

## [Stanard on De Witte, 'The Assassination of Lumumba'](#)

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**Ludo De Witte.** *The Assassination of Lumumba*. Translated by Renée Fenby and Ann Wright.

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In 2001, Verso published an English translation of Ludo De Witte's *De Moord op Lumumba* (1999). The work under review here is a reprinting of that book. De Witte is a Belgian sociologist, engaged scholar, and critic of capitalism who is also author of a number of other works of history including *Meurtre au Burundi* (2021), which examines the 1961 murder of Louis Rwagasore, first prime minister of Burundi. Before asking why *The Assassination of Lumumba* has been reissued at this moment—unchanged—it is worth first revisiting De Witte's study itself: its approach, argument, sources, and significance.

*The Assassination of Lumumba* details the story of the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the independent Democratic Republic of Congo. The killing of any head of government cries out for explanation. But not only was Lumumba Congo's first prime minister, he was also one of the first democratically elected leaders in Africa, ever. Moreover, by the time of his death in early 1961 he had become a prominent figure in the global anticolonial movement. Front and center in De Witte's analysis is his desire to establish responsibility for Lumumba's violent death. At the time the book was first published in Dutch in 1999 (it appeared in French in early 2000 as *L'assassinat de Lumumba*), many were aware of or at least suspected that Belgian actors had participated in Lumumba's murder. Nevertheless, the extent of the Belgian state's responsibility remained unknown, and Belgium's role was acknowledged neither publicly nor officially. *The Assassination of Lumumba* played a major role in changing all of this.

De Witte's book opens with a fast-paced re-creation of the chain of events leading up to the January 1961 killing of the prime minister. Within days of Congo's independence on June 30, 1960, the country's military (the Armée nationale congolaise, or ANC) rose in revolt, almost immediately followed by the secession of the mineral-rich southern region of Katanga under the leadership of Moïse Tshombe. In September, the country's president, Joseph Kasa-Vubu, dismissed Lumumba as prime minister; the latter announced the sacking of Kasa-Vubu in turn. Within days, ANC colonel Joseph-Désiré Mobutu (later Mobutu Sese Seko) enacted a coup and arrested Lumumba. All the while, international attention to and intervention in the Congo increased dramatically. Later that autumn, Lumumba attempted to escape to Stanleyville (Kisangani); he was stopped, arrested, and finally imprisoned not far from Leopoldville (Kinshasa). On January 17, Lumumba was transferred along with allies Joseph Okito and Maurice Mpolo to Katanga where all three were shot and killed outside Elisabethville (Lubumbashi). De Witte concludes his story by briefly examining the ensuing cover-up and reflecting on events following the murder. This is a sad tale chock-full of intrigue and

arresting personalities, with De Witte sometimes entering into the minutiae of who knew what, and when.

So, who was responsible for Lumumba's murder? When first published, *The Assassination of Lumumba* was in many ways a reply to a doctoral dissertation that Belgian Jacques Brassinne defended at a leading Belgian university in 1991. Brassinne, who had been involved in the events of 1960-1961, assigned guilt for Lumumba's death diffusely. By placing much of the blame on locals, he largely exonerated Brussels and the Belgian advisors to the breakaway Katanga regime.[1] Brassinne's connections had granted him access to key individuals for his dissertation research, and De Witte plumbs Brassinne's work for its sources and information. He does the same with the self-exculpatory memoirs of another figure involved, Belgian colonel Frédéric Vandewalle, from whose recollections of his time in Africa (*Mille et quatre jours, 1974-1977*) De Witte draws liberally.

One has to read De Witte's study carefully to figure out who is actually responsible for killing Lumumba because it assigns guilt variously at different points. Early on he pins blame on the Belgian government, the United Nations, the British, the Congolese who killed Lumumba, and the United States (President Dwight Eisenhower and the US Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA) (p. xiii). Later he says that it was the Belgians along with the CIA (and others) who forced Katanga to take Lumumba, compelling leaders of the breakaway region to kill him (p. 109). Elsewhere he points out how the Belgians and the UN could have done something to prevent Lumumba's murder but chose not to, consigning him to an early and violent death. He ends up assigning most blame to Belgium. "It was Belgian advice, Belgian orders and finally Belgian hands that killed Lumumba on that 17 January 1961. . . . The Belgian government of Gaston Eyskens is directly responsible for the assassination of the Congolese prime minister" (p. xxii). But even this does not say all because De Witte also blames Lumumba's death specifically on private capital. Although the Belgian government was responsible for the killing, he asserts that at the root of it all was colonial holding companies' desires for profits (p. 187).

