

Book Review

*The Assassination of Lumumba* by Ludo De Witte, (translated by Ann Wright and Renée Fenby). London and New York: Verso, 2001.

Reviewed by Kofi Ankomah

Ludo De Witte's *The Assassination of Lumumba* is a biographical narrative centered on the grim assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, (also known as Zaire under Mobutu) and two of his colleagues: Joseph Okito, a former vice president of the Senate and Maurice Mpolo.

De Witte writes: '...the prisoners were taken out of the car. They were barefoot, and dressed only in their trousers and vests. Verscheure removed the handcuffs. He was walking behind Lumumba who asked him: You are going to kill us, aren't you? To which Verscheure simply answered "Yes". These were the first words exchanged with the prisoners since they left Brouwez. According to Verscheure, Lumumba "took very well" the announcement of his imminent death. The prisoners stood on the path, surrounded by the policemen and soldiers. Verscheure said "they were still on their feet", implying that they bore the marks of the previous hours' beatings. Verscheure told them they were going to be shot. According to Gat, they were "given time to prepare, to pray." Verscheure said that Lumumba rejected the offer. Meanwhile the first firing squad of two soldiers and two policemen got ready. The police had Vigneron sten guns, the soldiers FAL rifles. Someone apparently intoned a native oath. Verscheure took Joseph Okito to a tree. According to Verscheure, Okito said: "I want my wife and children in Leopoldville to be taken care of." Somebody answered: "We're in Katanga, not in Leo!" Okito leaned against the tree; his face turned towards the firing squad already in position 4 metres away. A short hail of bullets and the former vice president of the Senate was dead: his body was immediately thrown into the grave. After "the little one", it was the turn of "the big one", as Verscheure said later. The Commissioner placed Maurice Mpolo against tree; a round of bullets from another squad mowed him down. Finally a third firing squad faced Lumumba. Verscheure, who had taken him to the big tree, later said that Lumumba trembled when led to the edge of the grave, but "mute, completely dazed, his eyes misty, he

put up no resistance". An enormous hail of bullets riddled the former prime minister's body. After the execution, we picked up half a kilo of cartridges," the police commissioner said. When Brassinne visited the spot twenty seven years later, the big tree was riddled with bullets.' (Pp. 120-121)

De Witte constructs an interesting portrait of a person with dedication to fighting colonial oppression and passionately dedicated to the unity of Congo. He also provides sharp and penetrating revelations of brutalities by Belgian ex-colonialists and their Congolese accomplices, in the murder of Lumumba and his two colleagues. His investigations into the hours of brutalities and torture meted out to Lumumba and his colleagues prior to their extermination are extremely valuable, for they demonstrate that his torturers were desperate to get rid of him. Though the book presents convincing arguments to show that the Belgian authorities and their other Western cohorts have no moral right to speak on contemporary human rights abuses, including those in the obnoxious Mugabe's Zimbabwe, a weakness is the inadequate coverage of the role of other Western countries.

The information De Witte presents supports the view that the horrors of Mugabe's Zimbabwe are no comparison to Moise Tshombe's Katanga torture, supervised by the West, against African nationalists. The result is a moral weapon in the struggle against the oppressive colonial system and an inspiration to nationalists to counter imperialism wherever it is found. Although De Witte did not suggest any specific action to be taken, his book led to a Parliamentary commission that found the Belgian government culpable in Lumumba's assassination through the provision of personnel, military support and appropriate logistics. Although the book does not set out to show how neo-colonialism operates, it provides a chilling description of how far it can go. With the information now available perhaps it is not too late for the International Criminal Court to have all the living culprits of heinous crimes prosecuted for human rights abuses.

De Witte's book demonstrates that Lumumba was a man with dignity and without bitterness toward his oppressors; he did what he did for the dignity of his country and people. De Witte provides supporting evidence using material from the United Nations' and Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' archives that places the prime responsibility for assassination of Lumumba, and his two colleagues, jointly on the Congolese and Belgian governments with some Western powers and the United Nations as accessories and accomplices. Using excellent historical research techniques, he unearths facts that led him to make the following conclusions: "That the Belgian government was primarily responsible for the murder of the Congolese prime minister. It is obvious to the reader, however, that other parties were equally guilty. True, the Belgians and the Congolese actually killed Lumumba, but without the steps taken by Washington and the United Nations during the preceding months the assassination could never have been carried out." (p. *xiii*).

