Remembrance of Sins Past: Unraveling the Murder of Patrice Lumumba

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The assassination of L.D. Kabila, forty years to the day after the 1961 murder of Patrice Lumumba, revived memories of the fate of the Congo’s first (and only) democratically elected leader, but in Belgium, the case of Lumumba’s assassination had already been re-opened by a solidly documented exposé challenging what had for some time been the ‘official version’ of the murder. Written by Ludo DeWitte, this account identified those members of the Belgian establishment whom it saw as having deliberately engineered Lumumba’s overthrow and ‘final elimination’. Its publication directly led to the creation of a parliamentary commission of enquiry whose final report was released in November 2001. Much of the investigation took the form of an examination of archival and testimonial evidence. Most witnesses were not seriously challenged, and cross-examination was usually gentle and ineffective. Yet, considering the perceived need to achieve some form of national consensus, the enquiry cannot be dismissed as a whitewash. The report concludes that ‘certain members of the Belgian government and other Belgian participants were morally responsible for the circumstances leading to the death of Lumumba.’ The commission also identifies what it correctly views as dysfunctions in the decision-making process that prevailed in 1960-1961. Reactions to the report suggest that, for many of those involved in those violent events, stereotypes and cold war clichés die a reluctant death.

La coïncidence (mais en était-ce une?) qui a voulu que Laurent Désiré Kabila fût assassiné à la veille du quarantième anniversaire du meurtre de Patrice Lumumba a été remarquée par la plupart des Congolais qui n’ont pas non plus mangé d’observer combien les réactions des milieux occidentaux faisaient monter, à quarante ans d’intervalle, des mêmes jugements cyniques ou racistes envers deux hommes dont la carrière pouvait effectivement présenter certaines analogies. La mémoire de Kabila, en tout cas (comme d’ailleurs celle de Lumumba) s’est ainsi vue mythifier aux yeux de ses compatriotes pour qui l’ambiguïté qui avait entouré son accès au pouvoir avait été largement rachetée par sa décision de rompre avec ses «parrains» rwandais et ougandais – avec les résultats que l’on sait.

Ce n’est pas uniquement par hasard que les destins de Kabila et de Lumumba se trouvaient ainsi liés, car le renversement de Mobutu en 1997 avait contribué à réveiller en Belgique le fantôme, jamais exercisé, du leader charismatique dont l’exécution dans des circonstances atroces avait secoué la conscience internationale. Après un foisonnement d’ouvrages consacrés à Patrice Lumumba dans les quatre ou cinq années suivant son assassinat, une version consensuelle où le flou artistique se mêlait à l’indifférence s’était imposée dans la société belge – la seule, à vrai dire, où le sort de Lumumba pouvait encore soulever l’intérêt – et avait été en quelque sorte «officialisée» en 1990-91 avec la défense d’une thèse doctorale.
(suivie de la publication d’une version allége de cette thèse) qui, sous un vernis d’objectivité, exonérerait la Belgique «officielle» de toute responsabilité dans l’assassinat tout en admettant que celui-ci correspondait bien aux voeux des dirigeants de l’époque.

La chute de Mobutu (qui y avait évidemment été impliqué) devait permettre de ré-ouvrir ce dossier mal clos et ce fut, pour l’essentiel, l’œuvre du sociologue flamand Ludo De Witte, dont l’ouvrage (publié en 1999 et presqu’aussitôt traduit en français puis en anglais) remettait en cause la responsabilité directe et l’action délibérée de certains dirigeants belges – avec la complicité plus ou moins active des grandes capitales occidentales ainsi que des milieux omnis – et même de Baudouin I et de son entourage. Le retentissement de l’ouvrage de De Witte fut tel qu’il alla provoquer la mise en route d’une enquête parlementaire sur l’assassinat de Lumumba (enquête dont les fruits ont été rendus publics en novembre 2001 sous la forme d’un rapport d’autant plus volumineux qu’il est bilingue) mais bon nombre de détails repris par De Witte avaient déjà été révélés par d’autres (Vandewalle, Soete, etc.) sans toutefois que ces révélations parcellaires bénéficient d’un retentissement comparable. Sans doute les circonstances se prêtent-elles aux remises en question: non seulement la fin du régime Mobutu ou l’inefficacité de la Belgique au Rwanda mais aussi les divers scandales qui avaient récemment secoué la Belgique (notamment les trafics pédophiles révélés par l’affaire Dutroux) avaient amené l’opinion publique à réclamer une transparence accrue.

Malgré son caractère polémique, le travail accompli par De Witte, sur la base de documents récemment ouverts, était suffisamment convaincant pour que l’enquête parlementaire ne puisse éviter de soulever des questions délicates. Toutefois, le souci d’éviter que l’enquête ne prenne un tour partisan devait amener la commission à faire une large place à ce qui pouvait surnager des diverses versions «officielles» et à ménager les témoins survivants. Pour l’essentiel, le rapport présente donc une version composite et nuancée des circonstances ayant mené au renversement et à l’assassinat de Lumumba et conclut à une «responsabilité morale» de la Belgique qui permet d’écarter toute responsabilité personnelle ou directe de telle ou telle personnalité politique (vivante ou défunte). Sans doute ne pouvait-on s’attendre à un verdict plus tranché et l’on peut même saluer le courage qui s’est traduit par les «régrets» et les «excuses» exprimés, au nom de son pays, par le ministre belge des Affaires étrangères, ainsi que par la décision de financer à Kinshasa une «Fondation Lumumba», mais il ne faudrait pas en conclure que le rapport parlementaire puisse être considéré comme le dernier mot sur la question ni que les recommandations qu’il formule représentent autre chose que des voeux pieux.

L’ouverture et les conclusions de l’enquête s’inscrivent vraisemblablement dans un souci de normalisation des relations entre Bruxelles et Kinshasa, mais les remous qu’elle a suscités dans l’opinion publique ou dans certains milieux politiques attachés à une vision diabolisante de Lumumba prouvent assez que le fantôme de Lumumba est loin d’être complètement exorcisé. Il en va d’ailleurs de même pour la réaction de certains acteurs étrangers et même pour les milieux universitaires belges dont l’objectivité pourrait être indirectement mise en cause. Derrière la mort de Lumumba se profilent, comme en filigrane, plusieurs de ces clivages (ethniques, idéologiques) propres à la société belge qui contribuent depuis quelques années à l’érmétisme et à la recomposition de son paysage politique.

Introduction

When Laurent-Désiré Kabila was assassinated on 16 January 2001, no one in the Congo failed to notice that the murder occurred, by what many refused to view as a coincidence, on the eve of the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of another tragic figure in the former Belgian colony’s violent history – Patrice Lumumba. Indeed, Kabila was scheduled to preside the next day over the commemoration of the
death of the man whose brutally truncated career had electrified millions of his
countrymen including the then obscure 21-year old Kabila. If the choice of that date
for Kabila’s assassination was fortuitous (as in Lumumba’s case, the official inquiry
has thus far failed to provide all the answers), the perpetrators must have overlooked
the symbolism it inevitably carried for a traumatised populace, and the prestige it
would posthumously confer upon a man who, from the dubious background of a
checkered career, had grown to heroic proportions in the eyes of most of his people,
first by freeing the Congo from Mobutu’s faltering grip (even if this was largely as a
tool for other players), and later by repudiating those who saw him as a pawn, thereby
becoming a symbol of Congolese pride and patriotism.

Although many may be tempted to read the parallel between the two men as another
illustration of Marx’s aphorism about the two Napoleons, Kabila and Lumumba may
have more in common than meets the eye. Both rose to fame from inauspicious
backgrounds, and under improbable circumstances; both tried to escape the grasp
of those who sought to manipulate them, and both paid with their lives for their
defiance.

