

# The unquiet death of Patrice Lumumba

By Bill Vann  
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January 17 marks the forty-first anniversary of the brutal assassination of Patrice Lumumba. The murder of the leader of the Congolese independence struggle and one of the most impassioned critics of the colonial oppression of Africa continues to haunt governments in both Europe and America.

In November, an all-party commission of inquiry formed by the Belgian government released a report acknowledging that Belgium played a role in the murder of the Congolese leader.

The admission was far too little and came far too late. The Belgian government decided to launch the commission as a show of repentance for past crimes. Its aim was to smooth the way for increased involvement in its former African colony following the fall of the Mobutu dictatorship and to improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States, its principal economic rival in the region.

“If we want to engage in frank dialogue with our former colonial partners, then we have to also consider some painful periods from our colonial past,” said a Foreign Ministry spokesman of the commission’s findings.

At the same time, the limited admissions served as a means of whitewashing the growing revelations about the assassination in the last few years, in both the book by Flemish historian Ludo de Witte published two years ago, *De Moord Op Lumumba*, and by journalists who interviewed Belgian officers and soldiers who participated in the killing.

Focus has been further brought to the assassination by the recent film *Lumumba*, directed by Raoul Peck, which recreated the horrific murder.

The film begins with the nightmarish scene of Belgian soldiers unearthing the remains of the Congolese leader and one of his comrades who were shot to death by a firing squad just days before. Determined to deny supporters of Congolese liberation even a corpse around which they could rally, the order was given to obliterate every physical trace of Lumumba. Thus, with axes, saws, acid and fire—along with ample quantities of whisky to dull their senses—the soldiers set about their grisly task.

The commission’s report concluded that authorities in Brussels and Belgium’s King Baudouin knew of plans to kill Lumumba and did nothing to save him. It insisted, however, that there is no documentary evidence that Belgium ordered the Congolese leader’s death.

It did acknowledge that the government covertly channeled funds and arms to regional secessionist groups within the Congo that were violently opposed to Lumumba. The report put much of the blame on Baudouin, who died, in 1993, alleging that the King pursued his own post-colonial policy behind the backs of elected officials. Some parties within the Belgian government have responded by calling for a debate on the future of the royal family.

In fact, earlier investigations have uncovered ample proof that the assassination of Lumumba was the direct result of orders given by the Belgian government and the Eisenhower administration, acting through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and local clients financed and “advised” by Brussels and Washington.

De Witte’s book cited a telegram sent three months before Lumumba’s death from Count Harold d’Aspremont Lynden, then minister for African

affairs, to Belgian officials in the Congo:

“The main aim to pursue in the interests of the Congo, Katanga and Belgium is clearly Lumumba’s definitive elimination,” said the memorandum. Given that the Congolese leader had already been deposed from power and placed under house arrest at the time, there was no mistaking the meaning of these words.

Similar revelations have surfaced from the US side. Last year, the government released archive material related to the Kennedy assassination that included an interview with the White House minute-taker under the Eisenhower administration, Robert Johnson.

In a meeting held with security advisers in August 1960, two months after Congo achieved its formal independence from Belgium, Eisenhower ordered the CIA to “eliminate” Lumumba, according to Johnson’s account.

“There was a stunned silence for about 15 seconds and the meeting continued,” Johnson recalled.

The CIA’s director, Allen Dulles, referred to the Congolese leader as a “mad dog.”

Among the American agents on the ground in the Congo was a young CIA man working under diplomatic cover, Frank Carlucci, who tried to work his way into Lumumba’s confidence in the months before the murder. Carlucci went on to become national security advisor and defense secretary in the Reagan administration and is today the chairman of the Carlyle Group, the influential merchant bank that includes George Bush Sr. among its directors.

According to Larry Devlin, then the CIA station chief in Leopoldville (Kinshasa), the agency’s chief technical officer arrived in the African nation shortly after the “elimination” order from Eisenhower. With him he brought a tube of poisoned toothpaste that was to be placed in the Congolese leader’s bathroom. The improbable plot was dropped, however, in favor of a more direct method. Lumumba was delivered into the hands of his bitterest political enemy, Moises Tshombe, the secessionist leader of Katanga.

