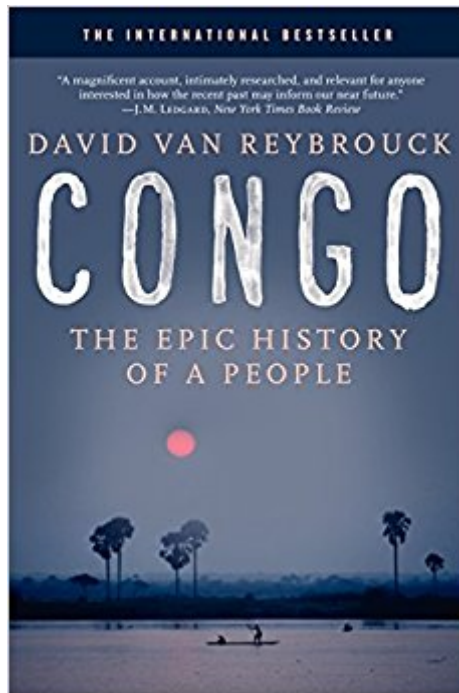


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# Congo: The Epic History Of A People



## Synopsis

From the beginnings of the slave trade through colonization, the struggle for independence, Mobutu's brutal three decades of rule, and the civil war that has raged from 1996 to the present day, *Congo: The Epic History of a People* traces the history of one of the most devastated nations in the world. Esteemed scholar David Van Reybrouck balances hundreds of interviews with a diverse range of Congolese with meticulous historical research to construct a multidimensional portrait of a nation and its people. Epic in scope yet eminently readable, both penetrating and deeply moving, *Congo* is a finalist for the Cundill Prize and takes a deeply humane approach to political history, focusing squarely on the Congolese perspective, and returns a nation's history to its people.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Beyond the retelling of slave and ivory trading, Belgian colonialism, and unstable independence, Van Reybrouck offers the perspective of ordinary Congolese caught in the broad sweep of that nation's turbulent history. The usual historical figures are here, from the adventurer Henry Morton Stanley to Belgian King Leopold II, from liberator Patrice Lumumba to the brutal ruler Mobutu Sese Seko, later overthrown by Laurent Kabila. But also present are elders, some in their hundreds or nineties, recalling their everyday lives in the midst of malaria outbreaks, missionaries, racial designations by colonial whites that exacerbated tribal differences, violence and oppression, economic instability and political upheaval, even the joy of hosting the fight between Muhammad Ali

and George Foreman. Van Reybrouck draws on interviews and anthropological research to offer dense detail of dress, custom, diet, beliefs—•all the ingredients of everyday life. This is a compelling mixture of literary and oral history that delivers an authentic story of how European colonialism, African resistance, and the endless exploitation of natural resources affected the lives of the Congolese. --Vanessa Bush --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

“This is a magnificent account, intimately researched, and relevant for anyone interested in how the recent past may inform our near future” | Van Reybrouck’s bibliography alone is worth the cover price. But what distinguishes the book is its clearheadedness. (New York Times Book Review)

“Balancing research with personal testimonies, Van Reybrouck . . . presents a panoramic account of Congo’s turbulent past. (New York Times Book Review: Paperback Row)

“A vivid panorama of one of the most tormented lands in the world” | A valuable addition to the rich literature that Congo has inspired. (Washington Post)

“Van Reybrouck’s carefully researched and elegantly written book takes in the reader with compelling portraits of ordinary people that enrich what would otherwise be a fairly conventional historical narrative. (Foreign Affairs)

“A magnificent, epic look at the history of the region” | A monumental contribution to the annals of Congo scholarship. (The Christian Science Monitor)

“[A] detailed and well-researched biography, thoroughly rooted in the lived experience of the Congolese” | It is clear that the author is not your typical historian dryly publishing his findings, but a literary artist with a pen almost as sharp as Lumumba’s tongue. (ThinkAfricaPress.com)

“... a compelling mixture of literary and oral history that delivers an authentic story of how European colonialism, African resistance, and the endless exploitation of natural resources affected the lives of the Congolese. (Booklist)

“Van Reybrouck’s extensive account reveals the depth and breadth of exploitation, particularly under Belgian colonial rule, and how Congo’s story is one fraught with the toxic cycle of desire, frustration, revenge. (Publishers Weekly)

“Van Reybrouck makes a good case for the importance of Congo to world history and its ongoing centrality in a time of resurgent economic colonialism, this time on the part of China. (Kirkus Reviews)

“a monumental history . . . more exciting than any novel. (NRC Handelsblad)

“An unbelievable tour de force. (Humo)

“An absolute masterpiece! (VPRO Radio)

“Breathtaking. (Trouw)

“Van Reybrouck tells his story . . . through numerous astute and intelligent voices of the Congo citizens and storytellers. . . . [Van Reybrouck] is not just an historian but a significant

ethnographer who deeply cares about the people whose history he is narrating. — (Rain Taxi) — “If you are looking to read one book on Congo this year, this is it. David Van Reybrouck combines deep historical investigation with extensive ethnography. The result is an illuminating narrative. — (Mahmood Mamdani, Director of the Makerere Institute of Social Research and author of *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*) — “A well-documented and passionate narrative which reads like a novel. [...] As an eye, a judge, and a witness, a talented writer testifies. — (V.Y.M. Mudimbe, author of *The Invention of Africa*) — “Congo is a remarkable piece of work. Van Reybrouck [keeps] a panoramic history of a vast and complex nation accessible, intimate and particular. — (Michela Wrong, author of *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*)