The ill-disguised satisfaction voiced in Western capitals after the death of the two men
– not to mention the barely veiled racism of the commentators – echoes a chillingly
similar tone of cynical arrogance, untempered by the lapse of forty years. French
Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine off-handedly described Kabila as ‘a picturesque
despot’. In Belgium, former Prime Minister Mark Eyskens immediately commented:

La mort de Kabila n’est pas surprenante. C’était un homme extrêmement néfaste pour son
pays. Il l’est devenu beaucoup plus rapidement que Mobutu. Il fut finalement pire que
Mobutu et au moins aussi corrompu.8

Only five weeks earlier, the same Eyskens (son of Gaston Eyskens, who held the
Premiership at the time of Lumumba’s assassination) had declared, in an interview on
the Flemish-language state television channel VRT:

In his times, Lumumba was considered a Communist, with so many deaths on his
conscience that a consensus to eliminate him developed in the West. He may be compared
with men such as Milosevic and Saddam Hussein today. Had he remained in power, it
would have been a catastrophe for the Congolese people.9

The analogy between Kabila and Lumumba may well stop here, however, and it
seems doubtful that Kabila’s memory (or the riddle of his murder) will remain as
vivid and emotionally charged as was the case with the man whose meteoric career
and martyrdom reverberated around the world. Yet, to many Congolese, the parallel
is obvious, as illustrated by the following comments collected in Kinshasa by
Alphonse Maindo Monga Ngonga:

[L.-D. Kabila] n’a ni attendu ni eu besoin des élections pour jouir d’une sanction populaire
positive, à titre posthume. Ses assassins ont fait avancer sa cause et réalisé son rêve, qui
était aussi celui de son prédécesseur: devenir un héros et marquer durablement l’histoire
congolaise’. ‘Après Lumumba, le seul compatriote qui m’a redonne la fierté et la dignité de
Congolais, c’est Mzee Kabila. C’était un nationaliste. Il est mort pour avoir osé dire non aux
Blancs, aux puissants ... Kabila assassiné est devenu un héros populaire adulé, faisant
oublier sa gestion politique calamiteuse et suicidaire. Le meurtre de Mzee a transformé
l’ancien maquisard devenu en 1997 président de la RDC en un digne martyr de
l’impérialisme international sur les traces de Lumumba.’10

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Indeed, as Marx noted further in the same passage quoted above:

*Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.*

**Hide & Seek: Reconstructing Lumumba’s Murder**

Reasonably accurate – if not fully documented – accounts of Lumumba’s life and death began appearing within weeks of his murder, and books devoted to him went on being published for several years thereafter. Some were merely anecdotal, many were openly partisan, but all reflected the passionate reactions evoked by the charismatic leaders, as well as by the transnational conspiracy that loomed behind his gruesome execution.

But while Lumumba’s legend never really faded – especially since the brevity of his public life and the disastrous sequels of his failure nourished endless speculations about the alternative scenarios that might have developed, had he lived, serious research on the late Premier remained in limbo over the next twenty-odd years, during which time the rise and decline of the Mobutu regime were the focus of dozens of generally competent and increasingly critical studies. Significantly, the Mobutist version of perestroika, starting in 1990 with the repudiation of the single-party state, soon followed by a deeply flawed and ultimately aborted ‘transition’ process, rekindled public interest in Lumumba’s fate (and Mobutu’s part in it). In the first blush of its elusive power, Zaïre’s ill-fated ‘Sovereign National Conference’ commissioned an inquiry that soon turned into a political football and reached no clear resolution. Concomitantly (and thanks in part to the opening of state archives in Brussels), new research had been initiated in Belgium. It soon became clear, however, that the subject of Lumumba’s death or, more accurately, the identification of those responsible for it, had lost none of its explosive charge. Indeed, the first scholar to take advantage (if rather selectively) of freshly released documents was Jacques Brassine – a man who had been a junior member of the Katanga secessionists’ team of Belgian advisers, and had later remained closely linked with Belgian policymaking circles. First submitted as a doctoral dissertation, and later published in a more popular version co-authored with a conservative journalist, his account of Lumumba’s murder was both sanitised and exculpatory. Almost simultaneously, a second, far more balanced account (yet one that dealt squarely with Lumumba’s shortcomings) had been produced by a noted scholar affiliated with the University of Louvain-la-Neuve as well as with the *Afrika-Instituut*/*Institut Africain*, Belgium’s premier centre for African studies.

It remained for a less establishment-linked scholar to take a more gloves-off approach to the accumulated materials once the now totally de-mystified Mobutu regime had sunk under the weight of its decades of corruption, mismanagement and bloodthirsty arbitrariness. First published in Dutch in 1999, then in a French version, and lately in an English translation, the book unleashed a storm of domestic controversy in Belgium, and was overwhelmingly responsible for the Belgian parliament’s decision to establish an official commission of inquiry into Lumumba’s assassination.
The attention generated by De Witte’s book must be read, at least in part, in its domestic Belgian context. A powerful grassroots urge not to let sleeping dogs lie — contrary to a national tradition to sweep embarrassing or divisive issues under the rug — had been unleashed in 1996 by the discovery of a pedophilic network linked to the death and/or disappearance of several young girls (the so-called ‘Affaire Dutroux’). Belgium’s failure to adequately respond to the 1994 Rwanda genocide — though in no way comparable to France’s — had also prompted an extensive and soul-searching parliamentary inquiry in 1997. The inglorious disintegration of Mobutu’s regime (from which the Belgian government had been virtuously keeping at arm’s length for some years) also created a favourable climate for the re-opening of some long-buried issues.

Or so they seemed. In fact, one reason why De Witte’s book, explosive as it was, was quickly given credence in Belgium is that, for anyone who cared to hear, some faint but insistent voices had long been telling stories that disturbed the comfortable official version of Belgium’s role in the 1960 Congo crisis — stories that were all the more believable (at least to those who read them) because they essentially confirmed what the Belgian public had believed or suspected all along, even if they had been placed, over the years, in a rationalised Realpolitik perspective. The richest and most illuminating accounts were those that flowed from the acerbic pen of the late Col. Frédéric Vandewalle, former head of the colonial intelligence service, then coordinator of Belgium’s military assistance policy to Katanga.

While corseted by an unapologetically colonialist outlook, Vandewalle’s insights are valuable not only for their blunt frankness, but also for the fact that he refused to embrace the sanctimonious half-truths and the cynical disinformation distilled by his (mostly civilian) associates. Vandewalle thus openly dismisses official statements (or carefully planted leaks) to the effect that the July 1960 outbreak of the ‘Congo crisis’ was, somehow, the effect of a Lumumba-led ‘conspiracy’, as well as the magnitude, or even existence of a ‘Soviet threat’ in the Congo at the time (a view also expressed, albeit behind closed doors, by the then US Ambassador in Kinshasa). Vandewalle also shows unexpected understanding of the cathartic value — and, to that extent, of the political ‘appropriateness’ — of Lumumba’s eloquent denunciation of colonialism in the Independence Day speech that caused such consternation in Belgian conservative circles and earned him their undying hatred.

It may well be, as De Witte suggests (p.4), that Vandewalle’s openness partly reflects the self-satisfied arrogance of a Machiavellian schemer who, with the battle safely won, yearns to display his backstage tricks for a limited audience. The mass of documents which he deposited at the Tervuren Museum (where De Witte consulted them at length) indicate, at the very least, that there were a lot more beans the maverick Colonel could have spilled, had he had the time and the inclination to do so.

Another, more modest yet equally central protagonist, Gerard Soete, had for his part spilled most of the beans he held in a little-noted book published in 1978. In that confessional (yet by no means apologetic) account, Soete, a police commissioner serving at the time in Katanga and later retained by Mobutu, describes in gruesome detail the destruction and eventual disposal of the bodies of Lumumba and his two associates, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito.

The fact that Soete’s book received rather limited attention at the time of its appearance was probably due in part to the fact that much of what it ‘revealed’ had been, in truth, fairly common (if unproved) knowledge in Belgium for quite some
time. Word-of-mouth accounts differing only on points of detail (who had dealt
Lumumba the final stab – or was it a final bullet? – in what house exactly had the
assassination taken place? had the acid used to dissolve the bodies been supplied by
the Union Minière or by Katanga’s department of public works?) began circulating in
Katanga, in Kinshasa and in Belgium almost from the moment of Lumumba’s death.
By the 1970s they had sedimented as a subtext to the constructed ‘official version’,
which suggested that the murder was the product of personal and/or ‘tribal’ – or even
‘atavistic’ – animosities among Africans, and that although individual Belgians might
have had a hand in the assassination as ‘instruments’, or ‘under orders’ from African
officials, the Belgian government itself shared no responsibility in the liquidation of
the Congo’s Prime Minister, even if it had (along with other Western powers)
welcomed his ‘elimination’ from the political scene.

