

BELGIUM'S LEGACY IN THE AFRICAN GREAT LAKES REGION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON RWANDA, BURUNDI, AND THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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ABSTRACT

Belgium's colonial history in the African Great Lakes Region, encompassing Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), is marked by a complex and deeply problematic legacy that continues to affect these nations to this day. Beginning with the establishment of King Leopold II's personal rule over the Congo Free State in the late 19th century, and continuing under formal Belgian administration, the colonial policies and practices employed by Belgium were designed to extract resources and consolidate power at the expense of indigenous populations. The Belgian presence, characterized by its exploitative and paternalistic governance model, entrenched social and political divisions, dismantled traditional systems of governance, and left these countries ill-prepared for self-rule. This work critically analyzes the multifaceted and long-lasting negative impacts of Belgian colonialism in Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC, focusing on the political, socio-cultural, economic, and environmental repercussions that continue to shape the region. The Belgian colonial rule was primarily driven by economic gain, with an emphasis on resource extraction, forced labor, and the exploitation of indigenous populations. In the Congo, the brutal extraction of rubber only under Leopold II's regime led to mass deaths and widespread trauma, while the institution of forced labor and harsh penalties for non-compliance served as tools to enforce colonial objectives. In Rwanda and Burundi, the Belgians introduced a system of indirect rule, which involved manipulating traditional ethnic divisions and structures to maintain control. This strategy of "divide and rule" entrenched ethnic tensions, particularly between the Hutu and Tutsi populations, setting the stage for breaking social cohesion leading to conflict and genocide against Tutsi. Although Belgium was formally responsible for the administration of these territories, the lack of proper political transition mechanisms following independence left these nations vulnerable to instability, with ethnic violence and political strife continuing for decades. In terms of socio-cultural impacts, Belgian colonialism significantly altered the region's social fabric. The introduction of European education, language, and religious practices led to cultural alienation and the erosion of traditional practices. Indigenous governance systems were disregarded, and traditional leaders were replaced or undermined by Belgian-appointed officials. The policy of institutionalizing ethnic identities in Rwanda and Burundi further exacerbated divisions between groups, which ultimately fueled violence and social fragmentation. These historical interventions have had long-lasting effects on national identity formation, as many individuals in the region continue to struggle with issues of cultural identity and belonging. Belgium's role in shaping these

identities remains a contentious issue, as the manipulation of ethnicity during colonial rule laid the groundwork for the intergenerational trauma that communities still face. Economically, Belgium's colonial exploitation has had enduring consequences, particularly in the DRC. The extraction of vast mineral resources, along with the forced labor of local populations, significantly hindered the development of local economies. Belgian policies focused primarily on the extraction of wealth from the region, with little regard for the economic development of the indigenous population. Infrastructure development was concentrated in select urban areas, leaving rural regions neglected and underdeveloped. These disparities in economic development have persisted long after independence, with regions like eastern DRC, rural Rwanda, and Burundi continuing to face economic challenges. Belgian colonial policies exacerbated wealth inequality, leading to the entrenchment of poverty and limited opportunities for socio-economic mobility in these countries. The environmental impacts of Belgian colonialism were also profound and far-reaching. In the DRC, unregulated mining practices resulted in widespread environmental degradation, including deforestation, soil erosion, and water pollution. The introduction of cash crops, such as rubber and coffee, displaced subsistence farming, which compromised local food security and contributed to long-term ecological imbalances. In addition, the Belgian colonial government's disregard for environmental sustainability created conditions that continue to hinder agricultural productivity and resource management in these countries. Environmental degradation remains a major issue in the region, affecting the livelihoods of millions and contributing to ongoing conflicts over land and natural resources. Belgium's colonial policies also contributed to numerous human rights abuses that left lasting scars on the region. The Congo Free State under King Leopold II is infamous for its system of terror, where millions of Congolese were killed, mutilated, or subjected to brutal treatment in the name of resource extraction. Although formal Belgian rule in the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi was less overtly brutal, human rights abuses continued through forced labor, executions, and other forms of repression. These abuses, especially in the Congo, traumatized entire generations, and their legacy continues to affect the mental health and social cohesion of the affected populations. The scars of Belgian colonial violence remain deeply ingrained in the collective memory of the region, influencing contemporary political and social dynamics. The long-term consequences of Belgian colonialism are still felt today in the political, economic, and social structures of Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC. The introduction and the manipulation of ethnic identities, the suppression of indigenous governance systems, and the prioritization of resource extraction have contributed to cycles of instability, violence, and underdevelopment. In the DRC, political instability and conflict have persisted for decades, while Rwanda and Burundi have struggled with ethnic tensions and cycles of violence, most notably culminating in the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi. Although the region has made progress in certain areas, such as infrastructure development and education, the colonial legacy remains a barrier to sustainable development and lasting peace. In conclusion, the colonial history of Belgium rule and practices in the African Great Lakes Region has left a profound and lasting legacy that continues to affect Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC. The region's political instability, ethnic divisions, economic challenges, and environmental degradation can all be traced back to colonial policies and practices. Addressing these legacies requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach, including historical acknowledgment, reparative justice, and international cooperation. Only by confronting the colonial past can these nations hope to achieve true peace, reconciliation, and development in the future.

Keywords: Belgian Colonialism, African Great Lakes Region, Rwanda, Burundi, DRC, Ethnic Divisions, Post-Colonial Instability

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INTRODUCTION

Belgium's colonial presence in the African Great Lakes Region—particularly in Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—has left a deeply entrenched and often devastating legacy. Initially established under the personal rule of King Leopold II as the Congo Free State in 1885, the territory was marked by extreme brutality, forced labor, and systemic exploitation. International outrage over these atrocities led to Belgium's formal annexation of the territory in 1908 from King Leopold II to the kingdom of Belgium, renaming it the Belgian Congo. However, even under formal colonial administration, exploitative practices continued under a guise of paternalistic control, with Belgium ruling Rwanda and Burundi as League of Nations mandates after World War I. These territories were treated not as partners in development, but as sources of raw materials and cheap labor, with governance structures designed to serve colonial interests rather than local well-being (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021; Hochschild, 1998).

