
Foreign Role in the Assassination of Patrice Lumumba

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ABSTRACT

Patrice Lumumba was first elected Prime Minister of Congo after it gained independence from Belgium in 1960. However, Lumumba's resistance to foreign economic exploitation won him enemies both outside and within the country. Lumumba was assassinated in January 1961 in the province of Katanga in Southern Congo. While, allegations have persisted and even proven of some foreign involvement in his assassination, the circumstances of his death continue to remain mysterious with many different versions of events. In 2002, Ludo de Witt's book 'The Assassination of Patrice Lumumba' was published based on declassified Belgian Documents and first person accounts shedding great light on the sequence of events of the assassination. The purpose of this paper is to objectively study the role both CIA and Belgium played in removing Lumumba, and their plans for assassinating him from August 1960 till January 1961. Effort has been made to present the events in a chronological order which has been confusing as no single source contains all information and a variety of both primary and secondary sources had to be consulted to provide as complete a picture as possible.

Keywords: Foreign, Role, Assassination, Lumumba

INTRODUCTION

Belgian Congo was the only Belgian overseas colony. Centrally located on the African continent, It was also the second largest African colony of any colonial power by area (the first being French Algeria) and arguably the richest in its mineral wealth. Patrice Lumumba was the central figure in Congo's struggle for independence from Belgium. Lumumba was one of a new generation of Europeanised middle Class *évolués* of urban background.¹ The *évolués* formed the core of an African Nationalist Movement in Belgian Congo in the 1950s. Several parties together formed the Nationalist Movement in Congo, the most prominent among them being the *Mouvement National Congolais* MNC.² By 1959, Lumumba had become the most important figure within the MNC and became the first elected Prime Minister of Congo after its independence in 1960. However, he was removed from the position of Prime Minister in September 1960, by President Kasa Vubu less than three months after he was elected PM. On September 14, 1960 both the President and Lumumba were deposed in a coup by Colonel Mobutu and Lumumba was placed under house arrest. On the night of 17th January 1961, Patrice Lumumba, the most important architect of Congolese independence was assassinated near Elizabethville under mysterious circumstances. Various versions of his death have been put forward which implicate Western agencies for his death.

BACKGROUND

The west's wariness of Patrice Lumumba was not new and even before Congo's independence Belgians accused him of being a Communist sympathiser³ as well as having dealings with Belgian Communists.⁴ These fears seemed to be vindicated when Lumumba requested Soviet intervention in the backdrop of the secession of mineral rich regions of Katanga and South Kasai from Congo after he was elected Prime Minister of an independent Congo.

The southern Congo province of Katanga is an extremely mineral rich region. It has vast deposits of uranium, diamonds and copper. The uranium for the US Manhattan project during WW II was almost exclusively sourced from Congo, specifically, Katanga⁵; as a result of its strategic importance, it had been separately administered by Belgium⁶ and had also been closer economically to the copper rich region of Northern Rhodesia which lay to its south⁷. But most significantly, CONAKAT under the leadership of Moise Tshombe was heavily supported by the biggest mining company in Katanga, the

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Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK) which was largely owned by the *Société Générale de Belgique*, a prominent holding company based in Brussels having close ties to the Belgian government.⁸ Similarly, the Sud-Kasaï (South Kasai) under Albert Kalonji decided to cede citing Congolese persecution of the Luba ethnic group of which he was a member. South Kasai though much smaller than Katanga was also mineral rich and received financial support from another Belgian mining company called Forminière in exchange for mining rights.⁹ Such mining privileges would have been impossible under the Lumumba government who was vehemently anti-Belgian.¹⁰

Belgium unilaterally deployed troops to Congo in 1960 allegedly to protect Belgian nationals during this period of civil unrest in the country.¹¹ This caused international condemnation of Belgium;¹² UN under the leadership of Dag Hammarskjöld launched United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC) its first peacekeeping mission in Africa,¹³ and ordered the withdrawal of Belgian troops; it is noteworthy, that though Belgian troops withdrew from most of Congo, they refused to withdraw from Katanga.¹⁴

