

Patrice Lumumba and the Struggle for African Independence

by Douglas Cioffi and April Francis



Revolutionary leaders have generally been both deified and pilloried by contemporaries and historians. Evaluations of revolutionaries often depend on the political points of view of commentators and their attitudes toward the revolution itself, its causes, achievements and troubles. Patrice Lumumba (1925-1961) led the struggle in the 1950s against Belgium's colonial rule in the Congo and helped guide his nation to independence in 1960. He has been a lightning rod for praise and condemnation. Some see him as a martyr who was assassinated by forces aligned with the old colonial regime and other imperialist powers because of his commitment to genuine political and economic independence for his people. Others describe him as an unscrupulous politician and demagogue responsible for the devastation of his country and civil war.

The history of the Congo in west-central Africa is a case study in colonial exploitation and the problems of nation building after independence. In 1887, the Congo was taken as a personal fiefdom by Belgian King Leopold II. Under the façade of creating a "civilized" nation, Leopold enslaved the people of the Congo and raped it for its natural resources.

Horrific tactics were used to force the Congolese people to work on rubber plantations. Someone could have a hand cut off for refusing to work or working too slowly. Families were held as hostages to force men into the fields. In 1908, as the scale of these atrocities became widely known, Leopold transferred control over the colony to the Belgium government. By 1920, an estimated 10 million Congolese had died to provide Europe with rubber and Belgium and Leopold with profits.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the African continent, including the Congo, experienced a surge of nationalist movements demanding independence from European colonial regimes. Patrice Lumumba was a postal employee, a leader of the trade union, and an active member of the Belgian Liberal party in the Congo. In 1956, he was charged with embezzlement from the post office, convicted and sentenced to a year in prison. He emerged from jail as a militant nationalist and in 1958 founded the Congolese National Movement, the first nationwide Congolese political party. Later that year he attended the first All-African People's Conference in Ghana where he met nationalist leaders from across the African continent.

After years of resistance to change, in 1959, Belgium announced a five-year program that would gradually grant independence to the Congo. Lumumba and other nationalist viewed this as an effort by Belgium to maintain its economic and political influence over a nominally independent country. They organized a boycott of proposed elections and Lumumba was arrested and charged with inciting a riot. After his arrest, Lumumba's party shifted tactics and entered the election. They won a plurality of the seats in the National Assembly and Lumumba was appointed the first Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo.

Lumumba charged that Belgium was trying to undermine independence and he appealed to the United Nations for help. When they refused, he turned to the Soviet Union, angering the United States and the west. Civil war broke out in the Congo when rebels in the mineral rich province of Katanga, supported by Europeans, tried to break away from the country. The United Nations Security Council finally intervened and sent a peace keeping force to the Congo. Patrice Lumumba was removed from office, either captured by, or surrendered to, his enemies and assassinated. Critics have long suspected that either the United States or Belgium played a role in his murder.

Patrice Lumumba's career illustrates the role an individual can play in shaping history. It also provides insight into the struggle to end colonialism in Africa and the difficulty of building new nations in a world dominated by powerful imperialist forces.

A. Could Patrice Lumumba be trusted to effectively lead the Congo?

Examine the excerpts from the two newspaper articles and from the Independence Day speech by Patrice Lumumba. Based on these documents, in your opinion, what did Patrice Lumumba believe? Do you feel he could be trusted as the new leader of the Congo? Explain.

Lumumba is a Fiery Orator (*The New York Times*, May, 22, 1960, p. 2)

“The week-end rioting in Stanleyville brings the death toll in the Belgian Congo from such outbursts this year to more than 350. Patrice Lumumba, who was arrested after the riots, is the 40 year old leader of the Congolese National Movement and one the Congo's first ‘middle class’ privileged Congolese sponsored by Belgium as allies and buffers against the bulk of the population. Mr. Lumumba, a university graduate, came to political prominence after he had been jailed for fraud after eleven years in the postal service. His fiery oratory has inflamed opinion throughout the Congo. He told a reporter the day after the new Belgian timetable for independence was announced: ‘This won't do for us. We ask for bread and get a stone. This a sop for the Belgians' stooges.’ In his newspaper, *Independence*, he was less restrained. ‘We will attack these Belgians violently and fight them with every last atom of energy,’ he wrote. ‘The Belgian suckers must go.’”

