Congo and Africa's World War: Crash Course World History 221

Crash Course: World History
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(0:00)
Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today were going to talk about the Congo.

(0:05)
(John from the past):
Mr. Green! Mr.Green! We're gonna to talk about the Conga?
No, me from the past, you idiot, that is a dance. However, your epic, epic ignorance does indicate that perhaps we don't do a particularly good job when it comes to talking about African history in world history classes.

(Intro)

(0:27)
So today we're gonna look at what happened to the Congo after decolonization but in particular what happened during the 1990s and early 2000s as Congo, or Zaire, or the Democratic Republic of Congo was embroiled in what some people have called Africa's World War.

(0:42)
European colonization in Africa was generally pretty, you know, bad. But it was particularly terrible in the Congo. There's a great book about it called King Leopold's Ghost, which detailed the brutality of life under Leopold's Congo Free State, and the international efforts to improve things there.

(0:58)
Leopold essentially owned Congo, and he ruled it as his private fiefdom from 1884 until 1906, when he was forced to turn over the colony to the Belgian government. From 1906 until independence in 1960, the territory was known as the Belgian Congo and while the Belgians were far less brutal that Leopold's agents had been, life for the Congolese under Belgian rule was also not good.

(1:20)
And then there was this sudden decolonization in the Congo and in a lot of ways the region was unprepared to become an independent state, like the Congo's new leaders didn't have much formal education or leadership experience.
There weren't many trained experts in, really anything, there were very few college graduates, no one had the skills to run an army or a government or an economy.

(1:39)
But I wanna be clear: that wasn't the Congo's fault, it was because there weren't educational or leadership opportunities available to Congolese people.

(1:47)
In 1965, a former army sergeant and journalist named Joseph Mobutu staged a coup and seized control of the government.
Now, he turned out to be a terrible leader, but in his first decade in charge, he did some good stuff.

For instance, he hosted The Rumble in the Jungle, arguably the greatest heavy-weight boxing match of all time between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, featuring the famous rope-a-dope.

(2:06)
Stan says he did some actually important things and that boxing isn't actually important.
Okay! From 1965 to 1975, Mobutu was able to build the economy based on this huge copper boom.
And then he destroyed the economy by appropriating most of the local businesses and turning them over to his cronies.

(2:22)
He built the first hydroelectric dam in the region as well as hospitals and, most importantly for his rule, a state television system that could broadcast national pageantry that celebrated Mobutu and his family.

(2:32)
Mobutu also changed the name of the country in 1971 from Congo to Zaire and he changed the names of many colonial cities like Leopoldville became Kinshasa, Stanleyville became Kisangani, Elisabethville became Lubumbashi.

(2:46)
And initially his coup was seen as a positive by many Congolese, but pretty early on it became clear that this wasn't going to be like a peaceful open government.

(2:54)
And Mobutu's Zaire was also really corrupt, like the underlying source of Mobutu's power was his ability to grant favors to his friends, a strategy known as clientelism or cronyism and Mobutu was great at it.

(3:06)
In order to keep his cronies happy, Mobutu raided the National Treasury again and again, he actually stymied development, in order to get more foreign aid, which he then used as an alternative source of income.

(3:17)
And then there was this huge crash of commodity prices, including copper, that followed the Vietnam War and that plunged Zaire into debt. In 1975 Zaire's foreign debt totaled 887 dollars.

(3:28)
The next year, the IMF launched its first stabilization plan for Zaire, a loan of 47 million dollars. In exchange for that loan, Mobutu agreed to cut public spending, devalue the currency, raise taxes and put the countries financial house in order.

(3:43)
Needless to say, that did not happen, there was a need for more and more and more loans, and by 1990 Zaire's total national debt topped out at 10 billion dollars.

(3:51)
But even as Mobutu drove Zaire into decline, there were no serious challenges to his power, because opposition was incredibly risky, critics of the regime faced arrest, torture, exile, at times murder.
And in the end it was outside forces that forced Mobutu from power.