Far from preparing these countries for independence, Belgium's policies fostered deep ethnic divisions, suppressed indigenous political systems, and neglected investment in education, infrastructure, and economic diversification. In Rwanda and Burundi, the colonial authorities institutionalized ethnic identities, particularly between Hutu and Tutsi, laying the foundation for post-independence conflict and genocide against Tutsi. In the DRC, the sudden withdrawal of colonial authorities in 1960—without sufficient preparation for local governance—triggered political chaos, culminating in the Congo Crisis. The effects of Belgian rule still resonate today in the form of political instability, economic underdevelopment, ethnic conflict, and environmental degradation. This report provides a critical analysis of these enduring consequences, examining the multi-dimensional impact of Belgium's colonial legacy on governance, socio-cultural cohesion, economic systems, and the broader development trajectory of these nations (Gondola, 2002; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021).

Colonial History of Belgium in the Great Lakes Region

Belgium's colonial involvement in the African Great Lakes Region began in earnest following the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, which recognized King Leopold II's personal claim over the Congo Free State. Under Leopold's rule, the region became synonymous with widespread atrocities, including forced labor, mutilations, and mass killings, primarily to extract rubber and ivory. These human rights abuses drew international condemnation, eventually forcing the Belgian government to take over the administration of the Congo in 1908, renaming it the Belgian Congo. Despite the formal transfer, extractive policies and racial hierarchies remained central to governance. Infrastructure such as railways and ports was developed not for local benefit, but to expedite resource extraction. The Congolese were subjected to harsh labor regimes, while educational opportunities were limited to basic vocational skills meant to support the colonial economy rather than promote intellectual or civic advancement (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021; Hochschild, 1998).

Following World War I, Belgium gained control over Rwanda and Burundi—then collectively known as Ruanda-Urundi—as a League of Nations mandate. While nominally distinct from the Congo, Belgium applied a similar governance model to these territories, heavily relying on a system of indirect rule. Belgian authorities co-opted traditional leadership structures, favoring the Tutsi minority over the Hutu majority based on perceived racial superiority, a tactic that embedded ethnic hierarchies into the political fabric of both societies (Mamdani, 2001). The deposition of King Yuhi V Musinga by Belgian colonial authorities in 1931 marked a significant shift in Rwanda's monarchy, as he was removed for allegedly resisting Catholic conversion and colonial policies. His successor, King Mutara III Rudahigwa, was more compliant with Belgian interests and converted to Christianity, which aligned with colonial agendas. However, his sudden and mysterious death in 1959 while visiting Bujumbura raised suspicions of foul play, with many Rwandans believing that Belgian authorities were involved. His death created a leadership vacuum that contributed to rising ethnic tensions and instability leading up to the 1959 social revolution. The introduction of identity cards specifying ethnicity and the differential access to education and administrative positions intensified social cleavages. Unlike in the

Congo, where Belgian rule was more directly administered, the manipulation of indigenous power in Rwanda and Burundi created a volatile legacy of ethnic stratification and resentment, setting the stage for future violence, including the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi and repeated cycles of conflict in Burundi.

Crucially, across all three territories, Belgium failed to adequately prepare the local populations for self-governance or nation-building. Political parties, civic institutions, and higher education systems were virtually nonexistent at the time of independence. In the Congo, independence came abruptly in 1960, following mounting pressure and widespread protests, yet no Congolese university graduates had been trained to assume national leadership. This led to the infamous Congo Crisis, marked by secessionist movements, foreign intervention, and years of dictatorship. Rwanda and Burundi gained independence in 1962, but the seeds of ethnic conflict sown under Belgian rule quickly erupted into coups, massacres, and genocides. The political instability and weak institutional frameworks that followed independence in all three nations can be directly traced to the colonial strategy of control without capacity-building, an approach that prioritized Belgium's interests at the expense of long-term stability and development in the region (De Vries, 2020; Gondola, 2002).

Deposition of King YUHI V MUSINGA

Yuhi V Musinga, the 20th King of Rwanda, came to power in 1896 and was deposed by the Belgian administration on November 12, 1931 primarily for his opposition to their rule that he perceived as undermining of Rwandan culture, including his refusal to be baptized as Roman Catholic, leading to his exile in Congo (Moba) where he died in 1944 and the enthronement of his son Mutara Rudahigwa.

Why did the Belgium exile King Musinga from his Kingdom?

The Belgium colonists based the legitimacy of the monarchy on religion rather than the Rwandan traditional culture and ethnicity, and the Belgian colonists and missionaries were able to undermine the authority of the King (Umwami), Yuhi Musinga deposing him in 1931. MUSINGA opposed the Belgian rule in Rwanda following several abuses including trashing Rwandan culture and making the monarchy a useless system.

Killing of King MUTARA III RUDAHIGWA

The King Charles Mutara III Rudahigwa abolished every activity that was giving room to abuse and hatred among Rwandans. He abolished uburetwa which was associated with some colonial burdens and ubuhake which was a service to the wealthier in the society. On 24 July 1959, Rudahigwa arrived in Usumbura (now Bujumbura), Urundi (Burundi) for a meeting with Belgian colonial authorities arranged by Father Andre Perrodin. He has to meet Jean Paul Harroy, the then Vice – Governor of Congo Belge and Rwanda – Urundi with headquarter in Bujumbura. He also needed the vaccination against yellow fever and He had to get it from his Belgian doctor in Bujumbura. The following day, he visited his Belgian doctor at the colonial hospital, where he died while he was preparing for a trip to UN to seek the country's independence from Belgians.

Mutara III Rudahigwa (March 1911 – 25 July 1959) was King of Rwanda between 1931 and 1959. He was the first Rwandan King to bring Catholicism to the country. He was baptised Charles Leon Pierre. He introduced the fonds Mutara Rudahigwa which offered scholarships to Rwandans, developed projects that improved agricultural productivity and sensitized Rwandans to always aim at improving their welfare. He was a reformist who believed in modernization and in Rwanda's sovereignty.