Congo Electing First Government To Take Over In Independence (*The New York Times*, May 16, 1960)

“Patrice Lumumba, currently the most powerful leader in the Belgian Congo, was hailed by thousands as the messiah of Congolese freedom on a n election day tour of the African quarter today. He demanded the immediate abdication of Belgian authority instead of awaiting the June 30 date for independence, but he urged the throng to ‘treat the white man as a brother.’ Belgians distrust the 34 year old postal clerk, who was once convicted of embezzlement. They accuse him of fomenting racial hatred. Stanleyville is unusual in the Congo as a city of marked racial hatred. Europeans have been insulted, spat upon and stoned by Congolese. ‘Don't throw stones at European cars,’ he told the crowds. ‘If you are drinking a glass of palm wine and a European passes, ask him to join you. He is our brother, and we must work together.’ But he sounded a threatening note to British and American newsmen. . . . He warned that unless the provincial government were established immediately, disorders would spread. ‘Most Europeans are sincere,’ he said, ‘but he knows of fifty-seven Europeans who are plotting against Congolese freedom.’”

Patrice Lumumba, Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo, June 30, 1960, Independence Day

“We are proud of this struggle, of tears, of fire, and of blood, to the depths of our being, for it was a noble and just struggle, and indispensable to put an end to the humiliating slavery which was imposed upon us by force. This was our fate for eighty years of a colonial regime; our wounds are too fresh and too painful still for us to drive them from our memory. We have known harassing work, exacted in exchange for salaries which did not permit us to eat enough to drive away hunger, or to clothe ourselves, or to house ourselves decently, or to raise our children as creatures dear to us. We have seen our lands seized in the name of allegedly legal laws which in fact recognized only that might is right. We have seen that the law was not the same for a white and for a black, accommodating for the first, cruel and inhuman for the other. We have witnessed

atrocious sufferings of those condemned for their political opinions or religious beliefs; exiled in their own country, their fate truly worse than death itself.

The Republic of the Congo has been proclaimed, and our country is now in the hands of its own children. Together, my brothers, my sisters, we are going to begin a new struggle, a sublime struggle, which will lead our country to peace, prosperity, and greatness. Together, we are going to establish social justice and make sure everyone has just remuneration for his labor. We are going to show the world what the black man can do when he works in freedom, and we are going to make of the Congo the center of the sun's radiance for all of Africa. We are going to put an end to suppression of free thought and see to it that all our citizens enjoy to the full the fundamental liberties foreseen in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. We are going to rule not by the peace of guns and bayonets but by a peace of the heart and the will."

B. What did Patrice Lumumba accomplish?

Examine the excerpts from the poem, the letter written by Patrice Lumumba to his wife, and from the obituary by John Henrik Clarke. Based on these documents, in your opinion, what were the achievements of Patrice Lumumba? Do you feel he was effective as the leader of the Congolese people? Explain.



From Dawn In the Heart of Africa

by Patrice Lumumba

And on this earth which you will always love
You will make the Congo a nation, happy and free,
In the very heart of vast Black Africa.

Lumumba's Last Letter Written to His Wife Just Before His Death

I write you these words without knowing if they will reach you, when they will reach you, or if I will still be living when you read them. All during the length of my fight for the independence of my country, I have never doubted for a single instant the final triumph of the sacred cause to which my companions and myself have consecrated our lives. But what we wish for our country, its right to an honorable life, to a spotless dignity, to an independence without restrictions, Belgian colonialism and its Western allies—who have found direct and indirect support, deliberate and not deliberate among certain high officials of the United Nations, this organization in which we placed all our confidence when we called for their assistance—have not wished it.

They have corrupted certain of our fellow countrymen, they have contributed to distorting the truth and our enemies, that they will rise up like a single person to say no to a degrading and shameful colonialism and to reassume their dignity under a pure sun.

We are not alone. Africa, Asia, and free and liberated people from every corner of the world will always be found at the side of the Congolese. They will not abandon the light until the day comes when there are no more colonizers and their mercenaries in our country. To my children whom I leave and whom perhaps I will see no more, I wish that they be told that the future of the Congo is beautiful and that it expects for each Congolese, to accomplish the sacred task of reconstruction of our independence and our sovereignty; for without dignity there is no liberty, without justice there is no dignity, and without independence there are no free men. . . .

Do not weep for me, my dear companion. I know that my country, which suffers so much, will know how to defend its independence and its liberty. Long live the Congo! Long live Africa!

