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“Battleground Africa: Cold War in the Congo, 1960–1965 (Book Review)” by Lise Namikas

Brian Bertosa

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Review of Lise Namikas, *Battleground Africa: Cold War in the Congo, 1960–1965* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). Pp. 350.

Between 30 June 1960, when the Congo formally gained its independence from Belgium, and 24 November 1965, when Joseph Mobutu—better known as Mobutu Sese Seko—began his thirty-two-year kleptocracy, the Congo was one of the world’s foremost trouble spots. The outgoing Belgians had done virtually nothing to prepare their colony for independence, all the better to argue against it in the first place, and, when the République du Congo became a *fait accompli*, to argue for their continued indispensability to the new state. The result was a disaster by any standard. By the end of the first week the Force publique, soon to be renamed the Armée nationale congolaise, had mutinied, disintegrating into armed bands that, among other things, menaced the remaining Europeans. The Belgians reacted by sending in troops starting on July 10. On the eleventh, the mineral-rich province of Katanga in the south-east of the country seceded, taking with it approximately eighty per cent of the nation’s tax revenue. On the fourteenth, in response to what the new Congolese leaders called Belgium’s “aggression” but also to the growing lawlessness on the ground, the United Nations Security Council, in the first of many resolutions on the Congo, approved a peacekeeping mission, ONUS (Organisation des Nations unies au Congo), that would end up staying almost four years. And all of this took place in just the first *two weeks* of independence.

As the anarchy spread, a dizzying number of intersecting lines of cleavage—some present, barely suppressed, under the Belgians, some new—became apparent between competing politicians, political parties, ethnicities, and regions, playing on a stage that never remained static for long. One of these conflicts, however, stands out for its importance. On the one hand were the followers of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected prime minister of the new nation and the only politician who could even come close to claiming a national following. Dynamic and articulate, Lumumba’s pro-independence stance necessarily put him at odds with Belgium, who in turn painted him as an enemy of the West. Among the many in the Congo who opposed Lumumba were those who, although by no means secessionist—Katanga had very close ties to the Belgians—were nevertheless wary of the stridency of Lumumba’s anti-Western

rhetoric. Sharing little in the way of a concrete political program save for a quick return to order, this group soon coalesced around the figure of Joseph Mobutu, at this time a colonel in the Armée nationale congolaise. Within the specifically Congolese context, this rivalry could scarcely be described as an East-West conflict at all—arguably, what divided these two groups the most was the nature of the continued relationship, if any, the new nation was to have with Belgium. Nevertheless, within the context of the Cold War in 1960, nothing more than this was needed to prompt the United States and the Soviet Union to quickly take sides in this new arena for their ongoing ideological conflict.

Published as part of the Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project, *Battleground Africa* by Lise Namikas is an impressively researched study of the policies of the United States and the Soviet Union towards the Congo from the period just before independence to Mobutu's 1965 coup, at which time the Soviets realized they could have no further influence there. As such, it offers a much greater chronological range than the many books dealing with this period that focus, understandably, on the figure of Patrice Lumumba, in many ways an African version of Chile's Salvador Allende. Lumumba's assassination in January 1961 marks the point at which these books generally stop.¹ Another important aspect to be noted is the author's use of newly available archival material from Germany, the United States, and particularly Russia, providing the most thorough account yet of the specifically Cold War aspects of the Congo crisis.

On the American side, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was furious over the "loss" of Cuba to communism, and with the new republics of Guinea and Ghana leaning heavily to the left, Eisenhower saw Lumumba as another Castro. He also had no intention of alienating Belgium, a key NATO ally in Europe.² His successor, John F. Kennedy, was more willing to risk this, wanting to demonstrate an openness to the aspirations of emerging nations in Africa and Asia. Lyndon B. Johnson, on the other hand, wanted as little to

¹ Emmanuel Gerard and Bruce Kuklick, *Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) is the most recent work on the assassination, containing much else besides. Its "Essay on Sources" discusses everything of importance in English, French, and Dutch.

² A Belgian, Paul-Henri Spaak, served as secretary general of NATO from 1957 to 1961.

do with Africa as possible. But despite these differences of style, the substance of American policy in the Congo remained remarkable consistent from Eisenhower onwards. This comprised, on the one hand, a concerted push to get rid of Lumumba, and when this in fact proved to have changed little, continued opposition to his followers. On the other was the promotion, wherever possible, of the fortunes of Colonel Mobutu. Inasmuch as Mobutu eventually emerged triumphant, it can be said that the Americans achieved their Cold War aims in the Congo.

The Soviets viewed the request for aid they received from the new Congolese government as an opportunity to gain a foothold in a place where they essentially had none. Helping Lumumba, who was already viewed worldwide on the left as an anti-imperialist crusader, would help cement their role as the foremost source of aid and encouragement to decolonizing peoples around the world—important at a time when the Sino-Soviet split was growing ever wider. Premier Nikita Khrushchev was quick to bluster on the world stage about Western aggression in the Congo, but in reality was reluctant to commit anything very substantial in terms of aid. The Soviet Union was relatively poor, there were much more important priorities closer to home, and, above all, there was no guarantee that the effort would prove worthwhile. The Soviets were very much the underdog in that part of the world and they knew it; whatever aid they provided could end up a dead loss in the event that Western interests prevailed and that is exactly what happened. Recently released documents from Russia reveal just how little Khrushchev was willing to gamble in the Congo in terms of money, material, and personnel, but Belgian exaggeration and American paranoia consistently made it out to be vastly greater than it was.

This period of the Congo's history is extremely complex and it is impossible to examine its purely Cold War aspects without discussing a great deal else. Namikas does an excellent job of first taking apart all the important strands of this tapestry, examining each of them in turn, and then showing how they all go back together. She is particularly strong on Lumumba, which was arguably not strictly necessary here due to the large amount of material available on

him, even including a feature film.³ Despite its title, *Battleground Africa* deals entirely with politics; armed engagements are described in summary fashion and what is examined are their results, not the details. Among the few weaknesses of this book, one of the most noticeable is the author's use—on her own account, not in quotations from Soviet or Chinese sources—of terms like “the imperialists,” “imperialist aggression,” and “reactionary figures,” rather than more neutral and precise terms such as “right-wing,” “anti-communist,” or even “friendly to the us.” A couple of the photo captions are not quite right: the worst is figure 4.2, “United Nations Forces in the Congo, July 27, 1960” (p. 75), depicting in reality a well-attended parade of troops marching through what can only be Dublin on a wet day (the Irish provided an important contingent to ONUC).

The overall presentation is very much a document-based approach, with the narrative tone of a dispassionate observer at a remove of decades from the events described. Had the author taken the opportunity for some lengthy quotations from the many sources available to her to put the reader “in the shoes” of some of the protagonists, the account would certainly have been livelier. That being said, the author writes as if she intends the book to become the work of record for this subject for a long time to come, and I believe it should. While no single-volume work could possibly do justice to all the many actors in this drama—and many, of necessity, are only mentioned in passing⁴—for anyone wishing to go beyond January 1961 in the Congo *Battleground Africa* is essential reading.

BRIAN BERTOSA, INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

³ *Lumumba* (2000), by the Haitian director Raoul Peck, is a riveting account of its protagonist's rise and fall and a visually stunning evocation of that time period, highly recommended to those who may not have the time to devote to an entire book on the subject.

⁴ This includes a few fleeting mentions of Canada.