

Why They Killed Patrice Lumumba

Patrice Lumumba was a radical leader of the Congolese independence movement who resisted Belgian colonialism and corporate interests. That's why he was assassinated in a US-backed coup 59 years ago today

Born in 1925, Patrice Émery Lumumba was a radical anticolonial leader who became the first prime minister of the newly independent Congo at the age of thirty-five. Seven months into his term, on January 17, 1961, he was assassinated.

Lumumba had become an opponent of Belgian racism after being jailed in 1957 on trumped-up charges by the colonial authorities. Following a twelve-month prison term, he found a job as a beer salesman, during which time he developed his oratory skills and increasingly embraced the view that Congo's vast mineral wealth should benefit the Congolese people rather than foreign corporate interests.

Lumumba's political horizons extended far beyond the Congo. He was soon caught up in the wider wave of African nationalism sweeping the continent. In December 1958, Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah invited Lumumba to attend the anti-colonial All African People's Conference, which attracted civic associations, unions, and other popular organizations.

Two years later, following mass demands for a democratic election, the Congolese National Movement headed by Lumumba decisively won the Congo's first parliamentary contest. The left-nationalist leader took office in June 1960.

But Lumumba's progressive-populist proposals and his opposition to the Katanga secessionist movement (which was led by the white-ruled colonial states of southern Africa and proclaimed its independence from the Congo on July 11, 1960) angered an array of foreign and local interests: the Belgian colonial state, companies extracting the Congo's mineral resources, and, of course, the leaders of white-ruled southern African states. As tensions grew, the United Nations rejected Lumumba's request for support. He decided to call for Soviet military assistance to quell the burgeoning Congo Crisis brought about by the Belgian-supported secessionists. That proved to be the last straw.

Lumumba was seized, tortured, and executed in a coup supported by the Belgian authorities, the United States, and the United Nations. With Lumumba's assassination died a part of the dream of a united, democratic, ethnically pluralist, and pan-Africanist Congo.

The murder of Lumumba and his replacement by the US-backed dictator Mobutu Sese Seko laid the foundation for the decades of internal strife, dictatorship, and economic decline that have marked postcolonial Congo. The destabilization of Congolese society under Mobutu's brutal rule — lasting from 1965 to 1997 — culminated in a series of devastating conflicts, known as the first and second Congo wars (or "Africa's world wars"). These conflicts not only fractured Congolese society but also engulfed nearly all of the country's neighbors, ultimately involving nine African nations and around twenty-five armed groups. By the formal end of the conflict, around 2003, nearly 5.4 million people had died from the fighting and its aftermath, making the war the world's second deadliest conflict since World War II.

Sa'eed Husaini recently spoke with Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, a leading Congolese intellectual and the author of a *biography* of Lumumba, about the life, death, and politics of the radical nationalist leader.

SH: Arguably the best-known event of Lumumba's life remains its tragic end. Though there has been at least some symbolic acknowledgment of Belgium's role in Lumumba's murder, no such reckoning has occurred in the United States. From your perspective, what would a full restitution for Lumumba's murder look like?

GNN: There cannot be a full restitution for Lumumba's murder. No amount of money or other form of compensation would do justice to the harm suffered by the Congo in losing a thirty-five-year-old visionary leader who could have helped build a great country. No amount of money would do justice to his children after having grown up without a loving and supporting father to guide them through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. And the same goes for his wife and other relatives, whose loss could not be mitigated by material acquisitions.

What is needed from all the accomplices in Lumumba's murder is, first of all, an acknowledgment of the crime they committed against him, his family, the Congo, and Africa; an apology for the harm

done in this regard; and an effort to honor the Congo's first democratically elected leader by promoting his legacy through schools, public education, and cultural events in all the countries whose leaders took part in his disappearance, beginning with the Congo itself.

SH: Despite growing up in his ethno-cultural homeland, Lumumba came to be known for his ardently multiethnic and even pan-African worldview. Were there aspects of his early upbringing in Sankuru that predisposed Lumumba to place a high value on Congolese unity and ethnic diversity?

GNN: While the Sankuru region of the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) is mostly known as the home of the Tetela people, to which Lumumba himself belongs, it is inhabited by people of other ethnic groups who ended up there either because of the activities of the Swahili-Arab slave traders or those of Belgian colonialists. These groups include the Kusu of Maniema, the Luba, the Songye, and other groups from the Kasai region, as well as the Mongo of Équateur.

In addition to growing up in a multiethnic environment, Lumumba's formative years as a middle-class civil servant took place between 1944 and 1956 in Kisangani (then Stanleyville), one of the major cities in the Congo and an area of ethnic diversity.

SH: You write that as a postal official in the Belgian colonial service, Lumumba was initially enamored by the possibility of “matriculating” or dropping his status as a “native” Congolese in favor of the status of an *évolué*, or honorary European. At what point did Lumumba abandon this hope of attaining elite status in colonial society in favor of a radical opposition to the Belgian colonial project?

GNN: Lumumba acquired both the civic merit card and the matriculation status in Kisangani, but these achievements of upper mobility in the colonial situation were a sham because racism continued to raise its ugly head through the color/wage bar.

