Belgian Societe Generale
  (also controlled river and rail transport)
Union Miniere Haut Katanga:

- 70% world’s copper production (1953), 80% cobalt, 5% zinc

- 1950-9: net profits 620 million $$, overall production increased 149%

- labour force 100,000: twice as large as any other mining industry

- attracted post-war immigration
Copper in Katanga

Colonial Development (cont.)

Cash crops also product Western investment:
- 35% - 40% commercial agriculture: controlled by Huileries du Congo Belges (subsidiary Anglo-Dutch Unilever Co. – also active in West Africa)

- dominated palm-oil production

- ran plantations covering hundreds of thousands of acres

- labour varied from poorly paid wage to forced
Urban Growth: dramatic even by African standards
- mostly workers, many of them migrants
- growth African urban associations, ethnically based
- African newspapers
-1957 municipal elections: Africans voted
(largest cities like Stanleyville, Leopoldville, Elisabethville)

Overall: adjunct to western industrial system, lacking any indigenous capital or internal capital generating market
Settlers not demanding semi-autonomy: Belgian colonialism ‘works’ for them
- huge numbers white officials, para-military forces, agricultural officers enforcing harsh programmes compulsory cultivation

- anachronistic ‘paternalism rhetoric’: create Middle Class who would attain citizenship in Belgo-Congolese community

- “Cartes de merite civile”: so rarely issued that they became source of grievance
Colonial Development (cont.)

Education:

- primary education: Christian Missionaries

- Evangelism successful: 600 Congolese priests, 500 ministers c. 1956

- 16 million Congolese: 3 ½ million Catholics; 1 ¾ millions Protestants
Colonial Development (cont.)

Education:

- 1950s: more secular education policies

- missionaries (including those from America), in turn rallying converts in support of church

[Excellent novel “Poisonwood Bible”, based on this ‘moment’ in history: see excerpt ‘Resources’.]
1957 Paper announcing Need for ‘independence plan’ *in 30 years*:
- hailed in Catholic journal, *Conscience Africaine*

- followed by handful educated Congolese:
  - included postal worker, Patrice Lumumba

- requested that Congolese elite, including first Congolese University Graduates (1957/8) be consulted in drafting plan
‘Decolonization’ as we know it simply did not exist in Belgian Congo:

- 1957 Belgian academic proclaimed independence should be prepared for – *in 30 years*

- 1959: riots spread throughout colony

- Belgian King announced: independence would be granted

... *and it was.*
Politics organized around urban ‘nodes’:

Leopoldville:

- *evoluees* in city and surrounding area: Kongolese “Association des BaKongos” (ABAKO)

- led by J Kassavubu
- desired restoration ancient ‘Kongo’

- meant taking pieces from French Equatorial Africa (across river) and Portuguese Angola

- cultural association founded 1950: drew on memories pre-colonial resistance led by local ‘Prophet’ Simon Kimbangu
Joseph Kassabuvu
Elisabethville:

- Confederation des Association Tribales du Katanga (CONAKAT)

- built on fears of local peoples against migrants (brought in for mining)

- large Belgian settler population: more than 100,000 arrived as post-war immigrants

- based on mineral wealth of region: talk of secession began
- leader Moise Tshombe: businessman

- lost considerably in 1950s economic slowdown

- closely associated with foreign financial interests: supported by UMHK
Political Situation in Congo (cont.)

Stanleyville:
- heterogeneous population: “hodge-podge” political interests, less clearly defined ethnic identities

- Movement National Congolese: leader Patrice Lumumba

- favoured national unity over federation

- like Nkrumah’s CPP Ghana – for same reasons
Patrice Lumumba
Kwame Nkrumah:

“The situation which faced the Congo on the eve of independence did not differ profoundly from that which threatened Ghana’s independence at the period of the ascendancy of the NLM of Ashanti, the Togoland Congress, the Anglo Youth Assoc., the Northern People’s Party and the Muslim Assoc., all of which were designed to destroy the CPP movement. As in Ghana, I was convinced that the Congo needed a strong unitary form of government. Events in the Congo since independence have only strengthened this conviction”.