(4:06)
So the Rwandan genocide of 1994 is familiar to many Americans, often as an example of the impotence of America in the face of post-Cold War problems, and also because it was horrific.
But less well known is the role that these events played in the disintegration of the Congo.

(4:21)
So conflict in Rwanda between Hutu and Tutsi people probably pre-dates Rwandas independence from Belgium in 1962.
But the path to genocide began in 1990, when the Tutsi-led Rwandan patriotic front began to cross the border into Rwanda from their bases in Uganda.

(4:38)
Between 1990 and 1994 approximately 20,000 people were killed and 1,5 million displaced in this conflict.
And then in 1994 the plain of Rwanda's Hutu president was shot

down and Rwandan Hutus began murdering Rwandan Tutsis, killing between 800,000 and a million people in three months.

(4:57)
This did not stop the Rwandan patriotic front, which in fact increased its attacks on Rwanda and then under leader Paul Kagame, they succeeded in taking over the country, leading to more than 2 million people fleeing, most of them to Eastern Zaire. Almost 850,000 people crowded into refugee camps around the city of Goma in Zaire.

(5:16)
Kagame desperately wanted to hold the Hutus living in those refugee camps accountable for crimes against Tutsis, but in order to do that, he would have to invade a sovereign territory, so he helped to set up the Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération and yes, I did take three years of high school French.

(5:33)
The AFDL or ah-eff-deh-ell for us French speakers, was made up of Zairians and would do the dirty work of killing Hutu refugees for Kagame, and to outside eyes, it would appear to be a domestic uprising against Mobutu.

(5:47)
So on May 29th, 1997, the victorious AFDL leader Laurent Kabila was sworn in as the president of the newly renamed Democratic Republic of Congo.
Mobutu fled to Morocco and died there four months later.

(6:01)
And that's where the story should end, with the fall of the dictator and the rise of a new nation that lives up to the 'democratic' in its name.
But that did not happen.
Between 1997 and 2000, everything in the Congo fell apart and the country descended further into chaos.
Kabila's rapid conquests of Zaire and the ouster of Mubutu along with the killing of hundreds of thousands of Rwandan refugees was what some call The First Congo War.
The Second Congo War was the revolt against Kabila that lasted from 1998 to 2002.

(6:31)
Kabila proved inept and authoritarian and an astonishingly poor head of state, but his biggest mistake was expelling the Rwandans who had helped put him into power, which is what started The Second Congo War.

(6:43)
Like a lot of conflicts, this isn't a straightforward good versus evil thing, and it's also not a thing with just two sides.
There are also a lot of initialisms involved, which makes it a little bit hard to follow, but its basic contours are relatively straightforward.

(6:56)
Let's go to the thought bubble.
So Rwanda invaded the Congo and nearly took Kinshasa, but Kabila was able to put together a coalition of other countries that saw Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi as a threat.

This coalition which included Angola and Namibia stopped the Rwandan advance and the fighting, leading to the Lusaka peace agreement, which, as you might suspect, did not last.
The fighting instead shifted to the eastern part of the DRC, especially the rich mining regions of Kivu and Katanga, and pretty quickly, the cause of the fighting turned from politics to profit.

(7:26)
Kabila's government supported local militias who fought the Rwandan and Ugandan armies, and then eventually each other over control of the valuable gold, diamonds and other resources there.
Fighting provided a sense of purpose, and also one of the only ways to make a living in a failed economy.
It was also incredibly brutal. According to one man who participated in the horror, "A soldier is like a dog. If you open the gate, he causes damage. In the morning, before we were sent out, our leader would say: 'Go out and do something foolish'.
We ransacked houses, we took cell phones, money, and gold necklaces from people."
There was also widespread rape and murder.

(8:01)
The war continued so long because it was so profitable, but a turning point came when Laurent Kabila was assassinated by some of his own child-soldier bodyguards in January, 2001.
African diplomats negotiated a ceasefire, largely in South Africa, and the resulting peace accord required a two-year transitional period monitored by the largest UN peace-keeping force ever assembled.