De Witte had already presented much of his research on this question in *Crisis in Kongo: de rol van de Verenigde Naties, de regering-Eyskens en het Koningshuis in de omverwerping van Lumumba en de opkomst van Mobutu* (Crisis in Congo: the role of the United Nations, the Eyskens government, and the Royal House in the overthrow of Lumumba and the rise of Mobutu, 1996). *The Assassination of Lumumba* leans on that earlier work. In fact, the reader at times encounters stretches of text in this book where endnote references appear to be missing and where, apparently, De Witte's analysis relies on his 1996 book. De Witte's other sources include what were numerous previously unexamined archival documents—unexamined into the late 1990s, at least—as well as key texts written by people involved in the Congo Crisis and the events leading to Lumumba's murder.

*The Assassination of Lumumba* is problematic in a number of ways. It tends toward binarism, which hampers a potentially more nuanced argument. De Witte is clearly pro-Lumumba and takes an unfavorable stance towards the prime minister's opponents and enemies (pp. xxiv, 48, 184-185). According to De Witte, Lumumba and his allies were the real nationalists in the Congo while their opponents were "anti-nationalist." An example of the latter is inveterate Lumumba enemy Godefroid Munongo, an individual so hostile to the prime minister that after his assassination, it "was generally believed in Elisabethville that he had killed Lumumba with his own hands." [2] Not only was Munongo a leading official in the Katangan regime of Moïse Tshombe, he was also a descendent of local ruler

King Msiri, who ruled in part of Katanga in the 1800s. Is it not possible that someone such as Munongo was also a real nationalist, just not a *Congolese* nationalist, which appears to be the only kind with whom De Witte agrees?

Another weakness is how De Witte's analysis presumes a sort of all-powerful West, implying as it does that countries like Belgium, Britain, and especially the United States were capable of accomplishing all sorts of things in Central Africa. Although the United States played a significant role in the Congo Crisis, it had a limited capacity to act in Central Africa, and US officials had little idea of what was going on there. Told in spring 1960 that there were some eighty political parties in the Congo, Eisenhower replied that he was not even aware that that many people in the Congo could read.[3] As for "New York," De Witte says little about how the hands of UN officials were tied at various points. The book also tends to treat the UN, the Belgian government, and US leadership as monolithic blocs (e.g., p. 66), with frequent recourse to metonymy: "Washington" and "Brussels" stand in for the US and Belgian governments, for instance. This overestimates the power of the United States and the UN and flattens out the functioning of what were large, sprawling entities within which competing visions sometimes fought it out over policy and the best course of action.

On one point, De Witte's analysis relies on hindsight, namely when he downplays the perceived threat of communism in the Congo. As he puts it, "The Kremlin had neither the political will nor the means to threaten the West's supremacy in the Congo and this was clear to most observers at the time" (p. xiv). This was not necessarily obvious to contemporaries. Belgian colonial officialdom was arguably obsessed with the communist threat. As noted, US officials knew little about Central Africa, meaning their imaginations were free to ruminate about all kinds of potential dangers. It bears remembering that until the United States secured its own domestic sources of uranium (which it had by the mid-1950s), it had been dependent upon uranium ore from the Belgian Congo. Even if by 1960 the United States no longer needed Katangan uranium for its atomic weapons program, officials did not want the province's uranium supply to fall into the wrong hands. US officials worried about how Katanga would defend itself from a communist attack, be it from a launching-off point in Yugoslavia, Egypt, or elsewhere in Africa, which would leave Katanga overrun. Although De Witte recognizes Belgian and more broadly Western fears of communism in the Congo, he downplays them. His close focus on Belgian actors results in a narrower scope that sometimes occludes the bigger picture, the consideration of which would incorporate broader impersonal forces into his story, for instance those of Cold War dynamics.

To a degree, De Witte's assignment of culpability to Belgium follows from the heavy attention he pays to Belgian actors, especially Minister of African Affairs Harold d'Aspremont Lynden and a cable he sent on October 6, 1960, to the Belgian consulate general in Brazzaville and the Mission Technique Belge (Mistebel) in Katanga—copying the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—calling for the "definitive elimination" of Lumumba. Indeed, construing the French-language expression *élimination définitive* is crucial to De Witte's account: to him, the cable is a smoking gun. A useful comparison can be made here between De Witte's book and Emmanuel Gerard and Bruce Kuklick's more recent *Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba* (2015). Gerard and Kuklick's book assumes a wider scope and provides more background on US, UN, and other foreign involvement in the Congo. They also assume a more neutral and guarded approach and take African agency more seriously.[4] Consider their interpretation of Tshombe's decision to acquiesce and accept the transfer of Lumumba to Katanga, a move fraught with risks for the breakaway leader: "We have some facts but must also conjecture." [5]

