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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

I.	Introduction.....	4
	A. Brief History on the Colonization of Africa.....	4
	B. Belgian Colonializm in Africa.....	5
	C. The Belgian Mission.....	5
	D. The Decolonization of Belgian Congo.....	7
II.	Congo’s Independence Reflections in Belgium Press in 1960.....	8
	A. Lumumba’s Image on Belgian Media.....	8
	B. How the Sovereignty and Independence of Congo Was Defined?.....	9
	C. Katanga Process on the News.....	12
III.	Conclusion.....	16

ABSTRACT:

The reason I chose to make an extended essay about “The reflections of the independence of Congo in 1960 in the Belgian Press” is my curiosity about the events occurred at those times. Analyzing the press and how they reflected the same situation from different perspectives assisted me to track the pulse of the public. The independence move in Belgian Congo was reflected in Belgium in mostly a negative tone, creating barriers between people to understand and realize the reality. I used different newspapers: La Soir and Le Libre Belgique as resources which provided me with various chances to have an overall opinion about the issue.

I divided this essay into sections which firstly briefs out the independence and the period, then analyzing the press. I believe it is fundamental to have background information in order to have a concrete view about this period. It is also a fact that independence of the Belgian Congo had an outstanding figure, Patrice Lumumba, who is mentioned in a whole section, since the Belgian Press used its all power to misrepresent him.

All in all, this essay mainly focuses on the press and it is crucial to mention that resources in Dutch were also used as guidance. On the other hand, translation of those documents and newspapers were difficult. That is why French newspapers have been picked mostly.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Brief History of The Colonization of Africa

Between the 1870s and 1900, Africa faced European imperialist violence, diplomatic pressures, military invasions, and eventual conquest and colonization. On the other hand, Africa started to resist in many different ways, raising up against the imperial states which were colonizing their countries. By the early twentieth century, however, much of Africa, except Ethiopia and Liberia, had been colonized by European powers.¹

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, seven European powers – France, Germany, Britain, Italy, Spain, Belgium and Portugal – were determined to have Africa as theirs. That triggered the colonial activity, which was encouraged by different elements mostly economical. It established in the 19th century which was right after the destruction of the slave trade which was triggered by the Industrial Revolution.

In order to explain the motives are especially grounded with economical reasons, the unlasting demand of the raw materials, and the search for profitable markets should be remembered.² To wrap up, these European states believed that colonial possessions conferred prestige and status by all means.

¹ The Colonization of Africa; Ehiedu E. G. Iweriebor – Hunter College; New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
<http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-colonization-of-africa.html>

² Ali A. Mazrui, “European Exploration and Africa’s Self-Discovery,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (1969), pp. 661–666.

B. Belgian Colonialism in Africa

The origins of Belgian colonialism in central Africa were rather peculiar. Although the leading economic and political forces of his country were opposed to any colonial ‘adventure’, Leopold II, the king of the Belgians (1835-1909), relentlessly tried to get control of some overseas region which would enable him to develop a lucrative commercial business³ Belgian Congo was ruled by Belgium from 1908 until 1960. In order to understand the process briefly, it is important why and how Belgians wanted to rule Congo.

C. The Belgian Mission

Leopold II, King of Belgium, was able to eliminate Portugal, France, Britain, and Germany (as well as the United States) into recognizing his claim to a huge chunk of Africa nearly ninety times the size of his own kingdom⁴. He stated that his main goal was to “civilize” the Africans. Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, summarizes Belgium’s colonial code number 29 as follows: “*Belgium’s mission in the Congo is essentially a civilizing one. It has a twofold aim. On the moral plane, it is to ensure the well-being of the native population and their development by the broadening of individual liberty, the steady relinquishment of polygamy, the development of private property and the support of institutions and undertakings promoting native education and giving the natives an understanding and appreciation of the advantages of civilisation. On the economic plane, Belgium’s mission is to achieve the development of the colony for the benefit of the natives and, to this end, to work towards an increasingly complete organisation of the country which*

³ The Historiography of Belgian Colonialism in the Congo; Guy Vanthemsche University of Brussels
Page 89

⁴ Janet G. Vaillant, Black, French, and African: A Life of Léopold Sédar Senghor (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 53.

will strengthen order and peace and guarantee the protection and expansion of the various branches of economic activity: agriculture, commerce and industry”⁵

Of course, civilizing the African was only a cover. The real motive was profits and raw material. To make a comparison of the techniques used in Africa by the colonialist states, it is possible to see the European authorities, mainly Belgium, tried to adapt their style to their general goals in the colonies; the cultural, economic, social and political reasons.