The assassination took place less than seven months after the Congo had declared its independence, with Lumumba as its first prime minister.

Lumumba was among the most courageous and principled figures in a generation of young nationalist leaders who came forward in the second half of the twentieth century to claim freedom from European colonialism.

These forces were ill prepared for the challenge of leading the immense eruption of social struggle that swept the continent. Moreover, both those who were murdered, like Lumumba, and those who survived were handed a poison chalice by the old colonial powers in the form of the arbitrary borders that they had drawn in the nineteenth century scramble to divide and conquer Africa.

In the Congo, in particular, Belgian colonialism had deliberately kept the African population untrained and uneducated, reduced to the status of beasts of burden for the extractive industries that looted the country’s vast mineral and other natural wealth.

On the eve of independence, the Congo, a territory larger than Western Europe, was seriously underdeveloped. There were no African army

officers, only three African managers in the entire civil service, and only 30 university graduates. Yet Western investments in Congo's mineral resources (uranium, copper, gold, tin, cobalt, diamonds, manganese, zinc) were colossal. These investments meant that the West was determined to keep control over the country beyond independence. The Belgians organized the transfer of power in deliberate manner to ensure that "independence" would at best be a formal fiction.

Following widespread rioting and strikes in 1959, the colonial power surprised all of the nationalist leaders by scheduling elections for May 1960. In a chaotic rush to take advantage of the fruits of independence, 120 different parties were formed, most of them regionally or ethnically based. Only one, the Mouvement National Congolais or the MNC, led by Lumumba, favored a centralized government and a Congo united across ethnic and regional lines.

Lumumba's rise and fall was meteoric. Plucked from a Belgian colonial jail where he was beaten and tortured for advocating independence, he was flown to Brussels to participate in round-table discussions that were aimed at smoothing the way to a peaceful and smooth transition to a regime that would leave Belgium's financial interests in the Congo intact, while transferring the trappings of state power from the white colonialists to a new native elite.

Peck's film *Lumumba* acutely captures the immense social contradictions underlying the independence movement and the class position of Africa's new petty-bourgeois nationalist rulers. A scene portrays Lumumba's speech before the independence day celebrations attended by the Belgian king and his ministers as well as the collection of black opportunist politicians into whose hands Belgium intended to entrust the new independent state.

In the midst of a ceremony in which the Belgians had congratulated themselves on successfully civilizing the Congolese and preparing them for self-rule, Lumumba spelled out in graphic terms the reality of colonial oppression, describing it as 80 years of "humiliating slavery which was imposed upon us by force":

"We have known harassing work, exacted in exchange for salaries which did not permit us to eat enough to drive away hunger, to clothe ourselves, or to house ourselves decently, or to raise our children as creatures dear to us.... We have known ironies, insults, blows that we endured morning, noon and night, because we are negroes.... We have seen our lands seized in the name of allegedly legal laws, which in fact recognized only that might is right.... We will never forget the massacres where so many perished, the cells into which those who refused to submit to a regime of oppression and exploitation were thrown."

Peck's camera cuts between the stunned anger on the faces of the Belgians listening to this speech and the elation of crowds of Africans gathered around radios cheering Lumumba's courage to honestly portray their existence.

Lumumba's forthright demands for economic independence, social justice and political self-determination, and his hostility to a political setup based upon tribal divisions, which the colonialists had effectively used to divide and rule Africa, sealed his fate. His threat to appeal for Soviet aid as a last resort in his effort to free the country of the continuing domination of the Belgian mining interests and Belgian troops, who continued to intervene in the aftermath of independence, gave Washington the pretext for allying with the old colonial power in seeking his elimination.

Within days of independence, the political situation in the Congo spiraled out of control. Black troops mutinied against Belgian officers. Katanga province, the main mining region, declared itself a separate state under Tshombe, who acted under the protection of Western mining interests and the Belgian military. Belgium sent its army back into the former colony, with the alleged aim of protecting its nationals. Lumumba invited in UN peacekeeping forces, but they too subordinated themselves

to the machinations of Belgium and the US, refusing to take any action to prevent the murder of the new prime minister.