Such was the discourse (later refurbished by Brassine (under scholarly veneer) that
Ludo De Witte now set to challenge and, if not to destruct, at least to deconstruct. Yet
the attention the book gained – as well as the hostility it triggered in some official
circles – were not due so much to the fact that it accurately fingered those who had
been involved in carrying out, or covering up Lumumba’s murder (their names were
by and large known), as to his ability to convincingly identify a chain of command
linking the perpetrators to the very apex of Belgium’s political hierarchy, including
the late King Baudouin and his immediate entourage. The Belgian citizenry’s sense of
outrage, however, had lately been excited by a number of scandals involving (across
party lines) several government officials – the Dutroux case being only the latest – and
thus De Witte’s book was not greeted with any real sense of shock but, more
damningly, with a widespread acceptance of its utter plausibility.16

To the average citizen, the book’s most disturbing aspect, perhaps, was the way in
which it emphasised the Belgian establishment’s direct responsibility and predomi-
nant role in Lumumba’s murder, to the detriment of the comfortable, if unofficial
version surreptitiously promoted among influential circles that, whatever Belgium’s
involvement may have been, the United States (or, more pointedly, the CIA and its
local station chief Lawrence Devlin) had been the real instigator and orchestrator of
the assassination.17

De Witte, however, hardly lets the United States off the hook, even if his prime target
is the Belgian establishment (or, rather, some of its past or current members). He
makes no bones about the fact that Lumumba’s assassination (sometimes euphemized
as ‘removal’ or ‘elimination’) had been discussed, recommended, plotted, attempted,
ordered or authorised at various levels of the US governmental structure, up to and
including the White House, or that similar views, goals and plans were being
concomitantly entertained at equally high levels of the UN hierarchy, of Her Majesty’s
government or (more ambivalently) of Gaullist France’s réseaux. The evidence he
offers on that score is not particularly new, but it is solid and should by now be
familiar to informed American (or even British) readers. De Witte’s major
contribution, however (aside from the political fallout he caused in his native
country), lies in his thorough – though possibly not always impartial – use of Belgian
archival materials. The story he tells is entirely credible and unlikely to be seriously
shaken by any future ‘revisionists’, not only because it effectively weaves together an
array of documents, testimonies or confessions whose validity has been independ-
ently established, but also because his scrutiny of the personalities, motivations and
idiosyncrasies of key members of Belgium’s establishment (perilously subjective
even if such an undertaking may be) carries a strong ring of truth – at least with
respect to those among them who are, in some degree, known to this reviewer.
De Witte’s effectiveness in placing the prime responsibility for Lumumba’s murder squarely in the Belgian establishment’s doorstep may have the perverse effect of comforting those past or current members of other Western policy circles in their contention that, notwithstanding their aversion to the man, Lumumba’s blood is not on their hands. This is the view still offered by Lawrence Devlin (who joined Maurice Tempelsman’s diamond-dealing business after retiring from the CIA). In her otherwise informative book,18 Michela Wrong uncritically accepts Devlin’s contention that ‘I just never felt it [assassination] was justified with Lumumba. I was hoping the Congolese would settle it among themselves, one way or another’ (p.80). Michael Hoyt, another American official who had been posted in Kinshasa in 1962, was content to accept one colleague’s dismissive version of the murder in 1964 when he was transferred to Kisangani (then Stanleyville), where he would shortly gain fame for being held hostage by Congolese rebels:

*During cocktails, David talked about when Lumumba was sent by ... Kasavubu and ... Mobutu to the Katanga in 1961, where he was killed by Tshonbe’s men ... ‘He was almost dead when the plane arrived in [Elisabethville]’ David said ... ‘They were loaded on a truck and that was the last seen of them’.* 19

For their benefit and for our edification, De Witte has added to the Anglo-American edition a five-page preface which briefly, but convincingly recalls the extent to which the United States, Great Britain and the UN were complicit in the conspiracy to liquidate the Congolese statesman. De Witte even manages (for the first time, I believe) to put a face and a name on the secret agent recruited in Europe by the CIA and sent to the Congo in November 1960 to eliminate Lumumba – Moise Maschkivitzan, a stateless person born in 1910 in Antwerp and hitherto identified only as QJ/WIN in the 1975 Church Report and in the declassified CIA documents. As for Britain’s involvement (no less bloody-minded for being indirect) it is more fully documented in Alan James’ dispassionate *Britain and the Congo Crisis, 1960-1963*.20 H.F.T. Smith (the future head of MI5), though convinced, like several of his Foreign Office colleagues, that it was ‘unlikely’ that Soviet bloc troops would be committed to the Congo,21 nevertheless favoured ‘the simple [solution] of ensuring Lumumba’s removal from the scene by killing him’.22 In his memoirs, Harold Macmillan, for his part, refers to Lumumba as a ‘Communist stooge’ and a ‘witch-doctor’.23 Much of Britain’s Congo policy during this period, however, focused on secessionist Katanga, on behalf of which a combination of British corporate groups and (white) Rhodesian personalities carried on active lobbying.

Aside from this preface (and an added chart identifying the ‘international actors’), the English-language edition is only slightly different from the French-language version – which the translators seem to have used in preference to the Dutch original. What has been (literally) lost in the translation largely consists of fragments, factual details and authorial views that would be relevant to, and understood by, Belgian or even French readers, but were presumably viewed by the publishers as too arcane for an American (or British?) audience. Instances of such ‘particle loss’ are, for the most part, inconsequential, and detract little from the book’s overall argument. Some can, nevertheless, be deplored, even if they concern relatively minor details. Thus, while describing the aristocratic parentage of Count Harold d’Aspremont Lynden (whom De Witte singles out as the true initiator of Lumumba’s murder), the English-language version (p.43) omits to mention that his father Charles – characterised in the French-language edition (p.103) as ‘archi-conservateur’ – had in the late 1930s tried to bring Léon Degrelle’s Rexist (fascist) party back into the fold of the Catholic Party from which it had been spawned.
Similarly, the Verso edition fails to include a reference to the memoirs of the then Prime Minister, Gaston Eyskens, who tartly remarks on ‘the unimaginable pretentiousness’ of the members of Belgium’s high aristocracy – including the same Charles who, as a member of the Senate, had publicly denounced his son’s predecessor at the department of African Affairs (and fellow member of the Catholic party), August De Schrijver, for having exposed the King to Lumumba’s ‘insults’. Even though Eyskens’ memoirs appeared only in 1993, one is inclined to surmise that Count Harold’s selection as Minister in charge of what was then clearly Belgium’s most explosive problem (as well, perhaps, as his earlier selection as Eyskens’ chef de cabinet adjoint) may have been strongly urged, not to say forced, on a reluctant Prime Minister by the entourage of King Baudouin – still embittered by the ‘humiliation’ he had suffered from Lumumba, and whose household was headed by Harold’s kinsman, Grand Maréchal de la Cour – Gobert d’Aspremont-Lynden.24

Other ‘lost fragments’ also contain additional (though not essential) information on members of Belgium’s establishment, while yet others merely prune the author’s tendency to repeat himself, and thus correspond to a form of editing that should have been performed earlier. Competent though this sort of editorial work may have been, it did not catch every ‘bug’ in the French version: thus, on pp. 37 and 43, two ambiguous and seemingly contradictory versions of the kinship links between Count Harold (who died in 1967) and ‘Lord Chamberlain’ Gobert – who is whose uncle/nephew? – simply reproduce the same confusing passages found on pp. 91 and 99 of the Karthala edition.25

Much of the debate generated by De Witte’s book (notably in the early rounds of parliamentary hearings) focused on the specific meaning of the term élimination définitive – the outcome which, in a telex dated 6 October 1960, Harold d’Aspremont-Lynden’s subordinates in the Katanga-based Mission technique belge (Mistebel) were instructed to follow regarding Lumumba, and which he described as ‘the principal objective to be pursued in the interest of Congo, Katanga and Belgium’. D’Aspremont-Lynden, it should be noted, had served as head of Mistebel (commonly viewed as the shadow government of that secessionist province) until 2 September 1960, when he was named Minister of African Affairs, whether as a reflection of pro-Katanga sentiment at the royal palace, or as a way for Gaston Eyskens to soothe Baudouin’s sullen resentment by taking on a well-known ‘hawk’ – and a well-connected one at that.26

Questions were raised as well as to the significance of the telegram d’Aspremont-Lynden addressed on to the Belgian consulate in Elisabethville (Lubumbashi) on 15 January 1961. This imperative message urged Moïse Tshombe’s secessionist government to arrange for Lumumba to be transferred to Katanga as soon as possible. Even if the aristocratic Count Harold refrained from using such crude words as ‘execution’ or ‘assassination’, his moral responsibility as well as that of those who, further down the line, assisted with the deed is hardly disputable. In the words of Belgian journalist Colette Braeckman, ‘the blood of Lumumba continues to haunt Belgium and the Congo’.27

A particularly nagging issue centres on the degree to which Belgium’s late King Baudouin was informed of (and tacitly approved) the plan to ‘eliminate’ Lumumba. In the preliminary findings of the parliamentary commission of inquiry, one encounters a disturbing reference to a memorandum of 19 October 1960 whose author, Major Weber (a Belgian officer then serving as Moïse Tshombe’s chief of staff) details in no uncertain terms the tenor of a meeting in which Tshombe and Mobutu, flanked by
their expatriate advisers, concurred that Lumumba – who was already under house arrest at the time – should be ‘neutralized, physically if possible’.