Even though its name was Congo Free State, Congo was at first not even a colony but a private property of the King Leopold II. That is one of the reasons behind, this issue is one of the most brutal events throughout the timeline.

In 1904, a commission was assigned to search about the conditions in the Congo. After the revealing of the cruel system in Congo, even then, Belgium did not soften its policy. This lack of colonial vision is attributable to the fact that the Belgians had not had the experience of governing colonies that the British or the French had. By 1919, the other colonial powers appeared to have been sufficiently impressed by what Belgium was doing to add Rwanda and Burundi to the Belgian empire as the League of Nations trust territories. What seems to have been put together was an administrative system involving a coalition of Belgian⁶. Moreover; Belgian colonial rule saw massive transfers of wealth from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Belgium. The Congolese people were not prepared to gain the control of their country after the departure of Belgians and when independence was granted in 1960.

D. The Decolonisation of Belgian Congo

⁵ Patrice Lumumba, Congo, My Country (London: Pall Mall Press, 1961), pp. 11–12.

⁶ Frantz Fanon, Toward the African Revolution (New York: The Grove Press, 1967), pp. 17–27

The decolonisation procedure in the Congo was ending in an unexpected and fast way. Obviously Belgian governments were not preparing the Congo or themselves for independence. By the time when the Congolese people demanded their fundamental rights and freedom from Belgium, the authorities were not expecting such a reaction and had no plan B at all. The Belgian government unwillingly had to do so.

In January 1960, a Round Table Conference was held in Brussels to discuss the political future of the Congo. May 1960 marked the first elections for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, six months after the Belgian government announced it would pull out of its African colony in response to widespread rioting and full independence to take effect on 30 June 1960.

The emergence of an independent Congo marked the beginning of a new era of colonialism by the Western powers. On this day, Patrice Lumumba became Prime Minister of the Congo, and in six months he would be assassinated.⁷ The promise of integration made to the évolués, meaning the acculturated Africans, was never fulfilled and the Belgians seem to have counted on an indefinite stay. Within thirty days, the new Congo government collapsed because of the demand of the Congo army to be led by Congolese commanders but not Belgians. A full coup d'etat followed on September 14, 1960, when Lumumba was taken into custody and then sentenced to arrest.

With the involvement of USA, the Congo case has turned into an international issue. The U.S. involvement in the political chaos and Lumumba's murder are widely considered to have been based on American belief that Lumumba was a communist.⁸ The United States and Belgium

⁷ The Congo: From Leopold to Lumumba, Whitaker R. Birt, Engr. 297B, Prof. Bruce Lusignan, pp 12

⁸ This is an important remark as this belief took a large part in US media at that time, and shared by the Belgian media as it will be shown in the following part of this paper.

together, therefore, provided extensive support to Lumumba's successor, General Mobutu Sese-Seko, who turned out to be one of Africa's most brutal and corrupt autocrats.

How did the Belgian newspapers reflect this independence period of the Belgian Congo is a far-reaching question to be answered in this paper. In answer to this question, this essay assesses various details including the news in different Belgian newspapers in 1960. Public reaction shown by especially written media to the events of July 1960 supported the Belgian government in its actions, especially where military intervention was concerned.

II. Congo's Independence Reflections in Belgium Press in 1960

The Congolese independence movement was to have a serious impact on Belgian Foreign Affairs. That's why, it has been discussed on Belgian printed media largely especially in 1960. 1960s was the time that Francophone newspapers such as *La Libre Belgique* and *Le Soir* sold numerous copies in Belgium and they were highly effective. There were Dutch newspapers in Antwerp and at the Flemish coast, but the Dutch newspapers were not as effective as the Francophone ones. So in this essay, the main sources are mainstream French newspapers in Belgium in 1960s.