This is a book written by a Flemish Belgian author originally published I believe in the Netherlands and recently translated to english. I have had a interest in the Congo ever since I read "King Leopold's Ghost" by Adam Hochschild and this book was a nice continuation of what I read in that book (though Van Reybrouck is slightly critical in a footnote of Hochschild, saying he was too black and white in his portrayal). I read Van Reybrouck interviewed hundreds of people and it shows in the sheer detail. Supposedly he even interviewed a 126 year old which seems too incredible too believe but real or not his story is incredible. Starting from the early discovery by Europeans to present day Van Reybrouck has a nice blend of sensitivity with objectivity. You can tell he really cares about the Congo yet he avoids taking a good vs evil narrative. The first half of the book covering European discovery and colonisation overlaps with Hochschild's "King Leopold's Ghost" but much more detailed. The second half which covers Congo independence and the aftermath I thought was the best part of the book. Everyone knows vaguely about how many African countries after independence were taken over by military dictatorships and plagued by civil wars and economic malaise but it was fascinating to read how it happened in the Congo in such detail. It gave me a completely different perspective of, not just the Congo, but Sub-Saharan Africa in general. A terrific book and a good example of how many good non-english books there are out there. Hopefully more get translated into english.

For anyone wanting to familiarize their self with the rich and turbulent history of the Congo and its leaders, this book is a one stop fulfillment of that mission. The author often pulls from firsthand interviews with major and minor actors the development of the Congo and occasionally from family history. (His parents spent time in the Congo.) I knew basically nothing about the Congo when I started reading this book and I undoubtedly learned a great deal from reading it. I would highly

recommend it to anyone wanting a comprehensive history of the Congo. Reybrouck's book starts with a panoramic view of ancient central Africa and then quickly arrives at the pre colonial/colonial period. During this period, Leopold II founded the Congo Free State (recognized by Europe in 1885), which was owned by himself personally, with the help of explorer Henry Morton Stanley. He made a fortune in ivory and rubber. Some of the fortune was used for public buildings in Belgium. Eventually, he was forced to cede the Congo to Belgium in 1908. In May 1960, a growing nationalist movement led by Patrice Lumumba won the elections and he became the first Prime Minister. The parliament then elected Joseph Kasavubu as President. The Belgian Congo became independent on June 30, 1960. Kasavubu and Lumumba fought and eventually Joseph Mobutu (Lumumba's chief of staff of the Congo army) arose from the ashes to become the new president and eventual dictator. Mobutu initially had the support of the United States because he was anti-communist. He worked hard to remove vestiges of colonialism including changing the name of the country to Zaire, Leopoldville to Kinshasa and Stanleyville to Kisangani. Ultimately though, his regime became a stumbling kleptocracy that did not invest in infrastructure or look after the wellbeing of its citizenry. After the Soviet Union fell, the US was no longer interested in having him as an ally. Mobutu continued in power until armed forces composed of a combination of Zairian opposition soldiers, Rwandan soldiers and Ugandan soldiers forced him to flee Zaire in 1997. The leader of the opposition forces, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, became president. Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and was succeeded by his son Joseph Kabila. The voters approved a constitution July 30th, 2006 and a vote was held. The disputed election between Kabila and Jean-Pierre Bemba resulted in violence between their supporters. Following that, a new election was held in October 2006. Kabila won. Sadly, more violence follows. The book ends with the author discussing his trip to China to report on the Congolese there and how they are buying goods to sell in Kinshasa. (Quite profitably, I might add.) While I appreciate the "end of journey" wrap up, I would have rather seen the book end with Reybrouck's thoughts on the Congo's future or its place in Africa or the world not just examples of trade with China. Additionally, I think a heavier use of some macroeconomic statistics would help the author make his points. Overall, I very much enjoyed the book.

Congo: The Epic History of a People was a comprehensive and insightful account into the desperate history of a people preyed upon by a European colonizer, by massively corrupt political leaders, and ultimately by ongoing Hutu-Tutsi slaughter imported from Rwanda, which the national

government has been too weak to stop. Van Reybrouck injects Congo's history into global events--the scramble for Africa, Cold War pawn, victim of economic globalization, and site of one of the earliest human rights' scandals: the cutting off of hands of those who did not meet rubber collection quotas. The volume records the ongoing exploitation of the Congo for its natural resources and explains how often well-intentioned international groups worsened the travails of the Congolese by policies that ignored conditions on the ground . Van Reybrouck theorizes that the tragedy of the Congo soared with its premature independence; Congo did not have the infrastructure needed for a democratic state. This book reads like a novel and is often piercingly painful as when Van Reybrouck relates the populace's habituation to corruption.

Excellent book. David Van Reybrouck tells the story of the Congo from earliest recorded history to the present day. The colonial story has been told before, and he tells it again with clarity here, but then continues on with a well researched and clearly written narrative of independence, the rise and fall of Mobutu and the ongoing wars. He brings the story alive by weaving in oral history from numerous interviews with people who participated in the events (or who pass along stories from their parents and grandparents). English translation is very good - the book does not read like a translation.

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