This document – the authenticity of which is unchallenged – was not only read, but annotated by Baudouin who refrained, however, from informing the Belgian cabinet of the existence of a plan to liquidate the Congolese leader. One can only speculate on the reasons for the King’s silence, but the most plausible explanation is probably the fact that the cabinet (or, at least, some of its members) was not only fully aware of, but actively involved in the macabre plot. In the eyes of Guo Polspoel and Pol Van Den Driessche, two Flemish investigative journalists whose October 2001 book, Koning en Onderkoning, deals with the secretive politics of the royal entourage, Baudouin’s failure to register even a pro forma disapproval hardly comes as a surprise in view of his unyielding animosity toward Lumumba. ‘One cannot’, Baudouin noted in the margins of the October memorandum, ‘allow the achievements of the past eighty years be destroyed by the hate-filled policies of one man.’ His brother Prince (now King) Albert had, for his part, had bluntly stated a few weeks earlier: ‘The responsibility for the Congo crisis rests on a single man – Lumumba’.

**Parliament Takes a Hand**

Given the apparent involvement of several of Belgium’s most important – or self-important – personalities in the blood-chilling scenario, one must acknowledge the courage shown by the parliamentary commission of enquiry, or else cast a tolerant gaze on its obvious reluctance to look for skeletons in some of the Belgium’s plushest closets. The motion to set up the commission was put forth in the lower house (House of Representatives) by a group of seven MP’s representing the different components of the country’s ‘Blue-Red-Green’ coalition government. The House Committee on Foreign Relations unanimously approved the motion on 2 February 2000, and the investigating commission was set up on 23 March in a plenary meeting of the House. A crucial decision was made at that time to make the commission ‘non-partisan’ or, more accurately, to include among its fifteen members representatives of the two language-based Christian Democratic opposition parties, Christen democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V) and Parti social-chrétien (FSC) – a move designed not only to allow it to speak on behalf of the entire nation, but also to avoid any suspicion of partisan scapegoating, since the coalition cabinet in power at the time of the Congo crisis was led by the Christian Democrats who had by then regained the control they traditionally held over the Ministry of ‘African Affairs’ (formerly known as the Colonial office) after a four-year interval (1954-1958) during which a Socialist-Liberal coalition had been confronted with their obstructionist reluctance to take part in the formulation of a non-partisan decolonisation policy. While this effort to avoid rekindling past divisions was indeed laudable, it also meant that the investigation was likely to follow a consensus-seeking approach and avoid fingering specific decision makers who (though most of them were now deceased) still had influential living associates, followers or descendents – or, for that matter, members of the royal family. The fact that the hearings were being held forty years after the events being investigated also meant that none of the commission members (and indeed few MPs) had been professionally or politically active at the time, and that their knowledge of the circumstances then prevailing in Belgium or in Africa was, at best, second-hand or indirect.

Much of the actual investigation, in fact, took the form of an extensive (but nonetheless ‘selective’) examination of archival and testimonial evidence, a task
performed by a small group of ‘experts’ appointed by the commission. Of the four ‘core’ members of that group, only one had any real background knowledge of the colonial and decolonisation periods. Three adjunct experts (two of them specialising in international law, one in encryption) also lent part-time assistance. The commission’s final report (p.16) also acknowledges the ‘assistance’ supplied to its four main ‘experts’ by Jean Omasombo Tshonda, a professor at the University of Kinshasa, and the only Congolese associated (other than as a deposed witness) with the investigation. The contributions of this highly knowledgeable of (and prolific writer on) the Congolese political scene, however, were carefully restricted. He met only briefly with the official ‘experts’ and was not allowed to work with them or to accede the archives they chose to consult. Indeed, the commission apparently agonised over whether to resort to Omasombo’s expertise – could a Congolese be ‘objective’? – and finally opted, as he wryly puts it, ‘for the formal inclusion of an ‘African’ as window-dressing (pour le décor), that is, without a real part to play ... to represent Congolese perspectives and sensitivities in a purely symbolic mode’.30

While instructive, the commission’s public hearings (some were held behind closed doors) show the degree to which most of the surviving protagonists still cling to what might be termed the ‘modified official version’ (the one presented by Brassine). Twenty-two witnesses (five of them Congolese) were heard in public sessions, five (including one Congolese) were heard in camera, and five (including one Congolese) were interviewed privately.31 Though all had been, to some greater or lesser extent, involved in various capacities and at different levels with the many facets and policy vectors surrounding Lumumba’s overthrow and assassination, a number of key protagonists were unaccountably not called upon. Some, like Etienne Tshisekedi, whose alleged responsibility has consistently dogged his sinuous political career, would undoubtedly have been disinclined to appear; others were ignored and, of course, most of the chief actors (Belgian or Congolese) were dead.

Witnesses were presented with a list of questions (some open-ended, some more specific) or statements on which clarification or qualification was sought. Many of the answers were predictably evasive, self-exculpatory, and occasionally irrelevant. Several witnesses read or recited prepared statements, or otherwise drifted into tangential matters. Most were not seriously challenged, and cross-examination was usually gentle and ineffective. The only witnesses whose veracity was directly challenged were Albert Ndele and Victor Nendaka, and both managed to run circles around their questioners.32

Among the Belgian witnesses, those (twenty-two out of twenty-five) who were positioned somewhere along the chain of command were allowed to argue that they were following orders, or that such instructions as they had received did not specifically refer to the ‘physical’ elimination of Lumumba. When pressed, they frequently resorted to a plea of forgetfulness of the sort made famous by Ronald Reagan during the US congressional hearings on the Iran-Contra scandal. Whether European or African, most witnesses recurrently suggested that the only actors capable of providing full answers were those who were now (fortunately?) deceased, and whose motivations were, by definition, unknowable.

The sense of frustration one often feels in reading these testimonies comes in large part from the fact that they are not reproduced verbatim, but summarised in indirect style by the rapporteurs (or by those working under their authority), with the occasional insertion, between inverted commas, of a few words presumably uttered by the witness. By default, the best (though possibly subjective) account we have of
the information discovered in the course of the hearings comes from the stories filed, day after day, by reporters for Belgium's major daily newspapers, some of which, however, like the conservative Catholic *Libre Belge*, had a record of virulent hostility to Lumumba combined with unqualified devotion to the Belgian royal family (warts and all) and, in that order, to the Christian Democratic politicians who had dominated the cabinet and Belgium's policy throughout the crucial period of the Congo's 'decolonisation' and collapse. Journalists, of course, had no access to the testimony of the twelve witnesses (over one-third of the total) whose testimonies were collected, in whole or in part, either in closed sessions or outside the precinct of the congressional hearing rooms – and sometimes collected, it should be added, by only one or two investigators. Answers or evidence offered by these witnesses are included only in the most abbreviated form (or simply not at all) in the commission's final report, even though the questions submitted to them are tantalisingly presented in full, as in the case of the public witnesses. Among those 'classified' testimonies are those of two major Congolese personalities whose direct and personal involvement with Lumumba's fate has long been known: Justin Bomboko (Lumumba's Foreign Minister, and later head of the 'College of General Commissioners') and Jonas Mukamba, who was personally entrusted with the 'delivery' of Lumumba into the hands of the Katanga secessionists and was subsequently made head of the giant diamond-mining concern Forminière (later Miba) in his native region of Kasai.