A. Lumumba's Image on Belgian Media

On June 30 1960, Congo had become an independent and sovereign state however it is needed to be stated that this did not prevent Belgium and a numerous countries from interfering in their internal affairs to Congo. In order to analyse the reflections of Congo's independence, it has to be understood how Patrice Emery Lumumba, who is the main actor during Congo's independence process, was presented on Belgian media starting by late 1959. Lumumba was a young politician who attempted to make his political Movement Nationalist Congolais (MNC) which was a nationally based party. He offered an interpretation of the previous

eighty years that focused on colonial exploitation, repression and resource extraction. By disrupting and opposing the accepted narratives, Lumumba was seen by most White Belgians (both in the Congo and Belgium) as radical, unstable and dangerous.⁹

B. How the Sovereignty and Independence of Congo was defined?

The Congo independence and sovereignty had been defined as a “*gift*”, more than the “*rights*” as a main tendency in Belgian media in early 1960. Moreover, the Congolese (mis)use of this gift was seen as threatening to white lives, interests and investments. Despite of the transfer of power in 1960, the Belgian interests and investments were still defined as “*extension of Belgian domestic space*” by Belgian media and there was some emphasis as “*the gift*” should be taken away; “*Independence has been a tragic error and all measures must be taken to save Belgian lives.*”¹⁰

The Belgian press has been directly affected by the Official Approach of Belgian Government about the Congo case. The Belgian Minister of Justice made a Press Conference on 28th July 1960, which took a large part in the media. It basically underlines that “*...The Government in all conscience was forced into this course of action by the mutiny of those same Congolese troops whose task it was to maintain order.*”¹¹

The press stressed the protection of Belgian lives as it was quoted from La Libre Belgique above. However, during the intervention no any Belgian citizen were killed, but it was not stated in the media during this period.

⁹ Imagining the Congo; the International Relations of Identity, Dunn C, Kevin, 2003, pp 75

¹⁰ La Libre Belgique, July 8 1960, 91

¹¹ Ministry of Justice 1960, 5

The Belgian Government interpreted the events following Congolese independence as evidence that the “*children*” had not become developed enough to be independent. Their intervention was underpinned by the belief in the African inferiority. Indeed, among many whites, “*A bas les macaques!*” (*Down with the apes!*) was a common refrain. The rhetoric that the children had proved themselves unworthy was predominant within the Belgian government and media throughout the 1960 crisis. The Belgian press followed the official statement by Belgian State as they read the Congolese actions within a framework that reinforced “*savage*” imagery, as a symbolic expression of resistance and completely denied the historicity of the crisis by explaining it in terms of Congolese’s natural barbarity.

As it is stated in the Introduction part, May 1960 marked the first elections for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, six months after the Belgian government announced it would pull out of its African colony in response to widespread rioting. More than 100 parties took part, but the ultimate winner was the Movement National Congolaise, MNC, headed by Patrice Lumumba. *La Soir* ran a story by foreign correspondents right after the elections that the five weeks Lumumba controlled the Congo, the country was “*gripped by Lumumba fever*”¹² But quickly, the article reported, “*Just as he was hailed as 'savior' in August and September, he became a 'Congo Christ' destined for crucifixion in late September and October.*”¹³ In that time, the Force Publique mutinied, Katanga seceded and the country became chaos. Regarding this, on 5 July 1960, an important piece has been published in *La Libre Belgique*; “*The whole future of the Congo is at stake. There is only one thing: The Force Publique*”¹⁴ *which remains the miracle of Congo that used to be Belgian. The Force Publique today is the only solid institution on this country. Its soldiers have an esprit de corps; they all have the*

¹² *Le Soir*, June 1, 1960, 5

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ The Force Publique is the Congolese Army, manned by Africans and officered by whites.

martial attitude, the same smile up to the ears, the same efficiency too. It has delivered a prodigious demonstration; well officered, well trained, the Congolose are capable of doing great things."¹⁵ Ironically, this was stated on La Libre Belgique on the day The Force Publique mutinity.

As stated above, since Lumumba mostly presented as “devil” in Belgian media during this period, his actions were read within the framework of paternalism as a proof of his immaturity and irrationality. As a proof; La Libre Belgique referred to his Independence Day speech in 1960 as “*Affront a roi et a la Belgique*” which means “*Belgium and the King are offended*” and sharply chastised “*l’insolence*” which means “*Rudeness*” of this upstart African.¹⁶ Almost without exception, the Belgian Media attacked what they regarded as Lumumba’s audacity to criticize Belgian Colonial practices in stead of accepting the “*gift*” of independence as “*grace*” and “*dignity*”.¹⁷

Lumumba’s devil presentation increased in continuous time in the Belgian media when it is discussed about the independence of Congo in international affairs. When Lumumba stayed in Blair House in Washington DC, the Belgian Press expressed outrage that Lumumba slept in the same bed that King Baudoin and Charles De Gaulle has each slept few months earlier.¹⁸ That shows that the Belgian media shows Lumumba as the scapegoat for Belgians fears and disappointments.