Although entrusted with a job usually reserved for Europeans as manager of the money orders service, Lumumba's salary was determined by his race, not his functions. He earned the equivalent of \$100 USD in 1956, somewhere between one-tenth and one-fifteenth of the salary of a European civil servant doing a similar job. His European colleagues also received free housing, a car, and a fully paid, six-month vacation back home to Belgium every three years.

These and other realities of the colonial situation eventually made him abandon his naive hope of seeing whites and the *évolués* working hand in hand to lift up the “ignorant masses” in a Belgian-Congolese community and pushed him in the direction of African and Congolese nationalism.

SH: How did Congolese nationalists view violence as a means of attaining political independence, and where did Lumumba stand on this question?

GNN: In general, Congolese nationalist leaders were strong believers in nonviolence, and Lumumba was no exception. This is why they were all shocked by the mass uprising for independence on January 4, 1959 [which erupted in Leopoldville, present-day Kinshasa, after members of an anti-colonial party were denied the right to assemble. Celebrated today as the Day of Martyrs, it was the first major outbreak of violence in the independence movement and marked a turning point for the anti-colonial struggle.

SH: What role did international mining companies play in encouraging the province of Katanga to secede from the Congo, and how did this contribute to the origin of the Congo Crisis?

GNN: With their mineral empire running from Katanga to the Cape, international mining companies did not like the idea of having a radical nationalist government in the Congo — one likely to reduce their *profit* margins with higher taxes and royalties in order to improve the livelihood of ordinary Congolese. This is why these companies, which had rejected efforts by white settlers to get a piece of the pie as their counterparts in South Africa, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and South West Africa (Namibia) had done, switched gears by forming an alliance with racist white settlers and right-wing *lobbies* in the United States and the United Kingdom.

This alliance not only endorsed the long-held dream of white settlers to gain political power in Katanga, but also provided the funds needed to sustain the secessionist drive in Katanga, with help from Belgium, Britain, and France.

SH: One could say that the origins of the Congo Crisis lie in a chance alliance between Belgian settlers and corporations, uniting with business and state interests from the white-ruled states of southern Africa. You describe this alliance as a “counter-revolution against national liberation,” given that it was formed to oppose the radical nationalism sweeping the continent. Could you say more about this alliance?

GNN: The Congo Crisis cannot be understood without reference to the Belgian-engineered Katanga secession in collaboration with international mining companies, which recruited white mercenaries to join Belgian troops in backstopping the secession. The UN refusal to use force to expel Belgian

troops and the mercenaries led to the dispute between Prime Minister Lumumba and UN secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld, who shared the same worldview as major Western powers and was very hostile toward Lumumba, as shown by the cable traffic in UN archives.

SH: So why did this combination of previously competing international and local actors ultimately come to agree that Lumumba's assassination was necessary?

GNN: He was the single most important obstacle to their scheme of establishing neocolonialism in the Congo, as they started on July 11, 1960 in Katanga.

SH: Lumumba delivered many memorable speeches and also wrote many moving letters. In 1960, he wrote to his wife from prison: "The day will come when history will speak. But it will not be the history which will be taught in Brussels, Paris, Washington or the United Nations. It will be the history which will be taught in the countries which have won freedom from colonialism and its puppets. Africa will write its own history and in both north and south it will be a history of glory and dignity." Was Lumumba also able to articulate a specific vision for how he intended to transform the state and Congolese society during the brief period in which he served as prime minister?

GNN: We do get a glimpse of his vision for postcolonial Congo in several of his major speeches and letters. While preoccupied with the unity, independence, and sovereignty of the Congo, due of course to the counterrevolutionary situation facing the country from July 10 to 11, 1960 (the Belgian military invasion and the Katanga secession, respectively), his main concern was how to transform the inherited structures of the state and the economy in order to improve the quality of life of ordinary Congolese.

SH: Like Amílcar Cabral, Thomas Sankara, and Steve Biko, Lumumba's martyrdom trans-formed him into a powerful symbolic force that continues to inspire radical movements across Africa. In your preface, you briefly describe the inspiration and sudden disappointment you felt at the time as a high school student (who was expelled for anti-colonial activities) witnessing Lumumba's meteoric rise and tragic assassination. As Africans and in the wider world, have we truly reckoned with the historical trauma that came from witnessing the assassination of some of the continent's most promising leaders?

GNN: Since all the assassinated leaders you mention were victims of world powers and/or their allies in Africa, like fascist Portugal and apartheid South Africa, I don't see why the world powers responsible for eliminating those African leaders they detest should be concerned with the impact of those assassinations on Africa.

It is up to us, Africans, to make sure that we follow the teachings of Amílcar Cabral on knowing our own weaknesses and finding ways to overcome them, and those of Kwame Nkrumah on collective continental security through an African military high command. We need our own equivalent to *NATO* to ensure the security of our people and that of our endangered progressive leaders.

Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja is a professor of African, African-American, and diaspora studies at the University of North Carolina and the author of many books, including *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History and Patrice Lumumba*.

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