The appropriately named 'synthesis' of the hearings is thus significantly different from (and less illuminating than) what one might expect from, say, a US Congressional hearing. Indeed, it occupies only 146 pages of the report's 988 pages – or 73 out of 494, keeping in mind that the Dutch and French versions appear in facing columns on every page – representing less than one-sixth of its length. Much of the rest, and by far its most substantial part (647 bilingual pages, or two-thirds of the total) consists of the *Rapport des Experts* – a report-within-a-report, as it were, to which might be added the five appendices (pp. 845-988), particularly Omasombo's 40-page monograph, which should by right have been included in the 'experts' account, were it not for its author's awkward status on the margins of that team.

**The Heart of the Matter**

That 'report' then, or Part II of the overall document, represents the fullest and, from a non-Belgian perspective, the most informative portion of the whole investigation. By its length, style and design, it stands out as a book – and therein lies a problem. With its catchy chapter and section titles, it fairly begs for best seller status, as if it meant to compete with the commercially published accounts by De Witte, Brassine and Kestergat (or Willame) by purporting to offer the 'last word' on Lumumba's murder and Belgium's part in it. As if to settle an argument between squabbling children, it strikes a middle-of-the-road, 'adult' pose between De Witte's accusatory and Brassine's exculpatory versions, acknowledging that 'wrongs' were committed, but suggesting that these were understandable – perhaps even excusable – under the 'circumstances'. There is, of course, some validity to that view, and the report has the merit of raising uncomfortable questions, as well as of airing a few (but not many) important bits of new evidence, but its central intent visibly remains to offer a compromise narrative to which both sides can be reconciled, even if grudgingly. In doing so, it seems to this reviewer that the 'experts' account' vindicates De Witte's version rather than Brassine's – at least implicitly – and, indeed, too much damning evidence had already been unearthed (by De Witte, by Vandewalle, by Soete, by Willame, and indeed by Brassine himself) for the genie, or the ghost of Lumumba, to be forced back into the bottle.
While this extensive centrepiece makes, perhaps, the best reading for an informed general public, it is to the final section (Part IV, pp. 828-844) that we must turn for what is, or should have been, the most intriguing, and most delicate challenge faced by the commission's fifteen MPs, the determination of the extent and nature of Belgium's responsibility, as well as the recommendations called for as the outcome of the inquiry. Considering the perceived need to achieve some form of national consensus on these highly sensitive issues, the conclusions of the report are, in the main, courageous and cannot be dismissed as a whitewash. To be sure, the rapporteurs avoided singling out specific individuals, but in doing so they ended up indicting the 'system' and, in many ways, the entire Belgian establishment while self-consciously (and not always convincingly) labouring to come up with extenuating circumstances. As a preamble to its conclusions, they warn:

When reading, thinking about and discussing this case, it should be recognised that people will always tend to analyse and comment on the facts from their current perspective on the world and current institutions.

The period investigated runs from 1960 to 1961. Although the fundamental principles of democracy and international policies were also valid then, it is useful to look at the historical context because from certain points, the standards, ethics and norms of international politically correct thinking were different then, than they are today. Circumstances in Belgium were different then. Belgian politics, institutions, the elite and the media functioned differently then, than they do nowadays.

The international situation was also radically different. We should not forget that the events occurred during the cold war. Every action taken by a country or its leaders was noted and analysed, sometimes to an absurd degree, in the light of the international situation and the fight against communism. The reports of the national security and intelligence services and also the reports of the council of ministers and the media clearly illustrate this.

It is also important not to forget the political climate and media coverage of that time. Belgian public opinion had been confronted for days, via written and audiovisual media, with reports of tragic events of murder and rape, coming from refugees who had fled, forced to leave all their possessions behind. In wide sections of the population, one person was held responsible: Patrice Lumumba. The population demanded a very strong response from the government.36

Briefly glossing over the hasty 'decolonisation' process, they admit, almost as an afterthought, and without offering any explanation, that 'the Belgian government deemed a speedy independence necessary in order to protect Belgian interests against foreign influences'. Though it may have only an indirect bearing on Lumumba's assassination, this matter is not without importance. Probably influenced by business circles (and perhaps by the apparent 'success' of General de Gaulle's gambit to cushion the independence of France's African territories by a web of bilateral 'cooperation' agreements), the Belgian government's startling decision to abandon its earlier timetable for a seemingly reasonable transition process spread over four to five years in favour of an 'instant decolonisation' gamble to be completed in a matter of months had been almost stealthily announced in parliament (where it went virtually unnoticed) in the final days of 1959 – before the January 1960 convening of the 'Round Table' conference in which the terms and timetable of the transition to independence were supposed to be the subject of a negotiation between Belgian and Congolese
delegates. Whether or not they suspected a cynical plot to ensure that such an ill-prepared hand-over would guarantee the need for extensive Belgian tutelage of an ostensibly ‘independent’ Congo, several key African delegates were alarmed by the prospect. Thus, while they realised that they could hardly argue publicly for a postponement of independence, Lumumba and Kasavubu privately approached Belgian authorities to suggest that the transition process should be extended under an interim ‘provisional government’, only to be told that Belgium’s commitment to quit the Congo on 30 June 1960 was irrevocable.37 One can only speculate what the Congo’s (and Lumumba’s) future might have been if this suggestion had been accepted, but this is not (understandably) the sort of question the rapporteurs were expected to raise.

Given the terms of its mandate, the commission also refrained from casting more than a cursory look at the role of the US or of the UN. ‘It is not the intention of the commission’, the rapporteurs note,

to [underestimate] the American or UN interventions. They are simply referred to when significant in explaining Belgian attitudes or actions.

Various witnesses, it should be recalled, had broadly hinted that the US, and more specifically the CIA, might have had a hand in – or at least planned – Lumumba’s murder (a view also expressed by De Witte), but while Washington’s concerns and reactions are briefly touched upon in the ‘historical’ portion (Part II) of the report (see pp. 120-122, 129-130, 219-222, 243-244, 404), this line of inquiry is not pursued in the concluding section, which (understandably) focuses exclusively on Belgium’s responsibilities. On this score, the report’s conclusions are measured, but precise, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

[Lumumba] was called a Satan by some, and honoured as a true people’s hero by others ... Indeed, it is a fact that he was the first democratically elected Prime Minister of the Congo. ... Not only the Belgian government, but also many other governments and many layers of Belgian and Congolese society were campaigning, some in a more co-ordinated fashion than others, to bring about Lumumba’s downfall politically [emphasis added] ... (F)rom the beginning, the Belgian government showed little respect for the sovereign status of the Congolese government ... In order to finance the policy against the Lumumba government, the Belgian government [resorted] to so-called secret funds ... This money [ca. Euros 6.7m. at current value] was used to support the opposition press and politicians, to finance radio campaigns ... and undercover operations ... It is impossible to find the origin of this sum ... During the second half of August ... the Belgian General Consulate in Brazzaville played an important role in encouraging the opposition or in providing logistic support. At that same time, Prime Minister Eyskens asked President Kasavubu, via his advisor Jef van Bilsen, to sack Lumumba.

Pressure from US diplomats and the UN was an important factor in the deposition of Lumumba ... After having given its support to the deposition of Prime Minister Lumumba [the Belgian government] was eager to prevent him from returning to power ... The first and most important measure in relation to this, insisted upon by the Belgian government, was the arrest of Lumumba ... Mobutu took action to arrest Lumumba on 10 October ... in exchange for a Belgian promise to provide technical and military support to the Armée Nationale Congolaise (ANC). The Belgian government was opposed to all possible forms of reconciliation, direct or indirect, between the Congolese leaders ... It is absolutely clear: there were plans to kill Lumumba [details of those plans follow].
During that same period there were – besides three American – also Belgian ‘plans’ aimed at the physical elimination of Lumumba ... Belgian officials helped with the execution of certain plans in Brazzaville and Leopoldville. (T)here was no trace of an order or action to rescind these plans; no disciplinary measures were taken against the officials – diplomats, officers or security agents – who knew about these plans or participated in them... A Member of Parliament pointed out to the Ministers who were involved in a debate in the Commission of Foreign Affairs on 13 December 1960 that there was a possible threat to the life of Lumumba in Katanga ... Minister [d'Aspremont Lynden], being the head of the Belgian Technical Mission (in Katanga) should have been able to make a good personal assessment of the state of mind of the Katangan leaders and the risk to Lumumba of his transfer there ... [T]he Head of State (King Baudouin) received an indication that the life of Lumumba was in danger ... No signs of disapproval or concern were given (...) about the possible physical elimination of Lumumba. No evidence has been found that either the government or the competent ministers were informed of this letter.