(8:22)
Thanks, thought bubble.
So, this transitional government continued the Congolese pattern of corruption.
According to historian David Van Reybrouck, "They emulated the abuses of Mobutuism with a zeal that would have startled Mobutu himself."

(8:35)
In the absence of an effective central government, non-profit organizations and local civil society agencies including Pentecostal churches stepped in to provide some of the services that governments usually provide.
And then on July 30th, 2006, The Democratic Republic of Congo held elections for president and parliament.
Now, no single presidential candidate won a majority and in the runoff election on December 6th, Joseph Kabila, son of Laurent Kabila became Congo's first democratically elected president since 1960.

(9:04)
What kind of democracy elects family dynasties? The Adams, the Roosevelts, the Bushes, we tried to do the Kennedys, but they kept getting assassinated.

(9:12)
Sorry, this isn't a particularly funny episode. Even the jokes are dismal.
The DRC created a new constitution with checks and balances, the new parliament and a constitutional court, and on paper it looked good, but Kabila proved to be a ruler in his father's mold.

(9:26)
He used violence to silence his main rival and had little control over most of his soldiers, the parliament voted salary increases for themselves while shirking most of the other responsibilities of governing.

(9:36)
By 2009, only five countries scored lower than the DRC in the UN human development index.
Today, 30% of the population is illiterate and 54% have no access to clean drinking water.

(9:48)
Now, for many westerners, this is continued proof of Congo's

continued backwardness, perhaps even hopelessness.
And it's true that this region has had tremendous struggles in the 50 years since Europe left more or less over night.

(9:59)
Having created an infrastructure that was designed not for a nation state, but a colony, whose resources were to be extracted for the wealth of the colonizer.

(10:07)
But these days, there is a new player in the world of international economic development - China.
And this is one of the most interesting stories in the world today.
Initially, the first Chinese investors in the DRC were private traders willing to gamble on the wild west aspects of Congolese capitalism, but in 2007, the DRC negotiated a huge deal with the People's Republic of China.

(10:27)
China would invest 9 billion dollars in the DRC's infrastructure in return for future revenue from DRC resources.
Now, to many, this looks a lot like neocolonialism - we'll help build your country if only we can extract your resources.

(10:42)
But at least so far, the biggest complaints have come not from the Congolese people, but from the IMF and other western financial institutions that stand to lose the only leverage over the DRC that they still possess.

(10:53)
So this is a very complicated relationship, like, for instance, Congolese women are taking advantage of new commercial relationships with China to start their own businesses.
And that's really cool. On the other hand, cheap Chinese textiles are destroying local manufacture in the DRC just as they are almost everywhere.

(11:08)
And it's far too soon to say whether this is going to be great for the people of the DRC or will be just another example of large powers using less powerful countries as like, pawns in some big geopolitical game.

(11:20)
Americans tend to have very negative views about Africa, which they tend to imagine very monolithically.
But Africa is huge and it is also hugely diverse. Seven of the ten fastest growing nations in the world are in Africa.

(11:35)
The DRC is not one of them, precisely because of the instability that it has seen in the last 50 years.
This is one of the largest nations in Africa, probably the richest in natural resources. It's a magnet for Chinese investment, which will certainly be one of the most important stories in coming decades.

(11:50)
And it's played a pivotal role in Sub-Saharan African history in the last 50 years.
Conflicts in the DRC also led to the largest UN peace-keeping intervention to date, the first joint European Union military action, and the first arrests and trials of The International Criminal Court.

(12:05)
So this is a vital place in the world to understand and to study and to pay attention to.
The events of the past 50 years in this part of the world are important for Congolese people who have suffered through them, but they are also important for the rest of us.
As David Van Reybrouck argues, Congolese history has helped to determine and form the history of the world.
Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

(12:25)
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Thanks to all of our Subbable subscribers and thanks to you for watching. As we say in my hometown - don't forget to be awesome.