The Tragedy of Lumumba

The Assasination of Lumumba by Ludo De Witte, translated from the Dutch by Ann Wright and Berde Keesey. Verso, 224 pp., $27.00

Lumumba a film by Raoul Peck

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1. Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the independent state of the Congo, was in power for only twelve weeks, but he has become a legend—to some a saint and martyr, to others a psychotic demagogue. Recently several books, a film, and a Belgian painting of Lumumba as a defining figure of his time, a heroic victim of Western greed, prejudice, and brutality. Detailed revelations about his death have, in terrible detail, filled in the gaps in previous accounts.

The tragedy of Lumumba touches on, and sometimes illuminates, many histories—the long colonial and neo-colonialism; African decolonization and the problems of transition and leadership; the influence of great internationals, the Cold War’s disastrous effect on parts of Africa during the liberation period; the limitations of the UN’s peacekeeping role; and, not least, the creation of myths and legends.

Belgium’s exploitation of the Congo was the darkest chapter in all the marbled history of European colonialism. To feed King Leopold II’s manic appetite for wealth and slave trade, the colonial administrators—administered by the independent Force Publique commanded by Belgian officers had halted the fertility of the Congolese in a few years and left a legacy of oppression and cruelty that poisoned forever the relations between Belgians and Congolese. At the Congo’s independence on June 30, 1960, the young King Baudoin, in a paternistic speech, praised his ghastly ancestor’s achievements. Lumumba’s fiery response brought into the open the long-suppressed resentment of his people. Perhaps for the first time, Belgian officials realized that after independence, with Patrice Lumumba as prime minister, things would not, as they had hoped, go on much as before.

The Congo, unlike most African colonies, had no longstanding liberation movement either at home or abroad, or any internationally recognized independence leaders like Mandela, Kenyatta, Nkrumah, Nkomo, Njamba, and others. Such liberatorism activity as there had been sanctioned only in 1957 and was led by Joseph Kasavubu, who was to become the Congo’s first president. Lumumba, a former postal clerk and beer salesman, became the leader of the nationalist, anti-colonial party, the Mouvement National Congolais, in Stanleyville, his political base. He was arrested on November 1st, 1959, his first time in November 1959 and then released to take part in the Brussels Roundtable that set the scene for the Congo’s suddenly accelerated independence. Precipitated in part by Charles de Gaulle’s abrupt granting of independence to France’s African colonies, Congolese independence was in every way a last-minute arrangement.

Whether because they believed that independence would be little more than a formality or because of the superiority and contempt they felt for their unfortunate African subjects, the Belgians, unlike other colonial powers, made no practical arrangements for an Independent Congo. No Congolese had ever taken part in the business of government or public administration at any important level. Only seven out of a population of 13.5 million had university degrees. There was not one Congolese in the Force Publique, which was to become the Armed Forces of the Congo, or the Congolese National Army (ANC). No colony had ever faced independence so ill-prepared.

In the first days of independence went along a dizzying pace. The army mutinied and threw out its Belgian officers. Europeans were roughed up, and there were reports of white women being raped. The Belgian population panicked and left. Belgian paratroopers were deployed to protect the remaining Europeans. These troops, believed by the Congolese to have been sent to reverse independence, clashed with the soldiers of the ANC—which had no officers—in the major cities. With the connivance of Belgium, the richest province of Katanga, whose president was Moïse Tshombe, seceded from the new republic, public administration, law, and order evaporated and were replaced by chaos and anarchy.

President Kasavubu and Prime Minister Lumumba were, understandably enough, unable to stem this tidal wave of unrest and appealed to the United Nations for help. The UN secretary-general, Dag Hammarskjöld, brought their request to the United Nations Security Council, which on July 14, despite the reservations of Belgium’s NATO allies, the United States, France, and Britain, called on Belgium to withdraw its troops from the Congo. The Council also authorized the secretary-general to provide the new government with military assistance as was necessary until its national security forces were able to meet their tasks.