Or consider their treatment of d'Aspremont Lynden's cable calling for Lumumba's *élimination définitive*, which they do not see as the smoking gun De Witte would have us believe it is. As they put it, "one does not order a diplomat to kill someone and copy the ministry of foreign affairs." [6] That said, Gerard and Kuklick do not remain agnostic on the question of responsibility for Lumumba's death. They assign blame to several actors including the Belgian state, Africans like Munongo and Tshombe, the United States, and the UN. They implicate King Baudouin and his royalist circle to a much greater extent than does De Witte. In conclusion, they make a comparison with the act of killing that takes place in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), where a dozen stab wounds by several passengers make it hard for Detective Poirot to identify a perpetrator. As on the Orient Express, those who were involved in January 1961 were many, and they collectively caused the numerous "cuts" that violently ended Lumumba's promising life.

The English-language translation under review here is not a revised or second edition. It is essentially identical to the 2001 English translation, down to the handful of typos in the initial printing that remain uncorrected here. The only difference between the two is that the reprinted book is missing thirteen images that appear on photo plates inserted between pages 98-99 of the 2001 book.

Why reprint De Witte's book, unchanged, at this point in time? This reviewer suspects the publisher reissued it because Belgian colonial history remains very much in the news. (Multiple queries from this reviewer to the publisher remained unanswered at the time of publication.) Over the past two years alone a special commission of the Belgian parliament worked hard digging into Belgium's colonial past—again—a process that as of December 2022 had resulted in no concrete outcomes. [7]

Indeed, since De Witte first published his book in Dutch there has been a lot of activity surrounding Belgium's colonial past, historiographical and otherwise. At the moment that De Witte's study first hit the shelves, Adam Hochschild's now-landmark *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998)—a riveting retelling of the Congo atrocities and the international humanitarian efforts that helped bring Leopoldian rule there to an end—had only just appeared in translation in Belgium as *De geest van Leopold II en de plundering van de Congo* and *Les Fantômes du roi Léopold: un holocauste oublié* (both 1998). In 1999, federal elections brought a new coalition to power in Belgium that was the first government in decades not to include the Christian Democrats, or CDs (neither CD party from either language region of the country was in government). It was they who had headed Belgium's government in 1960-1961 under the leadership of CD prime minister Gaston Eyskens. Thus one result of the 1999 elections was that the new ruling coalition did not fear CD obstreperousness should it seek to open up the question of responsibility for Lumumba's death. In 2000, Raoul Peck's moving film *Lumumba* appeared. Meanwhile, in Central Africa the Second Congo War that had begun around 1998 continued, as it would to 2003, especially in the country's east. It was during these years that Congo president Laurent Kabila was murdered, on January 18, 2001, almost precisely forty years to the day that Lumumba was killed. Kabila's assassination, like that of Lumumba, was shrouded in mystery, and it remains so today.

De Witte's book helped spur on the formation of the Belgian parliamentary Lumumba Commission that investigated his murder from 2001 to 2002. [8] This was followed by the publication of several works delving into the functioning of the commission and the nature of the assassination, for instance Luc De Vos, Emmanuel Gerard, Philippe Raxhon, and Jules Gérard-Libois's *Lumumba. De complotten? De moord* (2004; published in French as *Les secrets de l'affaire Lumumba*, 2005).

Between them, Hochschild's and De Witte's books contributed to an outpouring of scholarship on the history of Belgian imperialism and decolonization, much of it by members of a younger generation. This came to include Gerard and Kuklick's aforementioned *Death in the Congo*.

Since the early 2000s, other developments have taken place. David Van Reybrouck published *Congo. Een geschiedenis* (Congo: a history, 2010), which went on to become a best-selling milestone synthesis. Also in 2010, Belgium and its erstwhile colony marked fifty years of Congo's independence with extensive celebrations and commemorations. Beginning in 2013, the (in)famous Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale in Tervuren—object of much attention and criticism—underwent a major years-long restoration, emerging as the rebranded AfricaMuseum in 2018. While the Congo museum was being renovated, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign exploded, accentuating demands for a fuller accounting of the history and legacies of European overseas imperialism. The waves set off by Rhodes Must Fall were amplified by the Black Lives Matter movement. In public, debates over the colonial past led to both tearing down and building up. Some activists in Belgium attacked statues honoring Leopold II while others secured the creation of a *place Lumumba* in Ixelles, just on the edge of Brussels, inaugurated in 2018. The Belgian parliament established yet another investigatory committee, a *commission spéciale "passé coloniale,"* that carried out work from 2020 to 2022. In summer 2022, a ceremony to return one of Lumumba's teeth took place in Brussels with members of his family present; one of those who had disposed of Lumumba's mortal remains, Gérard Soete, had kept the tooth as a keepsake. Patrice Lumumba's children Juliana, Francois, and Roland were on hand at the Royal Palace in Brussels to receive the last physical remains of their father, more than six decades after his death.