[Cited in Mazrui & Tidy, African Political Parties, p.96]
Riots of 1959

Began in Leopoldville, spread to other cities, then to rural areas:

- reflected economic situation: post war boom hit by depression 1955/6

- collapse world copper prices 1957

- overall slowdown, massive unemployment, especially acute in Leopoldville
Riots of 1959

- exacerbated ethnic cleavages encouraged by:

  work situation (massive migrant labour)
  proliferation cultural associations

- NOT reflection of tradition or ‘tribes’ as interpreted by Belgians
Riots of 1959

Incendiary ‘spark’:

- banning of ABAKO meeting in Leopoldville
- riots spread, control of townships lost
- no Europeans killed
- ‘officially’ 50 Africans dead
Riots of 1959

Impact/spread in rural areas unexpected:
- facilitated by movement migrant labourers
- deliberately cultivated by local political parties
- rooted in years forced labour on plantations, infrastructure projects, compulsory crop growing schemes

So overwhelming that local administrators had to turn to Congolese party leaders for assistance!
Main question is “WHY” did Belgium so suddenly move towards independence for its richest (and indeed, only) colony?

- some argue Belgian politicians did not really believe that ‘independence’ meant what it said

- or… that total unpreparedness of Congo with its proliferation of political parties emerging at the last minute (120) would remain vulnerable to continued Belgian influence
- others emphasize that both business and the Church (each for its own reasons) saw that the time had come to extricate themselves from the responsibilities of colonial rule
Independence day, June 30 1960, both Belgian King and Premier were present:
- King delivered speech referring to ‘courage and civilizing role of Leopold II’
- praised colonial policies
- most importantly: warned Congolese not to jettison Belgian institutions, policies until they could improve on them
Independence: ‘the’ speech

- Kassabuuvu read out prepared/approved obsequious response.

- Lumumba replied in unscheduled speech

-denounced colonialism as ‘humiliating slavery imposed on us by force’!

“...no Congolese worthy of the name can ever forget that it is by struggle that we have won [our independence], a struggle in which no effort, privation, suffering, or drop of our blood was spared. …
...We have known sarcasm and insults, endured blows morning, noon and night, because we were "niggers'. Who will forget that a Black was addressed in the familiar “tu”, not as a friend, but because polite “vous” was reserved for Whites only? We have seen our lands despoiled under the terms of what was supposedly the law of the land but which only recognized the right of the strongest. We have seen that this law was quite different for a White than for a Black: accommodating for the former, cruel and inhuman for the latter.
...finally, who can forget the volleys of gunfire in which so many of our brothers perished, the cells where the authorities threw those who would not submit to a rule where justice meant oppression and exploitation. . . .

*Belgium, finally understanding the march of history, has not tried to oppose our independence.*”
Belgian king insulted:

- concluded Lumumba a ‘madman’ who would have to be eliminated

- Tshombe (CONAKAT) worried about implications for investment in Katanga

- ‘West’ in general (US in particular) worried because of unpredictability of new prime minister of Congo
“The Speech”

“Key” watershed moment:

- announced that Lumumba was not to be controlled by any existing party or interest – domestic or foreign
Independence Day

Lumumba arrives Palais de la Nation, Leopoldville for Independence Ceremony, 30 June 1960 (left)

Lumumba and Gaston Eyskens (Belgian Prime Minister) sign Declaration of Congolese Independence (right)

Patrice Lumumba (centre) forms his first government as Prime Minister. Joseph Mobutu (far right) ‘waits in the wings’.