The American UN undersecretary, Ralph Bunche, already in Léopoldville and soon to become the head of the UN mission, tried to explain the nature and limitations of the UN operation in his talks with Kasavubu and Lumumba. The UN troops could be told them, only use force in self-defense and could not be used to influence the outcome of any internal conflict.

2 I should explain here my own connection with the Congo. I was Ralph Bunche’s chief assistant and in that capacity was in the Congo during the summer and early fall of 1960. We

other, less dramatic means. Hammarskjöld was convinced that between the various parties in the Congo would only turn a bad situation into a catastrophe. "Alas, Horace," he told the Security Council in reply to a Soviet demand that the UN should intervene to prevent the Katangese secession, "that we help the Congolese people by actions in which Africans...will believe, and not leave the Congo or kill Congolese, and that will remain my guiding principle in the future." At mid-August Hammarskjöld took the considerable risk of personally leading the first UN troops into Katanga to provide the basis for the withdrawal of Belgian troops, as had been done successfully in the rest of the country. He did not take Lumumba with him on this already hazardous venture; the prevailing hatred and fear of Lumumba in Katanga would almost certainly have ensured a violent and bloody end of the mission, and probably of Lumumba and Hammarskjöld as well.

This kind of pragmatism was lost on Lumumba, and, resisting his exclusion from the Katanga venture, he violated the Hammarskjöld and the UN mission, his words being faithfully published under his name by the Soviet Union. He also refused to meet with Ralph Bunche when the UN peace mission arrived.3 Bunche, who considered that access to the prime minister was essential for the UN’s mission, asked to be replaced by someone with whom Lumumba would be willing to deal.

Far more disastrous, Lumumba dispatched units of the ANC, untrained and without logistics or leadership, in an attempt to deal almost certainly with Katanga and with a nascent secessionist movement in neighboring Kasai. It appealed for Soviet support in this desperate venture, and was given trained, armed, and equipped troops, and even transport planes. The planes and advisors were quickly withdrawn when the situation in Katanga was bad but not before had helped the ANC to massacre more than a thousand villagers. 4

Lumumba had visited Washington in July and talked with Secretary of State Christian Herter and Secretary of State Douglas Dillon. According to Dillon, Lumumba impressed both men with his "dynamic and enthusiastic" personality, and the willingness of the United States government

3Bunche, who had drafted the chapters of the UN Charter on decolonization and trusteeship and was awarded the 1950 Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating the armistice agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors, had a unique record as a proponent of decolonization and was the friend and mentor of many of the African independence leaders. Lumumba once asked me angrily why Hammarskjöld had sent "ce negre Africain" to the Congo, a comment that Hammarskjöld had only sent the best man in the world to a difficult situation. Lumumba did not revert to this subject.

The New York Review
to work with him began to evaporate. Lamumba's rejection of the UN and his call for Soviet military aid confirmed Washington's worst fears of a Soviet takeover in the Congo, with Lamumba as an African Pidal Castro. As a US Senate inquiry later showed, the Eisenhower administration authorized the president to assassinate him if he refused to take action. The bloody fiasco in Kasai aroused even the placid President Kasavubu to action. With the encouragement of Belgium and the United States, he dismissed Lamumba for governing arbitrarily and plundering the country into civil war. Half an hour later Lamumba declared on the radio that Kasavubu was no longer chief of state and he called upon the people to rise up and the army to die with him. The Western nations sided with Kasavubu, the Soviet bloc with Lamumba, and the UN operation was caught in the middle. As Bushebe's successor, Rajeshwar Dayal, put it, the UN is here to help but not to intervene, to advise but not to order, to consulate but not to take sides... We have refused to take any position if it could only remotely be considered as an act of intervention. But how can the duty of maintaining law and order be discharged without taking specific action when necessary? That is the problem that faces us daily and which is yet to be solved. All sides—Belgium, the United States, the Soviets, Lamumba, and Joseph Mobuto, Lamumba's military aide—loudly criticized the UN, a forearm of Bonnia thirty years later, where the UN's much-deserved neutrality and impartiality in a controversial conflict pleased no one.