Latest Interaction on Belgium in three countries

Belgium's contemporary involvement in Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC has shifted significantly since the colonial era, focusing more on diplomatic relations, development aid, and cooperation on regional stability. In Rwanda, Belgium has been a key partner in providing humanitarian assistance and supporting development projects, particularly in education and infrastructure. However, this relationship remains complex due to the colonial history and the Belgian role during the Genocide against Tutsi. Belgium has also contributed to reconciliation efforts, including facilitating dialogues about historical acknowledgment and reparative

measures for past injustices (Deman, 2023). Additionally, Belgium has offered support for the rebuilding of Rwanda's economy, focusing on sustainable development and poverty reduction.

In Burundi, Belgium has been actively involved in diplomatic efforts to address the political crisis, particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 political turmoil. Belgium has worked with the European Union to impose sanctions on the Burundian government due to human rights violations and has supported civil society organizations advocating for democracy and human rights. Belgium's interactions with Burundi highlight a tension between fostering diplomatic relations and addressing human rights concerns (Huggins, 2022). Although Belgium has provided substantial aid to Burundi, its relationship with the country remains cautious due to ongoing political instability and human rights issues stemming from both colonial and post-colonial dynamics.

Belgium's interactions with the Democratic Republic of Congo have been shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical considerations. While Belgium has acknowledged its colonial past, it has also maintained close economic ties with the DRC, particularly in sectors such as mining and infrastructure development. Recent diplomatic exchanges have included discussions about reparative justice for Belgium's colonial abuses in the Congo, with public debates on whether Belgium should pay reparations (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021). Furthermore, Belgium continues to support peacekeeping efforts in the DRC through its involvement in the United Nations mission, aiming to stabilize the region and reduce violence linked to armed groups. The modern relationship is characterized by a delicate balance between acknowledging past atrocities and addressing current political and economic challenges in the DRC.

The Unfinished Colonial Agenda: Belgium's Influence in Rwanda and DRC

The term "*unfinished colonial agenda*" reflects the ongoing impact of Belgium's colonial policies, particularly in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where deep-rooted structures of control, ethnic manipulation, and exploitative governance continue to shape socio-political dynamics today. Rwandan scholars and policymakers have increasingly criticized Belgium for failing to take full responsibility for its colonial legacy, particularly the institutionalization of ethnic categories and the failure to support inclusive governance post-independence. In Rwanda, Belgium's role in fueling ethnic divisions between Hutu and Tutsi populations has had long-lasting effects, culminating in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. Despite formal apologies and symbolic gestures, many Rwandans argue that Belgium has not adequately contributed to reconciliation or reparative justice (Umutesi, 2022).

In the DRC, Belgium's lingering influence is evident in ongoing political instability, weak governance structures, and exploitative economic arrangements, especially in the mining sector. The colonial infrastructure left behind by Belgium was designed not for national development but for resource extraction, a system that still disadvantages Congolese communities. Belgian companies continue to have stakes in Congolese mining and financial systems, often benefiting from weak regulatory frameworks. This perpetuation of economic dependency and uneven development has been described by Congolese and Rwandan researchers as a continuation of colonial-style exploitation under a neoliberal guise (Mukwege & Kalambayi, 2023). These scholars assert that Belgium's failure to fully dismantle exploitative networks has allowed external actors to maintain control over Congolese wealth.

Furthermore, the diplomatic posture of Belgium toward both Rwanda and the DRC has been marked by ambivalence. While Belgium funds development programs and promotes human rights, it has often avoided more transformative forms of engagement, such as support for regional justice mechanisms or the return of stolen cultural artifacts. According to Rwandan researchers, this selective involvement is symptomatic of an unfinished colonial agenda—one that seeks to manage historical accountability without disrupting the status quo. As Rwanda continues to assert its sovereignty and regional leadership, calls for Belgium to move beyond symbolic gestures toward genuine partnership and reparative action are growing louder (Nsengiyumva, 2023).

Historical Discrimination and Violence Against the Tutsi: Minubumwe

Jean-Damascène Bizimana, Rwanda's Minister of National Unity and Civic Engagement and a noted genocide scholar, has been vocal in documenting the historical patterns of violence and systemic discrimination against the Tutsi population in Rwanda long before the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi. He emphasizes that Belgian colonial authorities institutionalized ethnic distinctions, officially classifying Rwandans as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa, thereby transforming flexible socio-economic identities into rigid ethnic hierarchies (Bizimana, 2021). Under colonial rule, Tutsis were initially favored for administrative roles due to perceived racial superiority, but this preference shifted in the late colonial period, fueling resentment among Hutus and setting the stage for pre and post-independence violence.

Bizimana highlights several key episodes of anti-Tutsi violence, notably the 1959 “social revolution,” in which thousands of Tutsis were killed and many more fled the country as refugees. This period marked the beginning of a systematic campaign of exclusion, where Tutsis were denied access to education, employment, and political participation. State-sponsored violence continued through the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, including mass killings in 1963 and 1973, with the international community largely silent. Bizimana argues that this historical persecution was not isolated but part of a long-term plan of marginalization and ethnic cleansing that culminated in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi (Bizimana, 2020).

The Minister further stresses the role of colonial legacies in shaping these dynamics. Belgian authorities' divide-and-rule strategy deepened ethnic divisions and reinforced structural inequalities, which successive Rwandan regimes exploited. Dr Bizimana asserts that full accountability requires not only justice for the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi but also acknowledgment of the decades of prior violence that normalized Tutsi persecution. His work serves as a critical reminder that genocide against Tutsi does not begin with mass killings; it evolves from a foundation of sustained discrimination, hate propaganda, and institutionalized exclusion (Bizimana, 2021).

Negative Political Legacy

Divide and Rule: Ethnic Fragmentation

Belgium's “divide and rule” strategy in the African Great Lakes Region fundamentally altered the political landscape of Rwanda and Burundi. Upon taking control of Ruanda-Urundi after World War I, Belgian administrators sought to simplify governance by codifying ethnic categories—Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa—into a rigid socio-political hierarchy. Influenced by European racial theories of the time, colonial officials falsely believed the Tutsi were racially superior due to their physical features and supposed Hamitic origins. This pseudoscientific belief was institutionalized through policies that favored Tutsis for administrative positions, educational opportunities, and leadership roles. Ethnic identity cards introduced in the 1930s made these distinctions legally binding, creating fixed social classes based on ethnicity (Mamdani, 2001). What had previously been more fluid social distinctions were now hardened into divisive political structures.