The rapporteurs take pains to indicate that ‘there is no evidence ... that [Belgians seconded to the Katanga government] were involved with, or consulted during the decision-making process, which eventually led to the execution’, adding however that: ‘neither are there any indications that actions were taken to prevent the execution.’ Lumumba, they insist, ‘was killed on the orders of the Katangan authorities’, but ‘at no time, did the Belgian government protest ... against the unlawful execution ... nor did they express regret or disapproval in relation to it.’ With near-schizophrenic concern to avoid a direct accusation of specific individuals, the rapporteurs attempt to limit their indictment by stating:

No single document, of which the commission is aware, indicates that the Belgian government or a member thereof gave the order to physically eliminate Lumumba; The investigation does not show that the Belgian authorities premeditated the murder of Lumumba when it attempted to transfer him to Katanga; It is very clear, though, that the physical safety of Lumumba was of no concern to the Belgian government. It deemed the safety of Lumumba less important than other interests; By not considering the possible risks of the transfer, not asking guarantees for his physical safety or insisting on humane treatment and a trial, the Belgian government and especially the Minister of African Affairs showed a lack of forethought and a lack of respect for the constitutional state.

only to conclude that ‘certain members of the Belgian government and other Belgian participants were morally responsible for the circumstances leading to the death of Lumumba.’

Public attention has focused (critically or approvingly) on this admission of ‘moral responsibility’, which some saw as a form of equivocation or even hypocrisy, but the commission had been given investigatory rather than judiciary authority (consonant with separation of power principles), in addition to which criminal action against deceased persons would obviously have been without merit. The true (and fitting) mandate of the commission, however, was that which related to the formulation and execution of public policies, and called not only for the ascertaining of statistical responsibilities, but also for a prescriptive assessment of what must be done to avoid the repetition of whatever malfeasance had been committed.

In this latter respect, the commission’s recommendations, while not exactly earth-shaking, are nevertheless reasonable and pertinent. The commission thus identifies what it correctly views as dysfunctions in the decision-making process that prevailed in 1960-1961. These include ‘a lack of transparency ... and co-ordination between the
different Ministers who were involved with Congo policies’, as well as an uncertain distribution of power between different cabinet members, with the minister of African Affairs encroaching on the jurisdiction of the Foreign and Defence departments (especially where Katanga was concerned) and with individual diplomats and officers taking directives from d’Aspremont-Lynden outside normal hierarchical channels. The commission also notes that the government eluded the control of the Parliament as well as that of the Auditor’s Office by diverting and using funds for secret, ‘reprehensible’ purposes. Furthermore, the government violated its obligation under §4 of UN Resolution 290 (IV) of 1 December 1949 ‘to refrain from any direct or indirect action intended to jeopardise the freedom, the independence or the integrity of any state, to incite any State to internal struggle’, as well as – by delivering weapons and supporting different parties in the Congo conflict – the UN resolution of 20 September 1960. The report also comments adversely on the ambiguous roles played by those expatriate officials who, though serving as advisers to Congolese ministers, ‘reported directly to the Belgian State Security or other services’. Rather more gingerly, the rapporteurs observe that Belgian officials serving in Katanga (under Mistebele or its successor, the ‘Bureau-Conseil’), used ‘for their own benefit’ financial advances and other facilities offered by the Union Minière.

Cynics may see such censorious strictures as no more sincere that Captain Louis Renault’s famously indignant ‘I’m shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on in here!’ (in Casablanca), but politicians (especially when passing judgment on their peers) seldom come out as avenging angels. Perhaps the most delicate portion of the investigation was that which dealt with the late King Baudouin’s rather unsavoury role in the making of Belgium’s Congo policy, generally, and (somewhat more indirectly – or, better said, covertly) in Lumumba’s ‘elimination’. This is heavily mined terrain in Belgium, where criticism of the monarch (and, by extension, the royal family) remains an enduring taboo – partly because some of these monarchs (such as Leopold II, or Baudouin’s own father, Leopold III) were, precisely, not above reproach, but mostly because, in a country whose ‘national’ identity has largely been shattered, the monarchy is seen, or at least presented, as the only surviving symbol of Belgian unity.38

While wrapping its findings in bland, precautionary language, the commission nevertheless found that a conflict had developed between the King and the government ‘regarding certain aspects of Congo politics’. ‘In certain cases’, the report goes on, ‘this conflict led to the fact that the Head of State took independent action’, and that, having obtained ‘important information’ (about plans to murder Lumumba), he ‘probably’ failed to inform the government of it. Strong stuff indeed, by Belgian standards (and, one suspects, by British standards as well) – and it should be noted that access to the royal family’s archives was reportedly not provided without some (understandable) reluctance.

Yet, for all its effectiveness in identifying major problem points in the policy-making process, the rapporteurs were disappointingly vague in their suggestion of concrete remedies. The report’s conclusions sanitumously stress the need for Parliament ‘to be correctly and completely informed at all times’, and finds it ‘desirable’ to ‘develop a formula for informing Parliament, in extreme cases, about an action of the Government without jeopardising confidentiality’. For this purpose, its recommendation that the House Intelligence Committee must ‘pay special attention to the efficiency of the intelligence services’, and that ‘this monitoring must be performed in a permanent and efficient basis’ seems little more than a pious wish.
With respect to the King's role, the rapporteurs merely refer to 'the constitutional stipulations and customs concerning the role of the Head of State', and more specifically, to the undisputed provision (common to all parliamentary monarchies) that 'every action of the Head of State that could have a direct or indirect political influence should be ratified by a cabinet member so as to ensure, they add somewhat redundantly, that the King's 'political interventions or initiatives will not conflict with foreign or domestic government policies'.

Mixed Reactions

The commission's least directly 'political' recommendations are those inviting the government to 'develop the required initiatives in order to retrieve, make an inventory, structure and safeguard the archives of the different federal national institutions, especially those of the Head of State, by means of an appropriate allocation of financial means and members of staff', and urging 'a re-definition of the rules regarding access to documents under government control' - a goal likely to be applauded by anyone who has tried to consult Belgium's colonial archives. In this felicitous mood, the commission also recommends 'stimulating multidisciplinary and international historical research into the colonial and post-colonial eras', so that, on the basis of 'objective, scientifically obtained factual materials', political circles may acquire a synthetic understanding enabling them to 'come to terms with the past'.

Brave words indeed, and an achievement devoutly to be wished, but the reactions to the Commission's report (in Belgium or abroad) suggest that, for many of those involved in the violent events of that period - as well as, more regrettably, for those who, in the next generations, formed opinions of the Congo based on ready-made popular, oral or second-hand sources - stereotypes and cold war clichés die a hard, reluctant death. The first negative reactions, naturally enough, came from Belgium. While conservative newspapers such as La Libre Belgique noted, with quiet satisfaction, that consensus had been achieved only at the price of maintaining 'a certain ambiguity' in the allocation of responsibility, others expressed approval for the reappraisal of Lumumba's role and character, and for the indictment (however implicit) of former members of the country's establishment. Other, more discordant voices were heard. Marc Eyssens (whose opinions of Lumumba and Kabila have been quoted above) predictably saw the report as 'an incomplete, one-sided account of the facts, in which only part of the truth has been disclosed'.

A parallel reaction, but coming from a wholly different angle, was voiced by those who deplored the commission's timidity and suggested that, for all its cathartic value, the enquiry had been designed to clear the path for a resumption of Belgium's influence in the 'new' post-Mobutu Congo. Writing in Le Soir, Ludo De Witte not only listed the report's many blind spots, but also noted that Kabila's murder, by paving the way for a weak regime dependent on the West, had diluted Belgium's need for full disclosure as a token of goodwill. And, while naturally reaching different conclusions, both De Witte and his opposite number Brassine strangely concurred in deploiring the fact that the commission had ignored some key sources supporting their respective interpretations. Brassine, for his part, continued to deny that Belgium carried any responsibility (whether 'political' or 'moral') for Lumumba's murder. 'In truth', he said bluntly, 'we didn't give a tinker's damn about Lumumba. No one shed a tear on his death'.