On the evening of September 14, Joseph Mobuto—who had suddenly and unexpectedly broken with Lamumba and was establishing a power base of his own in alliance with Kasavubu—announced on the radio that he was renouncing the chief of state, the two rival governments, and the parliament until the end of the year. In the meantime, he said, he would call in "technicians" to run the country. For him, it was a casus belli, but for the hereditary chief of the Kone, it was not. The failure to call in a "technician" to run the country, it is said, to call on the devil to save the country, I will, in spite of everything, emerge victorious. Four days later, in a complete about-face, Lamumba sent Hammerinkel a reconciliation agreement with Kasavubu which effectively puts an end to the Congolese crisis. In it he asked for full UN assistance and assured the secretary-general of his full cooperation.

To the fury of the United States and its Western allies, Hammerinkel refused to recognize Mobutu and announced that the UN's objectives would be to reconcile Lamumba and Kasavubu, to restore constitutionalism, to reopen the parliament, and to get the government to tackle the new catastrophic internal situation—an empty treasury and the breakdown of public administration, judiciary, tax collection, and functioning schools. Lamumba was being guarded by UN troops in his official residence, and Hammerinkel refused to allow his arrest, which the US ambassador in Leopoldville had been urging on Kasavubu and Mobutu.
3.

Raoul Peck has recreated Patrice Lumumba's brief and tumultuous public career in a remarkable movie. His wonderful actors, especially Eric Ehoum- 
ane as Lumumba and Alex Désar as Lumumba's principal advisor in a way that is both moving and convinc-

ing. His European cast, particularly Piet Delbeke as the Belgian comman-
der, General Janssen, conveys brilli-
antly the Belgian attitude—arrogant, inquisitive, obtuse, but also singularly curious and nervous—which had so much to do with the tragic de-
bate of the Congo's independence.

Peck gives a lively impression of the conflicts and rivalries on the Congolese side, and of the gulf that divided the Belgians. Jean-Paul Vubu's passive postcolonial tribal federalism and Lumumba's dream of a national state that transcended tribalism. Lumumba is presented as a great hero, but Peck also hints at the frenzied atmosphere in the Congo in the crucial months, and on the Belgian side, as, for example, one would expect in a movie of this kind.

In his book The Assassination of Lumumba, De Witte has performed an important service in setting the stage for the events that led up to the assassination of Lumumba. The book is a valuable addition to the literature on the assassination of Lumumba and the Congo, and it provides a wealth of information about the events that led up to the assassination. The book is well-written and well-researched, and it is a valuable contribution to the literature on the assassination of Lumumba and the Congo.

The assassination of Lumumba was a tragedy that was preventable. The Belgian government could have done more to prevent the assassination of Lumumba, and it could have acted more effectively to prevent the assassination of Lumumba. The Belgian government was aware of the dangers that Lumumba faced, but it did not act to prevent the assassination of Lumumba. The Belgian government was also aware that the assassination of Lumumba would have a negative impact on the Congo, and it could have taken steps to prevent the assassination of Lumumba.

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flawed ideological thesis do nothing for De Witte's credibility.

4.

Patrice Lumumba's assassination was an inexcusable, cowardly, and disgustingly brutal act. Belgium, Kasa Vubu and Mobutu, and Moïse Tshombe bear the ultimate responsibility for this atrocity. The United States, and possibly other Western powers as well, tacitly favored it and did nothing to stop it.

Nor, in view of what subsequently happened, can the United Nations escape responsibility. After protecting Lumumba for two months in his official residence in Léopoldville, it stuck rigidly to its policy of non-interference in internal political conflicts after he left secretly for Stanleyville. In refusing to band with or hinder either Lumumba or the Kasa Vubu/Mobutu regime (now recognized by the UN General Assembly), the UN force made it at Kasa Vubu in Kasai, the last, slim chance of saving Lumumba from his enemies. Seen with the advantage of hindsight, the failure to protect Lumumba after his secret departure from Léopoldville joins the list of tragedies (including the Rwandan genocide and Srebrenica) that the UN failed to prevent by not taking action when action was still possible.