The long-term impact of these policies was catastrophic. The systemic exclusion of the Hutu majority from power sowed deep resentment, leading to cycles of retaliation and violence both before and after independence. In Rwanda, with the Belgium authorities support this culminated in the 1959 Hutu Revolution, in which the monarchy was overthrown and thousands of Tutsis were killed or forced into exile. The rigid ethnic identities imposed by Belgian rule became political tools used by successive regimes to justify discrimination, repression, and violence. The culmination of this was the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi, where over 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered in just 100 days—a tragedy that can be directly traced back to the colonial social engineering that normalized ethnic hierarchy and exclusion (Des Forges, 1999).

While the DRC did not experience ethnic classification in the same rigid way as Rwanda and Burundi, Belgian rule similarly exploited ethnic differences to undermine unity and reinforce colonial control. The

Congo's vast ethnic diversity—over 200 distinct groups—was used by colonial authorities to fragment potential resistance. Regional favoritism in education and employment created ethnic enclaves of privilege and resentment, weakening national cohesion. After independence in 1960, the lack of a shared national identity and the politicization of ethnic divisions led to civil war, the secession of Katanga, and decades of instability. Ethnic militias, often supported by foreign powers, became common, especially in the eastern regions bordering Rwanda and Burundi, where violence persists to this day. Belgium's legacy of ethnic fragmentation thus remains one of the most enduring and destructive aspects of its colonial rule in the Great Lakes Region (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021; Lemarchand, 2009).

Destabilization of Indigenous Governance

Before the onset of Belgian colonization, the societies in the Great Lakes Region—particularly Rwanda, Burundi, and parts of what is now the DRC—possessed well-established indigenous governance systems. In Rwanda and Burundi, the monarchy served as the central institution of authority, reinforced by a network of chiefs and local councils that managed land allocation, conflict resolution, and social cohesion. These institutions functioned with a high degree of legitimacy and reflected a deeply rooted understanding of local customs and political culture. Similarly, various communities in the Congo, such as the Luba, Kongo, and Lunda, had their own political organizations that emphasized consensus-building and participatory governance. However, the Belgian colonial administration viewed these systems as either primitive or obstacles to control and thus set about systematically undermining or co-opting them (Chrétien, 2017; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021).

Belgian authorities dismantled or subordinated indigenous political structures by introducing European-style centralized bureaucracies, which were alien to the local context. In Rwanda and Burundi, for example, the colonial administration restructured traditional leadership by appointing Tutsi aristocrats—regardless of their legitimacy or competence—thereby sidelining Hutu and Twa leaders who had held authority in precolonial times. This administrative favoritism institutionalized ethnic divisions while weakening organic systems of governance. In the Congo, the imposition of provincial administrators, often disconnected from local dynamics, disrupted community-based leadership structures. The colonial model centralized power in the hands of a few colonial agents and their selected intermediaries, thus eliminating mechanisms for local accountability. This transformation alienated the population from governance and created a dependence on colonial oversight, which would prove disastrous once Belgium abruptly withdrew (Mamdani, 2001; Gondola, 2002).

At independence, the absence of legitimate and functional political institutions left Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC ill-prepared for self-rule. The dismantling of indigenous governance meant that post-colonial leaders inherited foreign institutions that lacked societal buy-in and historical continuity. In the Congo, the lack of experienced administrators and the marginalization of local elites led to the 1960 Congo Crisis, secessionist movements, and civil war. In Rwanda and Burundi, the imbalance of power between ethnic groups—engineered under colonial rule—gave rise to cycles of political violence, coups, and genocide. The power vacuum created by the erosion of traditional authority contributed to a culture of political instability, where governance was often contested, illegitimate, and militarized. Belgium's short-sighted governance model thus created fragile state institutions that have struggled to deliver stability, justice, and inclusion in the post-independence era (De Vries, 2020; Uvin, 2009).

Post-Colonial Instability

The post-independence period in the African Great Lakes Region was marred by political instability, largely due to Belgium's failure to establish viable political institutions or foster inclusive governance prior to its abrupt withdrawal. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (then known as the Republic of the Congo), independence was hastily granted in 1960 with minimal preparation. At the time, there were virtually no Congolese with experience in national governance, and the colonial administration had not cultivated political

leadership or bureaucratic capacity. Within months, the country descended into chaos. The newly elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, was assassinated under murky circumstances, an act widely believed to have been facilitated by both Western powers and internal rivals (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021). This vacuum of leadership and external interference ushered in a long period of dictatorship under Mobutu Sese Seko, whose kleptocratic regime plunged the country into economic ruin, social decay, and persistent conflict.

In Rwanda and Burundi, Belgium's institutionalization of ethnic divisions during the colonial era created fertile ground for post-independence violence. At the time of independence in 1962, power struggles between Hutu and Tutsi groups, exacerbated by colonial favoritism and the rigid ethnic classification system, erupted into political instability and repeated cycles of ethnic violence. In Rwanda, with the support of the Belgian authorities the Hutu majority seized control following the 1959 social revolution, resulting in the exile of thousands of Tutsis. These tensions escalated over the decades, culminating in the 1994 genocide against Tutsi, in which over one million Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed over the span of 100 days (Mamdani, 2001). Burundi experienced similar volatility, including a series of coups and mass killings, particularly the 1972 massacre of Hutus by a Tutsi-dominated military regime and the 1993 assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye, which reignited ethnic conflict (Lemarchand, 2009).

The legacy of post-colonial instability in these countries is not solely rooted in their internal dynamics but deeply intertwined with Belgium's colonial governance strategy. By prioritizing ethnic segmentation, suppressing democratic movements, and abruptly exiting without transitional structures, Belgium left a void in political leadership and civic trust. The absence of inclusive institutions and national identity fostered chronic instability, paving the way for authoritarian rule, military coups, and civil wars. Even today, the ripple effects of this instability are evident in ongoing conflicts in eastern Congo, governance challenges in Rwanda and Burundi, and regional instability that affects the broader Great Lakes area. These conditions underscore how colonial-era decisions continue to shape the political trajectories of formerly colonized nations (De Vries, 2020; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021).