[Ludo de Witte, The Assassination of Lumumba, 96&ff]
Domestic Concerns: Katanga

Katanga:

- center of Congo’s mineral wealth, foreign investment
Domestic Concerns: Katanga

Katanga:

- leader Tshombe: related to royal Lunda family, mission educated, attended Brussels Congo Conference 1960

- pressing for loose political federation

- would allow Katanga to operate more or less autonomously

- worked closely with Belgian business interests
Domestic Concerns: Katanga

- refused to co-operate

- maintained large mercenary army (paid for by taxes from UMHK – Belgian Mining company) – with Belgian officers in charge

Katanga Commandos in Training Camp near Elizabethville
Foreign Concerns

Post-war Soviet Union:
- active in Congo but until independence, little success in cities
- concentrated in rural areas
- saw independence and Lumumba as possible ‘opening’ to establish more secure influence
Foreign Concerns

US (also Britain, France, South Africa) saw investments threatened:

- role American State Department, CIA stepped up
- included interfering with media
- further stimulated Soviet interest, activity!
The Mutiny... and afterwards

Within days Independence: Army mutinied
- felt betrayed: remained in hands of Belgian officers
- further provoked by Commander Jansson, infamous for having lectured to troops:

“Avant l’Independence = Apres l’Independence”

[said to have been written on blackboard or wall...]
The Mutiny… and afterwards

Uncontrolled attacks on Belgians began:
- property destruction, theft
- women raped, men beaten
- several deaths.

Set in place exodus by white civil servants, technicians, army personnel:
- Belgium demanded of Lumumba that order be restored
Formal secession of Katanga followed shortly afterwards; then Kasai.
Congo Gov’t failed to quell civil conflict:
- Belgium sent in paratroops
- foreign troops back in Congo after Independence:
  social chaos, disintegrating state

Lumumba turned for assistance to:
United Nations
United States
African Allies
Soviet Union
Lumumba with UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold, after their conference at UN Headquarters in New York on the critical situation in the Congo, 24 July 1960.

[Ludo de Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, 96&ff]
Congo as Theatre of Cold War

Following Lumumba’s election, Independence:

- ‘power vacuum’ created in Congo

- several foreign powers sucked/attracted in
Why so important?

- strategic wealth of country, physical position in Africa: whoever controlled Congo (especially Katanga region) could influence developments throughout central, southern Africa

- in 1960s: meant South Africa, Rhodesia, Mozambique, Angola in particular
US and Soviet Union engaged in ‘cold war’:

- Africa provided important new arena

- Congo ‘flashpoint’ for focused conflict

- US feared any African leader preaching ‘non-alignment’ was opening door to Communism
- Lumumba frequently labeled ‘communist’

- picked up on by Belgium

- echoed loudly by South Africa (whose own position in Africa, support by Americans, hinged on role as “western bastion against Communist influence”)
UN Operation 1960-64

UN accepted mandate to intervene:

- assist fledgling country stabilize itself economically, politically

- force Belgian troops to leave

- facilitate negotiations between Congo and Katanga
- Lumumba requested military assistance in Katanga

- UN refused: to do so would contravene role as ‘peacekeeper’

- did send troops to Elizabethville
UN Operation 1960-64

UN accepted mandate to intervene:
- Katanga determined to fight for independence
- refused to comply with UN ultimatums about use foreign, mercenary troops (Rhodesians, South Africans among others)
- by 1961, pulled into conflict
- Secretary General gave directions to commander on the ground: ‘do what needs to be done militarily’

[see ‘Congo: War in Katanga’, Readings]
- operation involved soldiers, equipment supplied by some thirty countries

- decision to be ‘active’ participant in attempt to bring Katanga back into Congo very controversial
UN Operation 1960-64

Complicated further by:

- ‘collateral damage’: too many civilian deaths, injured, property damage

- turned all of Katanga’s population (black and white) against UN

- Katanga government fueled flames with incendiary media messages
"Bring out your guns, spears, knives, axes and clubs, and kill all the U.N. to combat the murder campaign of Secretary-General U Thant * and his international minions!"