Outrage over Lumumba's murder and the glacially slow pace of accounting for it underscore a tension looming over history writing, past and present: Should scholars aim to produce strictly impartial scholarship, or should their work engage with current debates?[9] Some historians research and write with the goal of producing detached analysis shedding light on what happened in the past and why, as elusive, vague, and unattainable as the goal of objectivity might be.[10] Other scholars aim to utilize their scholarship to effect change in the present, assuming moral positions from which they pass judgment on past actors. One can usefully compare Gerard and Kuklick's more dispassionate approach with the more committed stance of De Witte, the latter of whom clearly favors Lumumba, disagrees with his enemies, and criticizes capitalism. This tension between detached historical research and political engagement was laid bare again during the work of the recent parliamentary *commission spéciale*. Many scholars and activists advocated for an engaged scholarship that would pass judgment on Belgian actors and lead to change in the present, for instance the issuance of a formal apology by Belgium for colonialism. Others, by contrast, argued that historians ought to take a neutral stance toward the colonial past and leave questions such as blame, apologies, or reparations to the public and politicians.

This debate parallels a similar tension in the overarching historiography of Belgian colonialism, one in which Leopold II and Lumumba loom large. Many historians have followed Adam Hochschild's and others' condemnation of Leopold II and his misrule in the Congo. Others, including the late Jean Stengers, assert that scholars should take a more neutral stance: write history, and leave political judgments to the politicians. That the question of the scholar's position features prominently in both the history of Leopold II and of Lumumba's murder highlights a unique feature of the historiography of Belgian overseas imperialism that De Witte's book only reinforces: bookending. Much scholarly



work on Belgium and the Congo focuses on either of two “bookends”: Leopold II’s État Indépendant du Congo (1885-1908) that launched Belgium’s involvement in Central Africa, or the 1960-1965 Congo Crisis that brought it to a formal end. Surveying recent European overseas empire building in comparative perspective, there is no figure in other histories as singular as Leopold II. Similarly, when it comes to the era of national liberation and decolonization, there is just no other individual who stands out as much as the dynamic, tragic, and near-mythical figure that is Patrice Lumumba. The history of Belgian involvement in Central Africa would benefit from moving away from this tendency toward bookending; a lot happened in the half century-plus between 1908 and 1960.

It is in the context of all of this that De Witte’s book appears again. This spirited and vigorously argued text remains a landmark. Unlike more recent monographs such as the excellent *Death in the Congo*, however, De Witte’s book does not benefit from everything unearthed during the 2000-2001 Belgian parliamentary commission investigation (and since). But of course, it was De Witte’s study that helped spur on the formation of that commission to begin with! It is to his credit that his book precipitated the commission because it pulled back the cover on numerous sources and archives and opened up channels for further study. Even before then, De Witte had plumbed the archives for sources that few had seen before to reach a conclusion now widely accepted, namely that the Belgian state participated in the killing of Patrice Lumumba. His book remains worthwhile reading for these reasons alone.

#### Notes

[1]. Jacques Brassinne and Jean Kestergat, *Qui a tué Patrice Lumumba?* (Paris/Louvain-la-Neuve: Duculot, 1991).

[2]. Conor Cruise O’Brien, *To Katanga and Back: A UN Case History* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1962), 104.

[3]. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960: Volume XIV Africa* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 274.

[4]. Emmanuel Gerard and Bruce Kuklick, *Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), e.g., 122, 195.

[5]. Gerard and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, 197.

[6]. Gerard and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, 161.

[7]. “Passé colonial de la Belgique: faute de consensus, la commission parlementaire se solde par un échec,” December 19, 2022, RTBF.be, <https://www.rtf.be/article/passe-colonial-de-la-belgique-faute-de-consensus-la-commission-parlementaire-se-solde-par-un-echec-11126045>. Thank you to Amandine Lauro for additional detail on the commission’s work.

[8]. Edouard Bustin, “Remembrance of Sins Past: Unraveling the Murder of Patrice Lumumba,” *Review of African Political Economy* 29, nos. 93-94 (2002): 537-60.

[9]. Controversy over this question exploded with American Historical Association president James Sweet's column against presentism. James H. Sweet, "Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present," *Perspectives on History*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present>. See also Jennifer Schuessler, "As Historians Gather, No Truce in the History Wars," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/08/arts/american-historical-association-james-sweet.html?>.

[10]. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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