Socio-Cultural Impacts

Institutionalization of Ethnic Identities

Under Belgian colonial rule, ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi was not simply acknowledged but deliberately codified into rigid, institutionalized categories. Prior to colonization, identities such as Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa were relatively fluid and often linked to socioeconomic status, intermarriage, or occupation rather than fixed racial or ethnic heritage (Mamdani, 2001). However, the Belgians, influenced by racial pseudoscience and the Hamitic hypothesis, viewed the Tutsi as racially superior due to their perceived "Caucasoid" features and pastoralist lifestyle. This led to a preferential treatment of the Tutsi minority in administrative positions, education, and political training. Conversely, the Hutu majority was excluded from positions of influence, reinforcing a racialized hierarchy that had not previously existed in such stark terms.

This colonial system was entrenched through formal policies, including the issuance of ethnic identity cards in the 1930s, which legally categorized individuals as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa. These identity cards became powerful tools of social stratification and exclusion, forming the foundation for institutional discrimination. Access to schools, jobs, and government authority was tied to these ethnic labels, undermining indigenous notions of shared nationhood and sowing the seeds of long-term ethnic division (Uvin, 2009). This stratification created not only economic disparities but also a sense of historical injustice and resentment among the Hutu population, which would later erupt in revolutionary and genocidal violence following independence.

The colonial legacy of ethnic classification continued to shape post-independence politics in both Rwanda and Burundi. After Belgium's departure, the colonial-era ethnic categories remained central to power struggles and identity-based politics. In Rwanda, the 1959 Hutu Revolution violently overturned the Tutsi-dominated monarchy, leading to the exile of hundreds of thousands of Tutsi and deepening ethnic animosity. In Burundi,

cycles of Tutsi-led military regimes and Hutu-led rebellions contributed to mass killings and coups. The legacy of Belgian colonial ethnic engineering was not only administrative but psychological—entrenching stereotypes and mistrust that would persist across generations. The social and political institutions of both nations became battlegrounds for identity politics, often with catastrophic consequences (Lemarchand, 2009).

Language, Education, and Religious Manipulation

During Belgian colonial rule in Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, language, education, and religion were deliberately used as tools of control and cultural domination. French was imposed as the language of administration and formal education, marginalizing local languages such as Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, Lingala, and Swahili. Indigenous languages were devalued and considered inadequate for modern intellectual or administrative discourse. This linguistic policy served to disconnect the elite from the broader population and entrenched a hierarchy based on fluency in French—a legacy that still affects access to power and opportunity in these countries today (De Vries, 2020). The dominance of French created a cultural and intellectual dependency that persists in post-colonial governance and education systems.

The Catholic Church, closely aligned with the Belgian administration, became a central pillar in the colonial project, particularly in the realms of education and moral instruction. The Church was granted control over most schools, where it promoted Christian doctrines, European customs, and loyalty to colonial authority. In both Rwanda and Burundi, Catholic missionaries reinforced social divisions by giving preferential educational access to the Tutsi minority, whom they perceived as racially superior due to pseudo-scientific beliefs imported from Europe (Mamdani, 2001). Meanwhile, the Hutu majority was largely excluded from advanced education and administrative training, which sowed resentment and fueled ethnic polarization. In the Congo, a similar system existed where missionary schools were designed not to empower Congolese communities, but to produce a limited clerical class skilled enough to serve the colonial apparatus yet too undereducated to challenge it (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021).

This educational and religious system fostered a small elite class that internalized colonial values and was often alienated from indigenous traditions and community life. These individuals—fluent in French, educated in Church-run schools, and steeped in Eurocentric ideology—were more likely to gain employment and leadership roles under Belgian oversight. However, this also widened the social and cultural gulf between the elite and the majority population. Traditional belief systems, oral histories, and local knowledge were systematically undermined or erased. Consequently, post-independence nation-building efforts struggled to reconcile imported colonial structures with indigenous values, contributing to identity crises and weakened social cohesion. The long-term impact of Belgium's cultural manipulation is still evident today in ongoing debates about education, religion, and national identity in Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC (Lemarchand, 2009; Gondola, 2002).

Cultural Alienation and Erosion

Belgian colonialism in the African Great Lakes Region deliberately undermined and devalued indigenous cultural systems, presenting European civilization as inherently superior. Traditional governance structures, spiritual beliefs, and social customs were portrayed as primitive and incompatible with "modern" civilization. In all three territories—Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo—local languages, customary legal systems, and indigenous knowledge were marginalized in favor of European norms. Cultural practices such as oral storytelling, traditional dances, and spiritual ceremonies were often banned or restricted, replaced by European religious and educational institutions that prioritized Western ideologies. This systematic delegitimization of African heritage fostered a cultural inferiority complex that has persisted well beyond independence (De Vries, 2020).

In Rwanda and Burundi, the impact was especially profound due to Belgium's manipulation of traditional monarchies and the rigidification of social categories. The Tutsi monarchy, for example, was initially used by colonial authorities to enforce control, but later weakened and dismantled as Belgium shifted alliances. This

contributed to the erosion of traditional power systems that once regulated communal life and conflict resolution. Colonial education and religious institutions taught generations of Rwandans and Burundians that their history and customs were relics of a savage past, thus creating a rupture between the older and younger generations and weakening the transmission of cultural values. The Catholic Church, in particular, played a significant role in reshaping societal norms, often framing traditional practices as sinful or backward (Chrétien, 2003). As a result, post-independence national identity formation became a fraught process, with nations struggling to reclaim or redefine their indigenous heritage amidst lingering colonial ideologies.

In the Congo, the cultural alienation was further intensified by the brutality of the Leopoldian regime and the imposition of a foreign administrative and religious order. Indigenous languages like Lingala and Kikongo were suppressed in favor of French, which became the language of prestige, governance, and education. The erasure of local histories and collective memory was institutionalized through the colonial education system, which focused on European history and religious doctrine while ignoring or distorting African pasts. Even post-independence leaders such as Mobutu Sese Seko recognized this alienation and attempted to reverse it through initiatives like *Authenticité*, which sought to revalorize traditional African names, dress, and customs. However, these efforts were often superficial or co-opted for political gain. To this day, Congolese, Rwandans, and Burundians continue to grapple with questions of cultural identity, caught between recovering suppressed traditions and navigating a postcolonial world still influenced by Western norms (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021; Gondola, 2002).