The Passing of Patrice Lumumba by John Henrik Clarke (1961)

The life of Patrice Lumumba proved that he was a product of the best and worst of Belgian colonial rule. In more favorable circumstances, he might have become one of the most astute national leaders of the twentieth century. He was cut down long before he had time to develop into the more stable leader that he was obviously capable of being. “Mistakes have been made in Africa in the past, but we are ready to work with the powers which have been in Africa to create a powerful new bloc,” he said at the beginning of 1960. “If this effort fails, it will be through the fault of the West.” During his long and lonely rise from obscurity to the Congo’s first Prime Minister, he taught himself never to completely trust power in the hands of others. This attitude is reflected in the suspicion that developed between him and the UN Forces in the Congo. His conflicts with the other Congo politicians was due mainly to his unyielding belief in the unitary state, and partly to his lack of experience in explaining, organizing and administering such a state. Nevertheless, he was the only Congolese leader with anything like a national following; a point too often overlooked. His greatest achievement in the early difficult months of Congo independence was in maintaining, with only a few defections, the solidarity of his widely disparate coalition government.

The important point in the Lumumba story, briefly related, is this: He proved that legitimacy of a postcolonial regime in Africa, relates mainly to its legal mandate; but even more, legitimacy relates to the regime’s credentials as a representative of a genuine nationalism fighting against the intrigues of new-colonialism.

C. Why was Patrice Lumumba assassinated?

As soon as independence was declared, there was a civil war in the Congo. Mineral-rich Katanga province (shown in the Time magazine map), with support from European powers, tried to secede from the country. Read the two reports on the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. Based on these reports, why do you believe he was assassinated?

“Opening the Secret Files on Lumumba’s Murder”

Source: *Washington Post*, July 21, 2002

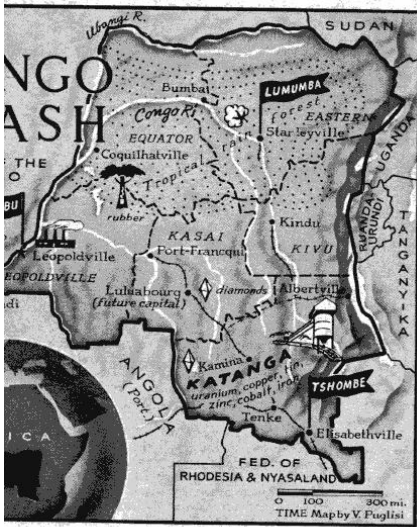
Forty-one years ago, Lumumba, the only leader ever democratically elected in Congo, was delivered to his enemies, tortured and summarily executed. Since then, his country has been looted by the U.S.-supported regime of Mobutu Sese Seko and wracked by regional and civil war.

The conventional explanation of Lumumba’s death has been that he was murdered by Congolese rivals after earlier U.S. attempts to kill him, including a plot to inject toxins into his food or toothpaste, failed. In 1975, the U.S. Senate’s “Church Committee” probed CIA assassination plots and concluded there was “no evidence of CIA involvement in bringing about the death of Lumumba.”

Not so. I have obtained classified U.S. government documents, including a chronology of covert actions approved by a National Security Council (NSC) subgroup, that reveal U.S. involvement in -- and significant responsibility for -- the death of Lumumba, who was mistakenly seen by the Eisenhower administration as an African Fidel Castro. Other new details: The U.S. authorized payments to then-President Joseph Kasavubu four days before he ousted Lumumba, furnished Army strongman Mobutu with money and arms to fight pro-Lumumba forces, helped select and finance an anti-



Lumumba government, and barely three weeks after his death authorized new funds for the people who arranged Lumumba’s murder.



“A Killing In Congo.” Source: US News and World Report
<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/doubleissue/mysteries/patrice.htm>

When Lumumba finally was killed, in January 1961, no one was surprised when fingers started pointing at the CIA. A Senate investigation of CIA assassinations 14 years later found no proof that the agency was behind the hit, but suspicions linger. Today, new evidence suggests Belgium, Congo’s former colonialist ruler, was the mastermind. According to *The Assassination of Lumumba*, a book published last year in Belgium by sociologist Ludo de Witte, Belgian operatives directed and carried out the murder, and even helped dispose of the body. Belgian authorities are investigating, but officials admit de Witte’s account appears accurate. . . . Lumumba’s death served its purpose: It bolstered the shaky regime of a formerly obscure colonel named Joseph Mobutu. During his three-decade rule, Mobutu would run his country, bursting with natural resources, into the depths of poverty. It took a civil war to oust him, and Congo has seen little peace since.