The mandate of ONUC was specifically as a peacekeeping mission, it therefore did not involve itself in fighting alongside Lumumba's government forces. Lumumba was disappointed by UN's unwillingness to help in the civil war. He thus, turned to the US for military aid. Eisenhower who considered Lumumba a dangerous radical, refused to help.¹⁵ Lumumba then looked to the Soviets who readily complied and by mid August 1960, over 1000 Soviet military advisors had entered Congo.¹⁶

Soviet assistance proved to be decisive and the *Armée Nationale Congolaise* (ANC) with the former's help turned the tide against the secessionists. This alarmed the United States and the west that feared an imminent Soviet takeover of Congo. Soviet help also alienated Lumumba from President Kasa Vubu and Colonel Mobutu who also enjoyed the support of the west and the CIA.¹⁷ Kasa Vubu asked the Soviets to leave Congo and dismissed Lumumba from his post; this resulted in a constitutional deadlock. Mobutu used this opportunity to take over power ostensibly to resolve this deadlock and removed both Lumumba and Kasa Vubu,¹⁸ even though he supported the latter, both being pro-west. Kasa Vubu was reinstated as President by Mobutu in February 1961.¹⁹ Lumumba was put under house arrest in Leopoldville on 10th October, 1960,²⁰ from where he made many escape attempts.²¹ It is generally understood that Lumumba was assassinated on the night of January 17, 1961 after he was transported by air to Elizabethville in Katanga.²²

ASSASSINATION

As early as October, 1960, Belgians had agreed with CIA officials that the elimination of Lumumba was essential to have access to Congo's minerals. On 6th October, Count d'Aspremont Lynden sent a cable to Elizabethville, the capital of the seceded province of Katanga a clear policy of 'elimination definitive' of Patrice Lumumba.²³ Lumumba's request for Soviet help resulted in extreme concern in US policy circles bordering on paranoia. The CIA station officer in Leopoldville, Victor Hedgman cabled the following report to CIA headquarters during the period August-September 1960:

“Embassy and station believe Congo experiencing classic communist effort takeover government. Many forces at work here: Soviets * * * Communist Party, etc. although difficult determine major influencing factors to predict outcome struggle for power, decisive period not far off. whether or not Lumumba actually commie or just playing commie game to assist his solidifying power, anti-west forces rapidly increasing power Congo and there may be little time left in which take action (to avoid another Cuba. (CIA cable, Leopoldville to Director, 8/18/60)”²⁴

According to the Church Committee Report, the CIA Special Group held a meeting on August 25, 1960 which decided that all options were on the table for Lumumba's removal.²⁵ On the next day on August 26, 1960, who had attended the meeting cabled to the CIA station officer in Leopoldville that:

“Removal (Lumumba's) must be an urgent and prime objective *** a high priority of our covert action. You can act on your own authority where time does not permit referral here. (CIA cable, Dulles to station officer, 8/26/60)”²⁶

Also in September 1960, CIA sent a scientist, Dr. Sidney Gottlieb [aka Dr Joseph Scheider as mentioned in the Church Committee Report]²⁷ to assassinate Patrice Lumumba. Sidney Gottlieb decided to use a poison that was indigenous to Congo; he decided upon botulinum toxin which he concealed within a diplomatic pouch. He travelled to Congo on September 27, 1960 with the intention

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of killing Lumumba where he was received by Ambassador Lawrence Devlin. However, Devlin was unable to get close enough to Lumumba so the toxin was dumped in a river.²⁸ However, the CIA men most closely associated with the plot denied any knowledge of such a plot to assassinate Lumumba while testifying before the US Senate Church Committee:

“The CIA officers most closely connected with the plot to poison Lumumba testified uniformly that they knew of no CIA involvement in Lumumba's death.”²⁹

The CIA officers deposed before the committee that they had contingency plans during the possible escape of Lumumba from captivity as illustrated in a fax from US embassy in Leopoldville:

“Political followers in Stanleyville desire that he break out of his confinement and proceed to that city by car to engage in political activity. * * * decision on breakout will probably be made shortly. Station expects to be advised by [agent] of decision was made. * * * station has several possible assets to use in event of breakout and studying several plans of action. (CIA cable, station officer to tweedy, 11/14/60)”³⁰

Lumumba while under house arrest was under guard by both UN troops with ANC troops maintaining a second outer security ring. Lumumba's final escape attempt was on 27th November, 1960.³¹ Lumumba was chased down by the Congolese army and captured on the banks of the Sankuru River along with Mpolo who was the minister of youth and sport and Okito who was the vice president of the Senate. Lumumba was then transferred to a prison in Thysville by Gilbert Pongo, a politician whose hatred and paranoia of Lumumba were well known.³²