Economic Exploitation

Resource Extraction in the Congo

Resource extraction in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly the Belgian Congo) formed the cornerstone of Belgium's colonial economic agenda. Under King Leopold II's personal rule (1885–1908), the Congo Free State was transformed into a massive labor camp dedicated primarily to rubber production. Indigenous communities were forced to meet rubber quotas under threat of violence, mutilation, or death. The Force Publique, a colonial military unit, enforced these quotas with brutal efficiency, leaving millions dead or maimed (Hochschild, 1998). After international outrage led to the transfer of control from Leopold to the Belgian state in 1908, the extractive system remained intact but slightly less violent. Belgium continued to exploit Congo's vast natural wealth—particularly rubber, copper, gold, diamonds, and uranium—while Congolese communities received little to no benefit from these resources (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021).

The colonial infrastructure built in Congo—such as railways, ports, and roads—was designed solely to facilitate the extraction and export of raw materials to Belgium. These transportation networks connected mines and plantations to ports, ignoring the needs of local populations or regional economic integration. Educational and health infrastructure for Congolese citizens was minimal and primarily administered by religious missions, reflecting Belgium's limited investment in human development. The infamous Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK), a Belgian mining company, operated massive copper and uranium mines with little regard for worker safety or environmental sustainability. Notably, uranium from the Shinkolobwe mine in Katanga was used in the U.S. atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, underscoring how Congo's resources were utilized in global geopolitical conflicts while its own people remained marginalized (Gondola, 2002).

The legacy of this exploitative system continues to haunt the DRC today. Despite being one of the most resource-rich countries in the world, the DRC remains one of the poorest due to entrenched corruption, weak infrastructure, and an economy still heavily reliant on raw material exports. Belgium's colonial economic model left the Congolese state ill-equipped to manage its own wealth, having been excluded from industrial knowledge, financial systems, and governance. The lack of reinvestment in local development created a structurally dependent economy where Congolese labor and land were commodified for external benefit. Post-independence leaders, including Mobutu Sese Seko, perpetuated this model of elite enrichment through

resource extraction, often at the expense of national development. This enduring pattern of exploitation can be traced back directly to Belgium's colonial economic policies (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021; De Vries, 2020).

Labor Exploitation and Forced Labor

Belgium's colonial rule in the African Great Lakes Region was built on a foundation of exploitative labor systems that extracted immense value from indigenous populations while subjecting them to extreme violence and hardship. In the Congo Free State, which was King Leopold II's personal possession from 1885 to 1908, the pursuit of rubber profits led to one of the most horrific forced labor regimes in modern history. Indigenous Congolese were coerced into meeting impossible rubber quotas under the threat of mutilation, kidnapping, or death. Those who failed to comply had their villages burned, families held hostage, or hands severed as punishment. It is estimated that as many as 10 million Congolese perished during this period due to overwork, famine, disease, and direct violence—a genocide in all but name (Hochschild, 1998; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021).

Though Rwanda and Burundi did not suffer the same scale of brutality as the Congo Free State, forced labor was a defining feature of their colonial economies as well. Following their transition to Belgian control after World War I, the colonial administration implemented the **corvée system**, which required indigenous populations to work without pay on infrastructure projects such as road construction, cash crop farming, and administrative buildings. Men were regularly conscripted for months at a time, often far from home, which destabilized family structures and local economies. Failure to comply was met with imprisonment, beatings, or confiscation of property. In Rwanda and Burundi, this labor exploitation was closely tied to Belgium's agricultural policies, which prioritized coffee and cotton production for export at the expense of food security and local autonomy (Chrétien, 2003; De Vries, 2020).

The consequences of these forced labor systems were both immediate and long-term. Entire communities were decimated by population displacement, exhaustion, and disease. Moreover, the economic structures created under colonial rule established extractive systems that continued into the post-colonial era, where labor was undervalued and profit concentrated in elite or foreign hands. Colonial labor exploitation destroyed traditional modes of production and communal solidarity, while failing to create the educational or infrastructural foundations needed for sustainable economic growth. Today, patterns of rural poverty, land inequality, and weak labor protections in Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC can be traced back to these exploitative colonial systems. The legacy of coerced labor continues to haunt the region, embedded in both institutional practices and the collective memory of its people (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021; Mamdani, 2001).

Unequal Economic Development

Belgium's colonial policies in the African Great Lakes Region were characterized by an unequal distribution of economic development that primarily benefited urban centers and foreign interests, while leaving rural areas severely underdeveloped. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Belgian colonial administration focused development in a few cities, particularly the capital, Léopoldville (now Kinshasa), and other areas with valuable mineral resources. The concentration of economic activities around mineral extraction, such as copper, gold, and rubber in the southern and eastern regions, led to significant wealth accumulation in urban areas, while rural communities, especially in the northern and eastern parts of the country, were left impoverished and marginalized (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021). This uneven development created stark regional disparities, which persist today, contributing to ongoing instability and conflict, particularly in the eastern DRC where resource-driven conflicts remain prevalent.

Similarly, in Rwanda and Burundi, Belgian colonial policies favored select regions for development, often at the expense of the rural majority. Both countries, with their fertile agricultural land, were pushed to produce cash crops such as coffee and tea, which were exported to Belgium and other European markets. However, this export-oriented agriculture was primarily geared toward the needs of the Belgian economy, leaving local farmers in Rwanda and Burundi with little access to the wealth generated by their labor. Rural communities, particularly in the more remote areas, were neglected in terms of infrastructure, education, and healthcare. As

a result, despite the region's agricultural potential, widespread poverty persisted in rural areas, creating deep inequalities between urban elites and the rural population (Ansoms & Marysse, 2011).

The long-term effects of these unequal development policies are still visible in the economic structures of post-colonial Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC. In the DRC, the concentration of wealth and infrastructure in a few regions has left vast areas, particularly in the east, deprived of the resources needed for economic development, while fueling armed conflicts over resource control. In Rwanda and Burundi, rural poverty remains entrenched, despite post-independence efforts to address inequalities. This imbalance has hindered economic growth and exacerbated tensions between urban and rural populations, leading to political instability and social unrest. The unequal economic development shaped by Belgium's colonial priorities has thus had lasting consequences, limiting the ability of these nations to achieve balanced, inclusive development in the years following independence (De Vries, 2020; Ansoms & Marysse, 2011).

