

Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba

Emmanuel Gerard and Bruce Kuklick (Harvard University Press, 2015), 276 pp., illustrations, maps.

Reviewed by Stephen R. Weissman

“For over fifty years,” this valuable study begins, “the circumstances of the assassination [of Patrice Lumumba, the charismatic, democratically-elected prime minister of the newly independent Democratic Republic of the Congo] have absorbed scholars and fascinated the general public.” (3) Coinciding with the CIA’s anti-Lumumba covert action program, the murder cast a long shadow over both the agency and American foreign policy.

In recent years, new evidence has emerged about this grisly event and those responsible for it. Of particular importance have been the gradually declassified files of the 1975–76 US Senate Church Committee’s investigation of CIA assassination plots against Lumumba, the report of a Belgian parliamentary inquiry in 2001, Congo Station Chief Larry Devlin’s 2007 memoir, and the long awaited appearance in 2013 of a “retrospective” Congo volume in the State Department’s *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, which contains extensive CIA operational documents from the 1960s.

Death in the Congo taps into all these sources and more. It is distinguished from other works on the assassination by its breadth of analysis. Co-authored by a Belgian historian (one of four academic experts employed by the Belgian inquiry) and an American one, it brings together in one place the intersecting outlooks and behavior of four sets of actors whom the authors hold accountable for having destroyed Lumumba both politically and physically: his Congolese political opponents, the governments of Belgium and the United States, and the United Nations. Rather than focusing narrowly upon the penultimate execution (which is described based on eyewitness testimony), it properly conceives of Lumumba’s death as the result of a lengthy “shared process of murder” (218) that began during efforts to remove him from power, continued through attempts to kill or capture and imprison him, and culminated in his transfer to secessionist enemies who had publicly voiced their murderous intent.

The study’s conclusions are mainly well founded although there are some significant shortcomings. The book will also intrigue intelligence professionals because

it implicitly raises enduring issues about covert action that continue to be discussed today.

Like other scholars, Gerard and Kuklick dismiss the anti-communist rationale for Western intervention against Lumumba. They cite CIA and State Department intelligence analyses that portrayed Lumumba as a proud nationalist and Pan-Africanist who strove to be neutral in the Cold War. Unfortunately, agency heads and President Eisenhower thought they knew better and disregarded this intelligence.

The authors maintain that the governments of Belgium and the United States—including their covert operators—were largely responsible for “this traveling carnival of death.” (215) They insist that the West cannot escape accountability for the consequences of its actions by arguing that it was “the locals” who pulled the trigger:

Along with their own attempts to deliver the coup de grace, US and Belgian officials more and more turned to Lumumba’s opponents...The Europeans and Americans goaded the Africans to imprison Lumumba and to secure a capital sentence. The politicians in Leopoldville proved willing to jail him, but were afraid either to bring him to trial or put him to death. Those in Katanga [a Belgian-supported secessionist province] were not afraid, and the Belgians and Americans and the Leopoldville Group knew that. With Western urging, [President Joseph] Kasavubu and his cohorts sent Lumumba to Elizabethville and his doom. (216)

Regarding the US role at the end, they present a very strong circumstantial case. The United States, through the CIA, was demonstrably trying to do Lumumba in—directly and through its cooperating Congolese leaders—from August through November 1960. In January 1961, these same clients gave the station chief advance notice of their plan to ship Lumumba to his bitterest enemies and he did nothing to discourage them.

Gerard and Kuklick are notably severe on Western and UN officials whose autobiographies, memoirs, and authorized biographies “distanced the authors from anything

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that had to do with the murder. . . . Contemporary evidence,” they demonstrate, “contradicts these recollections and shows their self-serving nature.” (3)

Buttressed by the latest declassified cables, *Death in the Congo* is, in this reviewer’s opinion, a powerful rejoinder to the oft-cited but poorly justified conclusion of the Church Committee Assassinations Report, which exempted the US government from any responsibility for Lumumba’s death. At the same time, it suffers from several major weaknesses, particularly in its analysis of US and CIA policies and operations: the authors contend that the Eisenhower administration’s decision to get rid of Lumumba was partially motivated by Belgian Secretary-General of NATO Paul Spaak’s threat to resign over insufficient US support of Belgium in the UN Security Council. But they offer no evidence that this concern rather than anti-communism provoked Eisenhower’s probable order to assassinate Lumumba. Nor does their assertion that “Western security arrangements might unravel at a decisive moment” if Spaak departed hold water. (70)