While Tshombe became prime minister after Lumumba's murder, his reign did not last long. In 1965, Joseph Mobutu, the Congolese army leader who handed Lumumba over to his executioners, staged a bloodless coup, inaugurating a 32-year dictatorship which was legendary for its corruption and greed. This "kleptocracy," which renamed the territory Zaire, became Washington's closest ally on the continent and served as a staging area for its counterrevolutionary interventions against liberation movements in southern Africa.

After his death, Lumumba was transformed into a harmless icon of African liberation and third world politics. Even Mobutu, who had engineered his death, paid homage to the former leader, as did the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, which named its premier international university after him.

In fact, the Soviets had little intention of helping Lumumba. Its presence and interest in Africa was never as strong as the West maintained—in order to justify its own neo-colonialist strategies—or as Moscow itself pretended to promote its image as a champion of national liberation. Where it did intervene, it was not to further social revolution, but to improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis US imperialism as part of its Cold War policy of peaceful coexistence. Thus, it could provide aid to Angola against apartheid South Africa's military aggression, at the same time that it buttressed a brutal military dictatorship in Ethiopia that plunged the entire Horn of Africa into desperate crisis.

Above all, Peck's film *Lumumba* bleakly portrays the new Congolese prime minister as isolated, trapped in a set of political conspiracies that he cannot escape. Born in Haiti, Peck spent time as a youth in the Congo, where his father worked as a teacher. He is sympathizer of Pan Africanism and has repeatedly said that he made the film above all to present Lumumba's story to an African audience. He accurately presents all of the forces aligned against the nationalist prime minister, from the CIA agents cultivating his military chief, Mobutu, to the Belgian colonialists and military officers and the treacherous set of grasping African politicians.

But what he is unable to see or explain is what social forces were at work within the new regime. Lumumba was unable to counter the enemies arrayed against him because, in the final analysis, he too was balancing between the imperialists on the one hand and the oppressed African masses on the other.

The murder of Lumumba was part of a political process that unfolded throughout sub-Saharan Africa in which the dreams of masses of workers, peasants and poor for revolutionary social change were cruelly betrayed.

The petty-bourgeois nationalist elites that came to power with decolonization were content to accept the legacy offered them by colonialism, laying hold of the state institutions and national boundaries created by the European powers in their conquest of Africa.

The formal granting of state independence nowhere in Africa represented in any fundamental sense the realization of the democratic aspirations of the African masses. Even in those areas where the end of colonialism was the product of armed struggle, state independence merely provided a cover for the continued dominance of imperialism over the masses of the former colonies, with corrupt national bourgeois cliques using the state to enrich themselves at the expense of any social progress.

While Lumumba's brutal assassination turned him into a martyr of Western imperialist aggression in Africa, those whom he had emulated, from Nyere to Nkrumah and Kenyatta, presided over corrupt regimes that gave way to military dictatorships and police-state regimes in the service of the international banks and foreign capital.

The Congo itself, 41 years after Lumumba's assassination, provides the starkest confirmation of the thoroughly reactionary character of the national bourgeoisie. Mobutu was overthrown in 1997, after his

debt-ridden regime had outlived its usefulness to Washington with the end of the Cold War. His successor, Laurent Kabila, was in turn assassinated, replaced by his son Joseph, who has sought to be even more accommodating to Western financial interests.

In the course of three years of civil war, more than 2.5 million Congolese have died, most of them women and children who have fallen victim to hunger and disease. The armies of neighboring African regimes—Rwanda, Uganda on one side and Zimbabwe on the other—have intervened in the country's civil war, ostensibly for reasons of political sympathy and regional security. In fact, they have merely emulated the historical role of Western colonialism, illegally appropriating and exploiting mining facilities to enrich military officers and their political and business cronies in the three countries.

There is no way out of the desperate social and economic crisis gripping the Congo and the entire African continent under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie and the domination of the Western banks and transnationals. The ideals of democratic freedoms, economic progress and social justice that inspired masses of Congolese and other Africans in the struggle against colonialism more than four decades ago will be realized only through the forging of a new movement to unite the African working class with that of Europe, America and the rest of the world based on the program of international socialism.

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