Environmental Degradation

Belgium's colonial exploitation in the African Great Lakes Region led to significant environmental degradation, driven by extractive industries, deforestation, and agricultural practices that disregarded sustainability. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the colonial administration implemented large-scale mining operations for minerals like copper, cobalt, and gold, often with little regard for environmental protection. Unregulated mining practices led to severe deforestation, erosion, and the destruction of local ecosystems. Additionally, the extraction processes introduced toxic chemicals into water sources, contaminating rivers and streams that local communities relied on for drinking and agriculture. The ecological damage caused by these mining activities continues to impact the region, as the DRC's mineral-rich lands remain a focal point of environmental exploitation (Nixon, 2022).

In Rwanda and Burundi, Belgium's introduction of cash crop farming also had long-term ecological consequences. The Belgian colonial administration pushed for the large-scale cultivation of crops like coffee and tea, which were intended for export to European markets. This shift from subsistence farming to cash crop production led to widespread deforestation as forests were cleared to make way for plantations. The expansion of agricultural lands further displaced indigenous species, disrupting local ecosystems. The focus on export crops also undermined food security in both countries, as rural populations were forced to prioritize cash crops over the cultivation of food crops. This alteration of land use patterns created lasting vulnerabilities in the region's agricultural systems, contributing to food scarcity and environmental degradation in post-colonial times (Ansoms & Marysse, 2011).

The legacy of colonial environmental degradation is still visible today in the region's struggle with natural resource management. In the DRC, the consequences of unchecked mining continue to wreak havoc on local communities, who face contamination from mining by-products and deforestation. Similarly, in Rwanda and Burundi, the ecological damage caused by colonial agricultural practices has contributed to soil depletion, water scarcity, and ongoing deforestation. These environmental issues, coupled with rapid population growth, have placed immense pressure on the land and natural resources, leading to cyclical poverty and food insecurity. The colonial disregard for sustainable environmental practices has thus had enduring effects, hindering the ability of these nations to effectively manage their natural resources and promote long-term ecological health (De Vries, 2020; Nixon, 2022).

Human Rights Abuses

Belgium's colonial rule in the African Great Lakes Region, particularly in the Congo Free State, is infamously marked by the systematic abuse and exploitation of indigenous populations. Under King Leopold II, the Congo Free State became a brutal labor camp where millions of Congolese people were subjected to severe physical punishment, including amputations, executions, and torture, in order to meet rubber and ivory quotas. Leopold's regime viewed the indigenous population as a mere resource, enforcing labor with a ruthless efficiency that resulted in widespread human rights violations. The Congolese were forced into grueling labor

conditions, where failure to meet quotas or disobedience to colonial authorities resulted in brutal punishment. Mutilations such as the cutting off of hands became a symbol of colonial cruelty, and estimates suggest that up to 10 million Congolese people died as a direct result of these abuses (Hochschild, 1998).

While Rwanda and Burundi did not experience the same scale of outright violence as the Congo, Belgian colonialism in these regions was nonetheless marked by severe human rights abuses, especially in its enforcement of forced labor systems and suppression of any resistance. In both countries, the Belgian authorities imposed the **corvée system**, which conscripted men to work on infrastructure and agricultural projects without pay, often under harsh conditions. Dissent or resistance to these exploitative practices was met with violence, including beatings, imprisonment, and even executions. The Belgian colonial authorities also targeted political leaders and local chiefs who opposed colonial policies, undermining traditional systems of governance and reinforcing the power of Belgian officials. In Rwanda, the Belgian colonial regime exacerbated tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi communities, manipulating existing social structures to favor the Tutsi minority, further entrenching ethnic divisions that would later erupt into violence (Chrétien, 2003; Mamdani, 2001).

The legacy of these human rights abuses continues to haunt the Great Lakes Region. In the DRC, the memories of colonial brutality persist as a source of collective trauma, particularly in regions where families lost entire generations to forced labor and violence. In Rwanda and Burundi, the colonial era set the stage for future ethnic violence, with the Belgian legacy of dividing communities based on ethnic lines contributing to the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi. The human rights violations of Belgium's colonial era left deep scars on the region, not only physically but psychologically, as generations of people lived under constant fear and suppression. The trauma inflicted during this period has had lasting effects on the political and social fabric of these nations, continuing to influence the dynamics of power, governance, and national reconciliation in the post-colonial period (Mamdani, 2001; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021).

Long-Term Consequences

Belgium's colonial legacy in the African Great Lakes Region has had enduring effects that continue to shape the political, social, and economic landscapes of Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The manipulation of ethnic identities by colonial authorities created deep divisions that persist to this day. In Rwanda and Burundi, the Belgian colonial regime exacerbated ethnic tensions by favoring the Tutsi minority over the Hutu majority, sowing the seeds for future conflicts. The Tutsi were often positioned in positions of power within the colonial administration, a dynamic that later fueled resentment and violent struggles for power in the post-colonial period. In the DRC, the colonial rulers employed a similar strategy by promoting certain local elites while marginalizing others, leaving behind a fragmented society where ethnic and regional divisions contributed to the country's subsequent political instability (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021).

The absence of proper state-building during the colonial era left these nations ill-prepared for self-rule after independence. In all three countries, Belgian authorities focused primarily on resource extraction, leaving little room for the development of governance structures or institutions that could support long-term political stability. When Belgium withdrew in the early 1960s, there was little to no institutional framework in place to guide the transition to self-governance. This lack of preparation led to immediate political chaos. In the DRC, the abrupt departure of Belgian officials contributed to the assassination of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and the subsequent rise of the dictatorial regime of Mobutu Sese Seko. Similarly, in Rwanda and Burundi, the political vacuum left by Belgian withdrawal triggered ethnic violence and civil wars, with both countries enduring years of instability and conflict (Uvin, 2009).