They speculate that CIA Director Allen Dulles was a reluctant assassin, dragging his feet for a few weeks before implementing the president’s mandate. Yet Dulles had already approved a murder plot against Cuban president Fidel Castro and would shortly launch *ZRRIFLE*, a project to create an agency assassination capability. The authors fail to appreciate the timing problem in attempting to suddenly introduce assassination into an ongoing Belgian-American political action operation to displace Lumumba by “semi-constitutional means.”

Relying too exclusively on information developed by the Belgian parliamentary inquiry, Gerard and Kuklick significantly underplay the CIA role in President Kasavubu’s dismissal of Lumumba and Colonel Joseph Mobutu’s decisive military coup. The documentary record generally supports portions of Devlin’s memoir giving the Agency significant agency credit for these developments.^a Similarly, the authors’ contention that Mobutu acted independently of the CIA and remained “neutral” between Lumumba and Kasavubu for weeks afterwards defies the facts. Devlin put Mobutu on his payroll a week before the coup after the latter had made his anti-Lumumba, anti-Soviet stance crystal clear and had revealed his plan to move troops to the capital. Within four days of his announce-

ment that he was “neutralizing” Lumumba and Kasavubu, appointing a temporary College of Commissioners to govern the country, Mobutu assured Devlin that the Commissioners would take orders from Kasavubu.^b

While it lifts the veil on major fractures in Belgian policy making and implementation, the book’s treatment of two apparent breakdowns in executive control of CIA covert action is seriously inadequate. The authors note that Devlin withheld his knowledge of his Congolese clients’ plan to send Lumumba to his sworn enemies from his superiors for three days until Lumumba had been rendered and killed. They pose the question of whether Devlin was purposely trying to dispose of Lumumba before the arrival of the John F. Kennedy administration whose policymakers were reconsidering Eisenhower’s hard line towards the Congolese leader. They should have probed further. On the same day Devlin was informed about the planned transfer, he learned that his request to Washington for funds to pay off a Congolese garrison on the verge of a mutiny that might restore Lumumba to power had been blocked by the State Department. The latter wanted to hold off on this matter “of high policy” until the new administration arrived in six days. This turndown, ignored by the authors, provided the worried but self-confident station chief with a powerful incentive to conduct US policy on his own. In addition, the authors fail to notice that this was not the first time that Devlin had pushed this envelope. After putting Mobutu on his payroll and discussing with him “the beginning of the plan for Mobutu to take over the government,” he waited six days—until the eve of the coup—before filing a report with Headquarters. Since his preferred course of action ran counter to the US policy of pursuing a “semi-constitutional” solution, it is not surprising that his cable was vague about his and Mobutu’s intentions.^c

Furnishing readers with many useful insights into a past CIA operation, *Death in the Congo* also provides needed historical perspective on continuing controversies over covert action. Targeted killings that may be based on faulty assumptions? Rendition of suspects to third parties who may harm them? Lapses in agency controls over officers? All of these issues came to the fore in the Congo a half century ago.



a. Compare Larry Devlin, *Chief of Station Congo: A Memoir of 1960–67* (Public Affairs, 2007), 63–70, 76–91 with US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States Volume XXIII Congo 1960–1968* (US Government Printing Office, 2013), 18, 20–41. The FRUS volume was reviewed by CIA Chief Historian David Roberge in *Studies in Intelligence* 58, No. 3 (September 2014)

b. US Department of State, *Congo 1960–1968*, 35.

c. US Department of State, *Congo 1960–1968*, 72–79, 28–31. For a fuller analysis of Devlin’s influence in the Congolese leaders’ decision to transfer Lumumba to secessionist Katanga Province see Stephen R. Weissman, “An Extraordinary Rendition,” *Intelligence and National Security*, 25, no. 2 (April 2010), 98–122.