*[see ‘Congo: Battle for Katanga’, Readings; U Thant succeeded Dag Hammarskjold – see below]*
Complicated further:

- Lumumba turned to Soviet Union for arms when UN refused: now ‘proof’ of his Communism

- neighbouring South Africa, British Central African Federation (Zambia, Rhodesia, Malawi) openly supported Katanga

- Tshombe in exile in Rhodesia
1961: mysterious death of UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold in plane crash while en route to talk with Tshombe in Rhodesia

- many felt decision to ‘step beyond his mandate’ in Katanga hurt ability UN to function effectively

- rumoured that American, British intelligence behind crash

- true or not, reflects upon how ‘Congo Crisis’ perceived internationally at the time
UN in Katanga

UN Troops in Katanga, Elizabethville

30 countries represented: here India, Ireland, Ethiopia
UN air attacks rapidly escalated, contributed to resentment local populations
Following on Lumumba’s turn to Soviet Union, aggressive attempts to bring resist Katanga’s secession:

- America chose Joseph Mobutu, former aide to Lumumba, ranking Colonel in army, as ‘their man’

- CIA actively involved in recruiting, cultivating him
- Mobutu had been unable to bring control to army/soldiers during retaliating attacks on Belgians: some say deliberately ‘let them loose’

- understood to be ambitious, determined, ruthless
Mobutu and Kennedy: a young president and an army chief reach ‘an understanding’ during the Cold War years. (n.d.)

Lumumba arrested:

- Kassabuvu consented
- he was ‘neutralized’ as well
- Mobutu took effective control (though not yet office)
Congo as Theatre of Cold War (cont.)

United Nations:
- provided ‘protection’ for Lumumba while under house arrest
- but when he escaped to Stanleyville, refused to extend protection
- soon recaptured by Mobutu’s army: taken (with two close aides) to Katanga
- all were brutally murdered and bodies burned
Who was responsible?

- Tshombe knew, some said gave consent
- some said Belgians
- some said Mobutu, acting on ‘orders’ of American CIA

In any case: murders carried out by Tshombe’s army commandos; now known Belgians, Americans and UN ‘implicated’
Joseph Mobutu in Leopoldville on 15 September 1960, having just announced that the Congolese army would be taking over the running of the country.

Ludo de Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, 96&ff.]
Lumumba’s Last Arrest

Lumumba, aides in truck at Leopoldville airport, day after their arrest by Mobutu’s army, Dec. 2 1960.

[Ludo de Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, 96&ff.]
Murder of Lumumba

Responses:

- Kwame Nkrumah, President Ghana:
  “The assassination of Lumumba is the first time in history that the legal ruler of a country has been done to death by the open connivance of a world organization [UN] in whom that rule put his trust.”

- New York: protesters marched on UN

- London: protesters marched on Belgian Embassy
World Wide Protest


[Ludo de Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, 96&ff.]
- stimulated new support by Black Americans for Pan-Africanism, responsibility to ‘support’ fledgling new countries

- US government: Kennedy’s ‘New Frontier’ advanced into “uncharted African territory”

- ‘spearheaded’ CIA on one hand, newly established Peace Corps on the other

- following ‘Congo Crisis’: Africa became internationally recognized Cold War Battlefield
After Lumumba...

Immediate aftermath assassination Lumumba:

- led to three-year battle to re-integrate Katanga and Kasai into Congo (UN involved)

- arrest of Tshombe: sought/received exile in Rhodesia

- ultimately returned as premier when he agreed to recognize Katanga as part of ‘Congo’
Battle to Reintegrate Katanga

Tshombe’s troops recapture a North Katanga town and American Weaponry, February 1962.

[Bill Freund, The Making of Contemporary Africa, facing 177]
Medium term consequences:

- country’s exploitation, suffering under Belgian rule, exacerbated by violence around independence, civil war with Katanga

- Congolese people crying out for a ‘second (real) independence’

- when Mobutu took over power in bloodless coup d'état, backed by Americans: country welcomed him
After Lumumba...

Longer Term Consequences:

- 32-year long nightmare of Mobutu
- ruled Congo as personal fief
- exploited ‘resources’ (human and economic) as he wished
- return full circle to ‘founder’ of Colony, King Leopold II: hence title of recent book about Mobutu and his rape of the Congo (now Zaire) “King Leopold’s Ghost”