The economic policies implemented by Belgium during the colonial era were inherently extractive, leaving the region with economies dependent on raw material exports and ill-equipped for sustainable development. In the DRC, Belgium's control over the vast mineral resources created an economy focused solely on extraction, while in Rwanda and Burundi, the colonial emphasis on cash crops like coffee and tea severely limited local

economic diversification. This extractive economic model left these nations highly vulnerable to fluctuations in global commodity prices and hindered the development of diverse industries or infrastructure that could sustain post-independence economic growth. As a result, all three countries have struggled with underdevelopment, inadequate infrastructure, and poor access to essential services such as education and healthcare. The long-term consequences of these policies have been evident in the persistent poverty and lack of economic opportunities in the region, which continue to fuel political instability and social unrest (Ansoms & Marysse, 2011; Uvin, 2009).

Contemporary Repercussions

The legacies of Belgian colonialism continue to profoundly shape the socio-political and economic realities of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Burundi in the present day. In the DRC, the colonial history of exploitation and the manipulation of ethnic identities has contributed to ongoing instability, particularly in the eastern regions. This area remains a hotspot for armed groups, and insecurity continues to plague the region despite various peace efforts and international interventions. The unresolved historical grievances related to Belgian colonial policies, including the exploitation of resources and the undermining of indigenous governance structures, have created a fragmented state where local and international actors struggle to maintain order and foster development. The power vacuum left after the colonial era, exacerbated by decades of dictatorship, civil war, and foreign interference, has contributed to the DRC's inability to establish sustainable peace and political cohesion (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021).

In Burundi, the colonial legacy of ethnic division has left a lasting impact on national identity and governance. The Belgian policy of favoring the Tutsi minority over the Hutu majority laid the groundwork for decades of ethnic tension and violence, which culminated in the 1993 genocide and subsequent civil war. Although Burundi has made some progress in peacebuilding since the 2000 Arusha Accords, the ethnic divisions persist in the political landscape. The centrality of ethnic identity in Burundi's political life—reinforced during the colonial era—continues to fuel social unrest and political instability. This ongoing tension reflects the deep-rooted scars of colonialism, as ethnic polarization remains a significant barrier to national unity and sustainable governance. While the country has seen improvements in infrastructure and development, it remains vulnerable to cycles of violence and political dysfunction (Lemarchand, 2021).

Rwanda's post-genocide recovery process offers another example of how colonial history continues to shape contemporary society. Following the 1994 genocide against Tutsi, Rwanda has made remarkable strides in economic development, education, and infrastructure. However, the memory of colonial-era manipulation of ethnic identities—where Belgians elevated the Tutsi minority over the Hutu majority—still plays a significant role in the country's politics and reconciliation efforts. The Rwandan government, led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), has promoted a narrative of national unity and reconciliation, but ethnic identity remains a sensitive issue. The state's efforts to create a post-genocide society free of ethnic division must contend with the historical legacy of divide-and-rule tactics that entrenched ethnic distinctions during Belgian rule. Rwanda's development successes are often tempered by these unresolved tensions, and the challenge of reconciling different ethnic communities while fostering a unified national identity is a direct consequence of its colonial past (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2021; Lemarchand, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Belgium's colonial rule in the African Great Lakes Region, particularly in Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), has left enduring and destructive legacies that continue to affect these countries today. The colonial period was marked by the manipulation of ethnic identities, the exploitation of natural resources, and the imposition of foreign governance systems that lacked cultural relevance. The Belgian authorities' disregard for indigenous governance structures led to the destabilization of political systems and the entrenchment of divisions among local populations. These policies sowed the seeds of conflict, which later manifested in severe ethnic violence, civil wars, and the exploitation of the region's

resources. The consequences of Belgian colonialism are still visible today in the form of fragile states, ongoing ethnic tensions, and deeply rooted socio-economic inequalities in Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC

Addressing these legacies requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond political rhetoric and involves tangible actions. First, there needs to be a historical acknowledgment of the atrocities committed during the colonial period, particularly in the context of forced labor, resource extraction, and the systemic violence inflicted on local populations. This acknowledgment should be accompanied by efforts toward reparative justice, which could include financial reparations, support for education and infrastructure in the most affected regions, and the establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions. Such steps would not only honor the memory of those who suffered but also provide a foundation for healing and rebuilding trust among the affected communities. Moreover, the international community, particularly former colonial powers like Belgium, must assume responsibility for their historical role and contribute to the development of the region through equitable partnerships, rather than exploitative practices.

Lastly, the process of healing and reconstruction in the African Great Lakes Region must center on inclusive governance, economic equality, and the promotion of social cohesion. While progress has been made in areas like education, infrastructure, and economic development, the legacy of ethnic division and colonial exploitation still hampers the potential for lasting peace and prosperity. Rwanda's successful reconciliation efforts, though impressive, remain fragile, and both Burundi and the DRC continue to face challenges in creating stable political systems. It is essential that future governance efforts in these countries prioritize national unity, social justice, and equitable development. Only by fully addressing the historical injustices of the colonial past can Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC hope to build a more stable, prosperous, and cohesive future for all their citizens.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the enduring legacies of Belgium's colonial rule in the African Great Lakes Region, it is crucial to foster a deeper understanding of the historical injustices and work towards collective healing. One of the first steps should be the establishment of truth and reconciliation initiatives in Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC. These initiatives should not only focus on the recognition of past wrongs but also create spaces for dialogue and understanding between different ethnic and political groups. By acknowledging the trauma caused by colonial practices and their aftermath, these nations can begin to rebuild trust and foster a sense of national unity.

Another key recommendation is the promotion of reparative justice. The international community, especially former colonial powers, should contribute to the long-term development of the region through tangible support such as financial reparations, educational initiatives, and economic investments. This support should be directed toward regions most affected by colonial exploitation, helping to close the significant socio-economic gaps that persist. Additionally, it is important to ensure that any reparative measures are designed in consultation with local communities to ensure that they align with their needs and aspirations.

Lastly, sustainable development in the region must focus on building inclusive governance structures that prioritize social cohesion, peace, and economic equality. It is essential for Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC to move beyond the ethnic divisions entrenched by colonial policies and work towards fostering a more inclusive political landscape. This can be achieved by promoting policies that ensure equal representation, protecting minority rights, and creating avenues for local communities to actively participate in governance. Moreover, investing in infrastructure, education, and healthcare will provide the foundation for a more prosperous and stable future. By addressing the root causes of instability and inequality, these nations can overcome the colonial legacy and pave the way for a more harmonious and prosperous future.

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