¹⁵ La Libre Belgique, July 5, 1960.

¹⁶ La Libre Belgique, July 1, 1960, 1

¹⁷ Le Soir, July 1, 1960, 1, 3 and 7, 2 July, 1960, 7

¹⁸ La Libre Belgique, February 14, 1961

C. Katanga Process on the news

These representations of Lumumba provide an interesting contrast to the Belgian Media and the government's representations of Moïse Tshombe, leader of the Katanga secession. Belgian backing to Katanga and the Tshombe government was an important factor on the clash against the Lumumba government. Discussing the government's intervention on behalf of Tshombe, King Baudouin stated: "*Whole tribes led by sober and honest men have asked us to stay and help them build a real independence in the midst of the chaos which now reigns in what was once the Belgian Congo. Our duty is to give a favourable reply to all those who loyally request our cooperation.*"¹⁹ As opposed to Lumumba, Tshombe was defined as loyal, honest and sensible.

On July 5, 1960, a cartoon on *Le Soir* has been published that depicting a drowning drunk whose bottle is rescued by a lifeguard, letting the drunk go down. This image seems to be an apt analogy for Belgium's response to the 1960 Congo Crisis: Lumumba was portrayed as the drunkard (or at least an idiot) who gets in over his head, the lifeguard (Belgium) dives in to rescue only what it considers to be of value, the alcohol (Katangan wealth), while the victim, (Lumumba/Congo) is left to drown.²⁰

Following the beginning of the Belgian military coup and the suspension of diplomatic relations between 10 and 14 July, there were many collective accusations, leading to a complete division. The Belgian government during that period was convinced of the fact that it no longer had to consider the Lumumba government and attempted to influence the creation of a new Congolese government. The Belgian media gave high support on this attempt.

¹⁹ *La Libre Belgique*, July 22, 1960.

²⁰ *Le Soir*, July 5, 1960.

These media representations are important for, in the case of the 1960 Congo Crisis they not only reflected the dominant discourse on the Congo, but clearly shaped Belgian policy toward the Congo. The Belgium press and public opinion strongly opposed the events in Congo after their independence. Belgium government not only did not inform its citizens, but also was dead locked in justifying its economically liberal point of view. Belgium, was also concerned on the economic aspects of the Congo crisis.²¹

Communication between Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and President Joseph Kasavubu broke down during the five weeks of their shared leadership. Lumumba called for international forces to intervene. The United Nations refused to fight to regain Katanga, which was backed by Belgium. The New York Times ran a special piece that discussed the Katanga problem referring the latest reviews on Belgian media; "If Mr. Tshombe proves to have a firm hold on his province with loyalty to Belgium and if Mr. Lumumba proves to have a similar grip on the rest of the Congo with his anti-Belgium attitude, the Belgian people will be all for going to the aid of the newly proclaimed state"²²

An August 1960 article appeared in The New York Times that addressed the direct fears of the United States government that Lumumba would approach Soviets for aid, thus defying the United Nations, whose members were attempting to thwart a Soviet stronghold in Central Africa.²³ This article has been discussed in Belgian media deeply as Lumumba did contact the Soviet Union, and within weeks Russian twin-engine planes began to show up in Stanleyville to help create a stronger Congolese military. New York Times columnist James Reston wrote in August, "*So much is known of Lumumba's personal self-indulgence and political instability*

²¹ Parliamentary Committee of enquiry in charge of determining the exact circumstances of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the possible involvement of Belgian politicians, pp 3

²² Harry Gilroy, "The Congo crisis as the Belgians see it," The New York Times, July 17, 1960, E 138

²³ Mumbo Jumbo, God of the Congo ...; Reston, James; The New York Times, Aug. 19, 1960, sec. A22

*that he is becoming an embarrassment to the Russians, especially since his appeals to racist prejudice, which go against Communist ideology.”*²⁴

These focuses on fears of communism created an idea of instability in the Congo that spurred some Americans to support American intervention in Lumumba's leadership. This has been also largely discussed in Belgian Media as this focuses on fears of communism created an idea of instability in the Congo that spurred some Americans to support American intervention in Lumumba's leadership.