De Witte glowingly describes Lumumba as the hero of the "struggle between the international neo-colonial coalition on one side and the nationalist Congo on the other." He believes that Lumumba belongs "in the pantheon of the universal defenders of the emancipation of the people." He briefly mentions some of Lumumba's misdeeds and the "political weakness of Congolese nationalism, including the weakness of its central leader..." and believes that Lumumba was decadent in thinking he would get help from Africa and Asia, from Moscow, and from the newly independent elites that originally supported him. He does not say how much Lumumba's personal conduct was responsible for this loss of support. African governments, for example, were shocked, and scared, by Lumumba's appeal to the Soviet Union for military aid.

There is, unfortunately, a vast difference between noble aims, which Lu-
mumba expressed eloquently, and the capacity and temperament to govern. The latter quality is especially important when a country is testing on the brink of chaos. After independence and the worldwide publicity that engulfed him, Lumumba became increasingly autocratic, mercenary, and irresponsible. He frightened and alienated his government colleagues, and their growing fear of him and of his increasingly erratic conduct made them receptive, when the time came, to Belgium and other intrigues against him. When he launched the ANC into Kasai, 250,000 Luba became refugees in addition to the one thousand killed. De

The only sure means of protecting Lumumba would have been to take him into protective custody before his persecutors caught up with him. Lumumba, who until his arrest had been conducting a fairly Ieetly and successful political swing through the country, would certainly have violently resisted this, and one can easily imagine what his supporters in the outside world would have said about it.

Witte sees Lumumba's attack on the Luba of Kasai as a statesmanlike response to the prospect of secession, but it created serious doubts about his judgment, even his sanity, both within the Congo and outside it.

I cannot pretend that members of the UN mission, or anyone else that I know of for that matter, found it easy to help Lumumba was a pleasant or rewarding experience. We had hoped to work with him in the desperately urgent task of restoring some degree of security and order and of getting his country going again. The UN was providing the only possible means and personnel for this purpose, but Lumumba preferred abusive rhetoric, ultimatums, threats, and demands for instant results. He cut off contact with Hammarskjöld and Bumbe and appealed to the Soviet Union for military assistance. Saying that "blood will flow," he threatened to violently expel the UN operation that was the one stable and constructive element in his country. Nonetheless Hammarskjöld, to the indignation of Belgium and the United States, protected him and made a prolonged attempt to bring about a reconciliation of Lumumba with Kasa Vubu and Mobutu—hardly the behavior of a neocolonialist.

At independence, it seemed possible that Lumumba would lead his people toward a bright future as a nation, a brief hopeful moment that Raoul Peck's film poignantly captures. For many reasons, including the behavior of Lumumba himself, this promise was not to be fulfilled. The subsequent decline of the Congo under Lumumba's successors, still continuing after forty years, is an even greater tragedy than Lumumba's terrible death.

In 1963 and 1964, with all secessions ended and the full parliament reconvened, it seemed just possible that the Congo might begin to move forward as an independent nation. Such frail hopes were dashed in 1965 by the return to power of Washington's supposedly anti-Communist protegé, Joseph Mobutu—reborn as Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga. For thirty-two years, under the admiring gaze of Western governments, Mobutu systematically plundered the Congo's economy, leaving no financial or economic base for a future leader to build on, and a huge foreign debt.

Mobutu's replacement, Laurent Kabila, was no improvement. Since 1998, a war in the eastern part of the country, involving half a dozen neighboring countries, has been responsible, according to the International Rescue Committee, for 2.5 million deaths from various causes. A wide variety of international efforts, and the accent, after his father's assassination, of Kabila's reportedly sensible and responsible young son, have yet to turn the tide of disaster. The Congolese people, who, for more than a hundred years, have known only oppression, strife, and penury, are still waiting.

9Michela Wrong's In the Footsteps of Mr. Kerra: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo (HarperCollins, 2001) not only describes Mobutu's calamitous kleptocracy, but also gives a percipient, down-to-earth, and affectionate description of the people of the Congo under Mobutu's tyranny.