Jean-Claude Willame, a somewhat more dispassionate observer, had earlier commented that the commission 'could not evade a number of traps, ambiguities and

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interferences' and that, through the report, Belgium had, in the final analysis, ‘settled accounts with individuals, not with its past’.

And, echoing a point also made by De Witte, Omasombo added:

*By essentially basing its work on ‘documents’, the commission meant to confer upon itself a certificate of objectivity. This was largely illusory. The experts sorted out the documents and citations in the light of specific viewpoints and/or interests. The text of the report reduces history to a chronological enumeration of events.*

Both the cathartic and political values of the exercise were evident (but in what proportion?) when Foreign Minister Louis Michel, responding to the House debate, expressed ‘on behalf of Belgium’ his ‘deep and sincere regrets’ and his ‘excuses’ to the families of the victims and to the Congolese people for the ‘irrefutable share of responsibility’ incurred by Belgian officials as well as for their ‘apathy and cold indifference’ toward the fate of Lumumba and of his two associates. To the surprise of many, Michel then went on to announce the creation of a ‘Lumumba Foundation’ to be financed by Belgium, but based in the DRC for the worthy but vague purpose of preventing conflicts and supporting good governance and the rule of law.

Though Belgium’s political establishment and mainstream media broadly welcomed Michel’s initiative (a bit grudgingly in some cases), some venomous comments were predictably heard from those circles directly implicated by the report. Thus, Arnoud d’Aspremont Lynden, whose testimony in defence of his late father had been heard by the commission, pronounced himself ‘disgusted’ with the Foreign Minister’s apologies which, he claimed, amounted to ‘making a man guilty of genocide into a hero’.

Popular reactions were rather more hesitant, ranging from indifferent shrugs to bafflement or even outrage, and reflecting the degree to which the nation had internalised the officially constructed version of the Congo’s decolonisation crisis and subsequent political history.

**Expanding Ripples**

Stereotyped visions of Lumumba, of the Congo (and indeed of Africa) still abound, of course – and not just in Belgium. Indeed, the tired, overworked (and often de-contextualised) ‘Heart of Darkness’ clichés are, if anything, more ubiquitously found among English-speaking columnists, media pundits and self-styled ‘experts’. And while Belgium’s admission of guilt and its half-hearted repentance were generally applauded abroad, and notably (if predictably) in the Congo, some foreign reactions and comments reflected the unreconciled vision and defensiveness of some diehard ‘cold warriors’ as well as their unreconstructed adherence to simplistic or polarised views of Africa and the Congo.

Some, it seems, are still struggling to put Lumumba’s ghost to rest: in a panel discussion that followed the Washington premiere of Raoul Peck’s ‘Lumumba’ on 25 July 2001, former Reagan Defense Secretary/National Security Adviser and Carter Deputy CIA Director Frank Carlucci called the film a ‘Third World anti-American propaganda piece made for the sake of making some money.’ Carlucci, who was second secretary at the US Embassy in Leopoldville in 1960, claimed he was ‘out of the loop’ when a meeting attended by US Ambassador Clare Timberlake, Mobutu, and President Joseph Kasavubu discussed Lumumba’s fate. Carlucci said he informed his superiors in Washington that Lumumba was not a communist, but let them know Lumumba had ‘a lot of communists around him’ and that he personally harboured some ‘very leftist views’. While admitting that Washington ‘toyed’ with the idea of
assassinating Lumumba, and that poison was delivered to the CIA's Leopoldville station chief Larry Devlin, Carlucci defended the CIA's actions because the agency, he said, was acting on Eisenhower's ambiguous order to 'remove Lumumba'. It was never clear, he claimed, that Eisenhower meant assassination. Notwithstanding the accumulation of evidence to the contrary, Carlucci even referred to the now largely discredited UN Report that claimed to have found no evidence of foreign involvement in the assassination of Lumumba.\(^{45}\)

Coming to Carlucci's assistance, the ultra-conservative (and Belgian-born) columnist and former editor of Newsweek Arnaud de Borchgrave inadvertently documents the vital role played by Carlucci during the 1960 Congo crisis, in the course of a ranting denunciation of Lumumba during which he unreeled all the sordid rumors that circulated at the time about him, asserting that 'Washington's fear of an African Castro was not unfounded' while simultaneously insisting that 'Lumumba was ready and willing to turn over his country to a shady capitalist named Dettwiler.'\(^{49}\)

In his zeal, de Borchgrave insists (ignoring the commission's report which was released a week later) that Lumumba's murder was wholly devised and executed by Africans, while admitting that 'the former Belgian colonial masters were pleased and approving [and] so was official Washington.' And, to support his contention that the suggestion of Carlucci's involvement is nothing more than 'twaddle in all its unrationed (sic) splendor', he reminds us that 'neither the Church nor Pike congressional intelligence committees ... found any evidence of CIA involvement in the murder of Lumumba', overlooking the fact that Mr. Carlucci (whom the docudrama, in any case, depicts as declining to cast a vote on the grounds that 'the US does not interfere in the affairs of sovereign states') was not, at least ostensibly, with the CIA at the time, even if he later served as deputy director of that agency. Mr. Carlucci must have felt, nevertheless, that his denials might not fully exonerate him, and managed (by threatening a lawsuit against Peck and the film distributor's, Zeitgeist) to have his name 'bleeped out' in the version of Peck's film that was released in March 2002 on US television by the HBO cable network.\(^{50}\)

While the tremors caused by the Belgian parliamentary investigation have had, on the whole, few repercussions abroad (owing in part to the commission's tactful choice to concentrate almost exclusively on Belgium's role), ripples of controversy have unexpectedly reached into some usually placid circles, including academic precincts. In an interview conducted on 23 April 2001, the noted expatriate Belgian historian Jan Vansina referred in scholarly but nevertheless scathing terms to his Belgian colleagues, and more generally, to Belgian colonial historiography, about which he offered his views on what his interviewers identified as its three main currents, namely 'positivist academism', 'imperial historiography' (mostly concerned with biographies), and a third group writing 'from a deep-felt sense of indignation mainly about the abuses during the early colonial period'. The first, and most 'established' group, Vansina opined, proceeded from the premise 'that historians must not become involved with moral assessments. Historians cannot be judges.' The reaction of Stengers (the most prominent representative of that group) 'was that it was of no use to judge something that occurred 70 years earlier, because one is not familiar with the moral standards of that period.' By contrast, Jules Marchal\(^{51}\) 'shows that the abuses in the Congo Free State could be said to be immoral according to the standards at that time.'

The interview triggered a spirited response from Jean-Luc Vellut (University of Louvain-la-Neuve) who took exception with Vansina's suggestion that 'positivist
history', taken as representative of Belgian historiography, had ‘connived to organize silence around the most brutal aspects of the colonial nexus’, and had shown itself ‘impervious to an ethical approach to the past’. While agreeing that ‘naïve positivist visions of knowledge hold sway over much of historical production in Belgium’ and that ‘Belgian historians who took part in the reactivation of Africanist historiography in the 1960s kept violence at the periphery of their narratives’ (a limitation of which he finds evidence in Vansina’s best known works), Vellut contends that ‘to present the generality of professional historians of his days as accomplices in a cover-up operation is to take a step too far’. Vansina’s views, he argues,

will please the advocates of a stricter anticolonial line in our assessment of the modern history of the Congo. The eruption of the holocaust paradigm is significant here, especially now that the history of the Free State is presented as ‘l’holocauste oublié’, in the words of the French subtitle to Hochschild’s book. … Renewing with Hannah Arendt’s fleeting essay on colonial imperialism, the Congo becomes a proto-Nazi experiment. In this literature, as a rule Joseph Conrad is shamelessly recycled to serve as an incriminating witness. Vansina is too subtle a scholar to join this chorus, but he clearly wants to collect some benefits from a position of fellow traveller in exile (…) in tune with a dominant mood in ‘Africanist’ debate. We are once again entering a melancholy cycle as we are reminded that historiographies know their Schumpeterian cycles: nostalgia and eulogy are succeeded (or preceded) by ‘black books’, and so the process unfolds. Now the mood is to renew with the abolitionist tradition, to denounce the evil, to bring the liberating word and to paternally put the African in the debt of the liberal West.52

The fact that this academic sparring centres on the colonial era (and, more specifically, on its ‘Leopoldian’ period, from which the Belgian state self-consciously, if not altogether successfully, always tried to disentangle itself) confirms that, for better or worse, Belgium’s convoluted relationship with the Congo or, one might argue, the Western world’s relation with Africa at large – cannot be conveniently separated into discrete compartments, or by some convenient ‘colonial/post-colonial’ watershed. In Belgium, following the release of the parliamentary commission report, voices were heard (even from some who denied its conclusions) calling for a critical study of the political and business establishment’s ties to the Mobutu regime. Similar calls might well – but thus far have not – been raised in other countries, and the charade of ‘national reconciliation’ currently unfolding in Kinshasa, with its rehabilitation of ex-Mobutists and assorted ‘technocrats’, suggests that many skeletons will yet rest undisturbed in unopened closets.