As an order from the Katangan authorities which is standing for with the transfer, Lumumba was murdered. Despite of the difficulty to state that the time of that decision, this murder can only be described with one term: a planned execution. Despite of the awareness of certain authorities within the government, that murder was denied to the public. Considering the fact that there has been many secret meetings with NATO members, this situation is clearly blurred.²⁵ Regarding this, a column about on the topic; "*Make no mistake about it, he was murdered by the Katanga government of Uncle Toms at the bidding of the blood-sucking Belgians*"²⁶ took a large place in Belgian media with high internal criticisms and Belgian media showed tendency as kept demanding an investigation.

Fears of communism and misunderstandings of Africa stemming from centuries of racism damaged independence efforts. The country continued to spiral out of control under Mobutu's leadership. Even in death, Lumumba was regarded by Belgian media as a threat to Congolese peace. Lumumba's book, *Congo My Country*, was published later that year in Belgium, raising public outcries about its authenticity and possible textual exploitation in translation or

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Parliamentary Committee of enquiry in charge of determining the exact circumstances of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the possible involvement of Belgian politicians, pp 7

²⁶ Edward Peeks "The ghost of Lumumba will haunt our foreign service," The Afro American, Feb. 25, 1961, sec. A5

posthumous doctoring, according to Belgian Colin Legum.²⁷ He said the text benefited neither Lumumba's admirers nor Belgian colonial authorities; "*They bear the unmistakable stamp of Lumumba's mind as I know it from my own conversations with him,*" he said. The book described Lumumba's stance on the cry for help to the Soviets as one of desperation, not communist intent. Still, Western powers found roots of socialism in the African's move. Lumumba wrote, "*I have no right to sleep as long as the people are not masters of their own destiny.*"²⁸

²⁷ Colin Legum, "The Life and Death of Patrice Lumumba," foreword in Patrice Lumumba, Congo My Country (London, 1962): vii.

²⁸ Legum, Congo, My Country: xi.

III. CONCLUSION

It is for sure that the rapid change in the Congo from a dependent colony to a free state, did not fit in with the improvement of the perspectives of some Belgians, which remained concrete by a colonial thinking pattern for a long period. This highly took part in Belgian media. A look at the history of Lumumba's assassination and its effects on Belgian politics shows that a combination of factors contributed to “racist” policies at home and abroad. The Belgian Public was highly affected by the political media in the issue of the Congo. In addition various techniques were used by the mass media in order to spread the main message in the country. A fear of communism by the involvement of USA to the case, a lack of understanding of African society and economic interests in the Congo drove the Belgian policy on the Congo's leadership. Belgian mainstream media showed Congo situation as “*deterioration*”. Besides, Lumuba’s inability to reach the international media, so the images how Belgian media was representing Lumumba was the only source for Westerns and Congo people as well. For example, the Belgian newspaper Le Soir reprinted Lumumba’s Independence Day speech on page 3, after a front page attacking Lumumba’s “diatribe” and reproducing the full text of the speech of King Boudouin. This one instance would prove to be the only time Lumumba had his own words in the international media via Belgian media. After that, Lumumba was given no any chance by Belgian media to articulate his interpretations to a wider audience. Lumumba’s inability to access Belgian media meant that he was unable to circulate his discourses beyond a limited domestic stage. Furthermore, Belgian media actively used its hegemonic power over discursive space against Lumumba as it was explained by examples in this paper.

During that time, the Belgian government was highly against of the idea that the possible support for the Lumumba movement especially from the Belgian media. Right after

Lumumba was deposition from his chair, their mission has turned into to subdue Lumumba since it was a probable thing for him to come back. So, Belgian interference approximately, aimed to disqualify Lumumba by shaping the thoughts of the public. In addition there were no indications from Belgium about having concerns about Patrice Lumumba's security. All in all, trying to stay as objective as possible, it can be said that the government and the media of Belgium were ethically the catalysts of the unfortunate conclusions. Also considering the fact that The European Commission has published a historical research on the issue and recommends this research to the member states, it appears like, there is a movement to at least recover the injuries of the past.²⁹

²⁹ Parliamentary Committee of enquiry in charge of determining the exact circumstances of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the possible involvement of Belgian politicians, The Conclusions of the Enquiry Committee, 2001
http://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/comm/lmb/conclusions.pdf

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