Thysville is located at a distance of 150 kilometres from Leopoldville. The prison where Lumumba was incarcerated was known as Camp Hardy in Thysville. The chief of staff of the camp commandant was a Belgian by the name of Second Lieutenant Schoonbroodt, who saw soldiers marching towards the quarters of African officers on the night of 12-13th January, 1961.³³ He warned the Commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Bobozo of an impending mutiny by soldiers. Soldiers were demanding a raise in pay and threatening to release Lumumba partly because of nationalist sympathies and partly because of the latter's usefulness as a bargaining chip. Some officers were taken hostage and their wives raped;³⁴ a frightened Bobozo telephoned Leopoldville which resulted in a state of panic in the capital. Europeans in Leopoldville were particularly terrified as they felt that Lumumba would return to power at the capital at the head of the guards from Thysville.³⁵ It was clear that holding Lumumba at Thysville any longer was risky and this was certainly a contributing factor in subsequent events. The CIA shared this concern and in the former's assessment the army garrison at Camp Hardy would have mutinied:

“Will mutiny within two or three days unless drastic action taken satisfy complaints. (CIA cable, Leopoldville to director, 1/12/61)”³⁶

While trapped on the banks of the Sankuru, Lumumba had appealed to UN troops who refused to help him on direct orders from New York.³⁷ During the deposition before the Senate's Church Committee, the CIA accepted that it cooperated with the Congolese government in closing possible avenues of escape by Lumumba on the day of his final escape attempt:

“[Station] working with [Congolese Government] to get roads blocked and troops alerted [block] possible escape route. (CIA cable, 11/28/60)”³⁸

He could have been killed there and then; however it was desired by the Belgian government that he should be directly dealt by the Katangese under President Tsombe. This Belgian desire was communicated to Tsombe by the Belgian Minister for African Affairs on January 15.³⁹ While it was clear that the Belgian government did not want him killed in Thysville, it was not immediately clear whether Lumumba would be transferred to Elizabethville in Katanga or to Bakwanga in South Kasai. On January 14, CIA chief in Leopoldville, Devlin learned that South Kasai would probably be Lumumba's final destination.⁴⁰ Colonel Jean Gillet, the commanding officer of Kalonji's troops in South Kasai was ready for the transfer of Lumumba after listening to radio communiqués between Colonel Louis Marliere, the Belgian adviser to Mobutu and a Belgian intelligence officer called Joe Verdickt who played an instrumental role in the entire affair.⁴¹

Here Brassinne and Kestergat, authors of *‘Qui a tué Patrice Lumumba’* suggest a twist in the series of events. It seems that a venue for Lumumba was decided by the Katangan president at a meeting of the Katangan government. As per Brassinne and Kestergat, the date for this event is January 14 or 15 at

the latest.⁴² They also maintain that this agreement was reached before Belgium requested Tsombe for Lumumba to be transferred to Katanga and that Tsombe kept quiet about this even after he was informed on January 16 of Minister d'Aspremont Lynden's urgent telegram to receive Lumumba in Katanga by his Belgian private secretary Bartelous.⁴³ In short, Brassinne and Kestergat suggest that Katangans agreed to the transfer of Lumumba without any knowledge of it to their Belgian advisors. Therefore, de Witt in his authoritative work 'The assassination of Lumumba' is justified in debunking this version of events which clearly seeks to absolve the Belgian authorities of any role in the assassination. The CIA too knew of the Congolese government's plan to send Lumumba to certain death in Katanga even though there is no proof of their direct involvement:

“The Congo Station had advance knowledge of the Central Government's plan to transport Lumumba into the hands of his bitterest enemies, where he was likely to be killed. But there is no evidentiary basis for concluding that the CIA conspired in this plan or was connected to the events in Katanga that resulted in Lumumba's death.”⁴⁴

As it turned out, Tsombe agreed, and without delay, the same day, Lumumba was put on a DC-4 aircraft bound for Elizabethville in Katanga. Upon arrival Lumumba along with Mpolo and Okito, his two government officials were shackled and severely assaulted with rifle butts by Katangese gendarmes who were eagerly waiting at the airport. This was done in full view of journalists and UN soldiers who were present there.⁴⁵