Meanwhile, as part of a motley crew of transnational operators, Belgian actors remain deeply involved in various traffics (arms, diamonds, coltan, etc.) that contribute to the evisceration of Africa and to the accumulation of anonymous victims.53 And thus, a tortuous, bloodstained thread may, after all, span the four decades separating Lumumba’s murder from Kabila’s assassination.

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Endnotes


2. ‘Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce ... the nephew for the uncle’. Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, New York: International Publishers, 1963, Chap. I.


4. ‘De Zevende Dag’, 12 December 2000. The interview in question was triggered by the reactions to Ludo De Witte’s book discussed below. Eyskens’ chumminess with Mobutu is amply recorded in the 1997 Belgian television (RTB) documentary ‘Notre ami Mobutu’.


6. Karl Marx, Ibid.

7. Pierre Devos, Vie et mort de Lumumba (Paris, 1961); Serge Michel, Ulterior Lumumba (Paris, 1962); Jean Van Lierde, La Pensée politique de Patrice Lumumba (Paris, 1963, with a memorable preface by Sartre); Luis Lopez Alvarez, Lumumba ou l’Afrique frustrée (Paris, 1964); G. Heinz & H. Donnay, Lumumba Patrice: Les cinq derniers jours de sa vie (Brussels & Paris, 1966). In addition, the many books written about the ‘Congo Crisis’ during those early years usually deal at some length with Lumumba’s life and death. A full list should also include the abundant production in non-Western (especially communist) countries.

8. An exception should be made for the 1975 Church Report (US Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Activities, Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders, 94th Congress, 1st session). Madeleine Kalb also made use of declassified documents in ‘The Congo Cables: The Cold War in Africa – From Eisenhower to Kennedy’ (New York, 1982). For Belgian exceptions, see below.


12. Adding to the revulsion caused by this sordid case were the popular suspicion that Dutroux was being protected by some ‘highly-placed persons’, and the inept handling of the prosecution, which delayed a formal indictment until 15 March 2002. A few days later, Dutroux was sentenced to a 3-year prison term for unrelated felonies committed in 1992-1993.
13. Frédéric Vandewalle, Mille et quatre jours: Contes du Zaïre et du Shaba (Brussels, self-published, 1974-1977; 13 fasc). Vandewalle had previously published an illuminating account of the 1964 Belgo-American operation against the Lumumbist counter-government in Stanleyville, in which he had also been directly involved (Frédéric Vandewalle, L’Ommegang. Odyssée et reconquête de Stanleyville, 1964. Bruxelles, Le Livre Africain, 1970) as well as a number of articles in a bulletin published for and by former officers of the ex-colonial force.


15. Gerard Soete, De Arena. Het Verhaal van de moord op Lumumba (Bruges: Raskijn, 1978). Soete was later interviewed by Brassine, and by a number of television journalists when the circumstances of Lumumba’s assassination again became a ‘newsworthy’ issue. Much of his account was incorporated in Raoul Peck’s recently released film, ‘Lumumba’ (2000) in which the 39-year old Haitian-born director (who lived for a while in post-independence Congo) offers an impassioned but carefully documented view of the final year of Lumumba’s life – a view which, though re-enacted for the screen, is nevertheless fuller and better researched than his 1992 documentary film on the same subject (‘Lumumba: La Mort du Prophète’).

16. By contrast, Adam Hochschild’s derivative King Leopold’s Ghost (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998) hardly caused a ripple in Belgium because it told a story with which readers were already familiar – unlike, apparently, their American counterparts who made the book a bestseller, even though the story had originally been told (more accurately and more compellingly) by English-language writers such as Roger Casement or Mark Twain.

17. This is a line still adhered to by some of the minor protagonists whose testimony was heard by the Parliamentary Commission (see ‘Les ‘Katangais’ belges chargent les Etats Unis’ in: La Libre Belgique, 2 July 2001). In their damage-control efforts, other, more senior protagonists (or their descendents) preferred to adhere to the ‘Brassine version’ – including Brassine himself – while key surviving Congolese politicians involved with deciding Lumumba’s fate shrewdly charged their deceased colleagues (Tshombe, Munongo, et al.) ... and tended to exonerate Belgium (where, it should be noted, most have chosen to retire).


21. James, p.56

22. Ibid. p.63

23. Quoted, Ibid. p.62


25. The confusion may have originated in a mistranslation (from Dutch to French, and later from French to English) of the term neef which, in Dutch, is sometimes used indifferently for ‘nephew’
or ‘cousin’. In actual fact, Gobert was Harold’s uncle. A reference to Harold in the introduction is also credited in the index to another member of this admittedly much-ramified family (in this case his father Charles).

26. The existence and tenor of the 6 October telex fired off by d’Aspremont-Lynden less than five weeks after leaving his post as Belgium’s proconsul in Katanga to assume control of Belgium’s Congo policies were first mentioned and quoted by F. Vandewalle, in his *Mille et quatre jours ...*, III, doc. No. 65.

27. Some Belgian officials and politicians (including cabinet members) were, it should be noted, less sanguine about the Katanga secession (see Claude Roosens, ‘La Belgique et la sécession du Katanga’, in Lanotte, Roosens & Clément (eds.), *La Belgique et l’Afrique central*, pp.107-132). Thus, while d’Aspremont-Lynden was assisting with the creation of an army (*gendarmerie*) for the breakaway province, Foreign Minister Pierre Wigny, for one, was trying to negotiate a rapprochement between the central government and Katanga (Ibid. p. 119) – a task undoubtedly made easier for the suave Wigny once the two rival regimes had become accomplices in Lumumba’s murder.


29. These colours stand for the Liberal (Blue), Socialist (Green) and ‘environmentalist’ (Green) ideological ‘families’, but Belgium’s political spectrum, long similar to that of the UK, has become increasingly complex over the past twenty years as a result of the deliberate separation of traditional ‘ideological’ parties into autonomous language-based wings, and of the emergence of explicitly ethnic parties in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, as well as of two (also language-based) ‘green’ formations (‘Agalev’ and ‘Ecolo’). In addition to its ‘Blue’, ‘Red’ and ‘Green’ components (each consisting of two regional segments), the coalition also includes the moderate Flemish ethnic party VU&ID (*Volksunie & ID 21*) itself a combination of two groups, and two ‘francophone’ groups (FD and MCC) linked with the Brussels-based affiliate of the Liberal (Blue) ‘family’. The complexity of the party system (and that of related acronyms) has dramatically increased since September 2001, with no fewer than a half-dozen groups being renamed, splintering, or becoming extinct (with some belonging to the traditionally dominant Christian-Democratic ‘family’ even dropping the ‘Christian’ label from their official appellation). For a brief inventory of such changes, see Dirk Vanoverbeke: ‘Le Grand écart des partis du Nord et du Sud’, *Le Soir* (Brussels), 25 May 2002.


31. Two of those 32 witnesses were successively deposed in mixed conditions. In addition, the commission also heard (but not under oath) members of the Lumumba, Tshombe, Okito, Mpolo and d’Aspremont-Lynden families, as well the two authors Ludo De Witte and Jacques Brassine (the latter, by virtue of the official position he held in Katanga at the time of Lumumba’s murder, was also heard as a sworn witness.


33. And later still tied, through a network of intricate alliances and marriage links, with several key members of the Mobutist and anti-Mobutist establishments.

34. Before and after serving as *Commissaire général à l’Intérieur* – and thus in charge of police and security matters – in the ‘College of General Commissioners’, Mukamba had worked closely with Albert Kalonji, leader of the copycat secessionist *État minier du Sud-Kasaï*, centered on – and instigated by – the Forminère mining house, but fuelled also by the ethnic particularism and sense of victimisation of the Kasai B.A.Luba. Kalonji’s bitter hostility to Lumumba (which had led him to