Patrice Lumumba's crime was that he was a nationalist/pan Africanist, par

excellence. He made known, in no uncertain terms, what Belgian colonialism meant to the Congolese. His straight talk, (The Speech of Patrice Lumumba on Independence Day, 30 June, 1960) was in the presence of global dignitaries, including King Baudouin of Belgium, who didn't take the speech too kindly. Lumumba was considered a threat not only to the Belgians but also the Portuguese authorities, the whites of South Africa, Rhodesia and the British colonialists, among others. At independence, the army of the Congo, known as the Force Publique, was officered by the Belgians and Lumumba had the audacity to support its "Congolisation". Colonel Vandwalle subsequently admitted, "The sequence of events on 17 January in Elizabethville would bring the matter of Lumumba's elimination to an end. First mooted in August 1960, it entered into final stage on 5 December." In addition, he was saddled with the Moïse Tshombe and the "Katangan gang". In Washington Okumu's words, (writing in *Lumumba's Congo: Roots of Conflict*, New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1963) ". Katanga is a classic case where a great African stooge or quisling could be turned into an almost complete harp by the colonialists and neo-colonialists: a harp which could be played on at any time, twenty four hours a day, and will still produce the desired music, no matter how discordant the sound!" (p. 171).

Lumumba's assassination cannot be understood unless it is placed in the African context. For Africa, the 1960s saw the beginnings of efforts to undo the damage caused by the International African Association (a body formed under the direction of Leopold II, King of Belgium for the occupation of the Congo Basin) and the Treaty of Berlin 1885 that empowered European countries to carve up colonial territories in Africa for themselves. These colonial machinations resulted in mass poverty, exploitation and oppression as the basic facts of life for the African. The 1960s were also significant years for Africa in that many European countries were compelled to abandon their colonial territories. But the 1960s were also the years of "regimes change" in Africa, manipulated by departing colonialists and imperialist forces, aimed at establishing "neo-colonialist" tutelages. In spite of the fact that the world was striving for human rights and constitutional freedom for all, the European powers collaborated with local armed forces personnel to depose elected governments and parliaments in Africa. In short, the 1960's came to be dominated by what Ernest Lefever has labeled the *Spear and Scepter*, a specter of the dominance of the officer corps in many African countries.

Even though all member states of the United Nations pledged to respect and apply the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with due process of law presumed to be applied to anyone accused of a criminal offence, human rights abuses were rampant, under the guidance of authoritarian military regimes calibrated and fine-tuned by European neo-colonial forces. We need to state at the outset that the experience in Africa shows that human rights and ethical principles came to be applied by the ex-colonial powers only when they served their political objectives. Under the cloak of misinformation by imperialist forces, democ-

ratically elected African nationalists were branded autocrats and violently replaced by ruthless bloodletting bigots like Idi Amin, Moise Tshombe, Joseph Mobutu, and Emperor Bokassa, to name only a few.

For truth and reconciliation, it is mandatory to have new judicial investigations and/or trials by the international criminal court on some of the major regime changes in Africa. In the case of the regime change of the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1960, many commentators have either accused the United Nations itself of complacency and some other Western powers for connivance in the overthrow, imprisonment and assassination of Patrice Lumumba. By the mid 1970's Pan Africa/nationalist leaders had been deposed and replaced by what Okumu calls "great African stooges or quislings." The ghost of Patrice Lumumba still haunts the Democratic Republic of Congo; it is total independence, total liberation, and total unity that will complete the transition from dependency to sovereignty and establish the modalities and institutions of democracy. "The prisoners' six hours of horror" visibly harmed, did not eliminate Lumumba's hunger for dignity, respect, equality and integration of the Congo. But the events that culminated in the Congo crises still dominate the country that David Gould described: "Zaire is potentially the wealthiest country in African, but it stands today as an impoverished development tragedy. It is fabulously endowed with natural resources, including copper, cobalt gold silver, tin, fertile soil, and bountiful waterfalls. Zaire has woefully failed to meet its promises. (*Bureaucratic Corruption and Underdevelopment in the Third World*, Elmsford, New York, Pergamon Press, 1980, p. xi) And in Washington Okumu's words, the Congo will continue to be "the continent's linchpin" and "Africa's great mineral heart and politico-strategic gateway All sorts of minerals like uranium, cobalt, copper, diamonds, gold, zinc, manganese, cadmium, columbium and tantalum lie buried in its soil in measureless quantities" (*Lumumba's Congo: Roots of Conflict*, New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1963, p. 132). But with neocolonialism hovering over, Congo will continue to be a heavily indebted poor country.

By pointing out the cloak and dagger nature of the neo-colonialist methods, perhaps, De Witte is assisting in safeguarding the Congo's wealth from being plundered further by latter-day colonialist and imperialists. Congolese nationalists and Pan Africanists must watch them with eagle eye and resolve to counter the hidden agenda of their alleged "benefactors."

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