Two days later on that fateful day, the January 17, 1961, Lumumba was again put on an aircraft and taken to Tsombe;⁴⁶ en route he was again physically assaulted, so seriously that the pilot had to come out of the cockpit and ask the beating to stop for fear of damage to the aircraft.⁴⁷ During the final hours of their lives, Patrice Lumumba along with Mpolo and Okito, his two colleagues was driven to pre designated spot on the outskirts of Elizabethville accompanied by Tsombe. A number of Belgian officers and Katangese policemen were a part of Lumumba's final entourage and would form the firing squad. The Belgian officers included Captain Julien Gat, Lieutenant Gabriel Michels, Commissioner Frans Verscheure and Sergeant Francois Son.⁴⁸ The entourage reached its destination at 9:40 PM. Okito was shot first, followed by Mpolo and lastly Lumumba. The bodies were buried in graves which had already been dug at the same place.⁴⁹

Next morning, on January 18, the Interior Minister of Katanga called up Katanga's Belgian police commander Gerard Soete with orders to conceal the killings. The bodies were subsequently hacked into small pieces and dissolved in sulphuric acid; after running out of acid were burnt while a few teeth were kept as souvenirs.⁵⁰ News of Lumumba's death was not released until February 10, when Katangese authorities announced the escape of Lumumba, Mpolo and Okito.⁵¹ Three days later on February 13, 1961, Katangese authorities announced the death of Lumumba with his two ministers under mysterious circumstances; this was immediately taken cognizance of in the UN Security Council's 933rd meet on the same day.⁵² On February 21, the UN ordered a neutral investigation into the death of Patrice Lumumba.⁵³

It is nevertheless noteworthy to note that a cable on January 19, 1961 from the US embassy in Leopoldville to Washington still shows ignorance of Lumumba's fate is still under the impression that the government in Léopoldville does not intend to assassinate Lumumba:

"no advance word whatsoever" of Lumumba's flight to Katanga and that the Congolese central government "does not plan to liquidate Lumumba." (CIA Cable, Elisabethville to Director, 1/19/61)⁵⁴

Therefore, the Church Committee acknowledges that while the CIA planned to liquidate Lumumba and it had motives to do so, it was not actually involved in the actual assassination as a favourable opportunity for the same did not present itself.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

Belgian involvement in the entire affair is clear without a doubt with the direct involvement of Belgian soldiers in the assassination of Lumumba and the Belgian government directly involved in the transfer of Lumumba to his Katangese executioners. It can be argued that the Belgians mentioned, were at the time employed in the service of Katangese authorities, however, it is clear that Belgium had commercial and strategic interests in both Katanga and South Kasai and both these secessionist

provinces had Belgian support, It is not a coincidence that Belgian mercenaries like the infamous Julien Gat were in the employment of both these provinces in leading positions. Moreover, it is proven that Lumumba was transferred to Katangese at the direct behest of the Belgian government.

The US on the other hand had more of an ideological problem with Lumumba as the latter was seen to have a Soviet tilt. The United States did not have as many direct mining and financial interests in the Congo as Belgium did, nevertheless, the dictates of the cold war meant that the US had to stand by its NATO ally; however, because of these differences of interests, the US was never as proactive as Belgium in manipulating affairs within Congo. This is not to say that the US was favourably inclined towards Lumumba; on the contrary, the CIA under the Eisenhower government actively put in place plans to assassinate Lumumba who was considered a dangerous radical. Nevertheless, Belgium, a nation with far fewer intelligence resources than the CIA manipulated and created opportunities to assassinate its most dangerous foe while the US could not find a suitable opportunity to do so or felt that the potential fallout of Lumumba’s assassination would be more destabilising for the region.

Belgium was on the other hand absolutely desperate to hold on to the mineral wealth of the nation which was once its only colony. In doing so, not only was International Law thrown to the winds but the removal of Lumumba who was a man for the people, was replaced by the Western backed government of Mobutu Sese Seko. Mobutu’s rule was a classic kleptocracy wherein the nation’s resources were completely exploited for the personal benefit of a small ruling elite. This was to have long term consequences not only for the people of Congo, and its stability, but also for the Central African region at large.

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