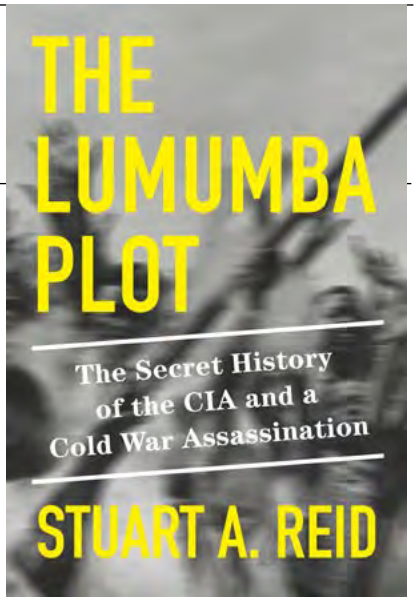
The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of the CIA and a Cold War Assassination

Stuart A. Reid (Alfred A. Knopf, 2023), 618 pages, index.

Reviewed by Paul Kepp



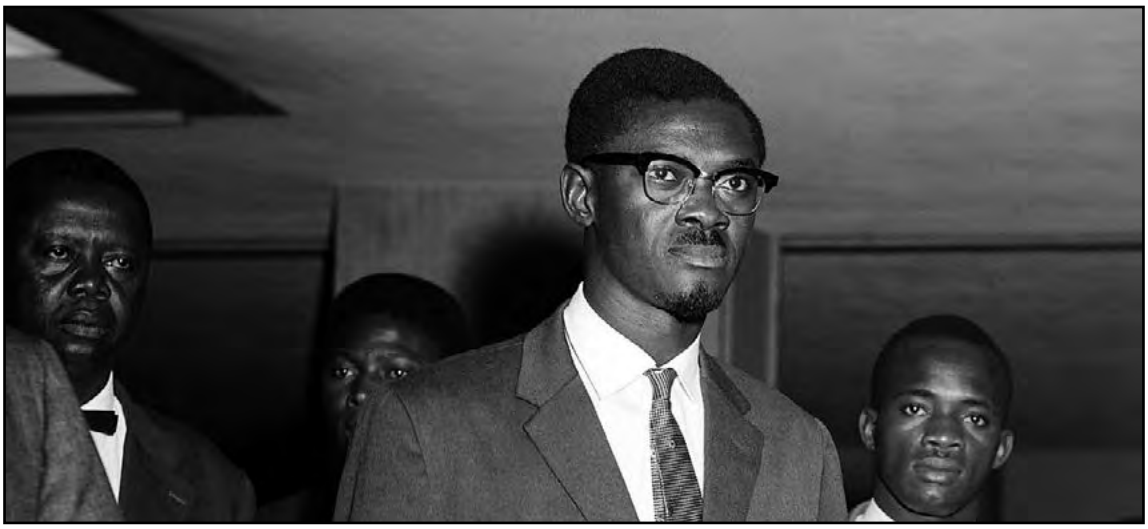
It is one of the iconic images of the Cold War. Arms bound, stripped of his signature eyeglasses and bowtie, surrounded by a jeering, abusive crowd, Patrice Lumumba, onetime leader of Africa's largest country, confronts what he must have known would be his death. It is an arresting and troubling picture. The photographs (actually taken from film footage shot in December 1960 by a journalist on the scene) contribute to the enduring hold Lumumba has on the imagination.

Stuart A. Reid's *The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of the CIA and a Cold War Assassination* tells the story behind the photos. Reid, a senior editor at *Foreign Affairs* magazine, has done a superb job documenting the Congo's independence, which took place amidst a wave of decolonization surging across Africa, at the height of the Cold War in 1960. The title, however, is incomplete. The CIA was indeed involved, and there was a plot (many of them in fact) but there is more to the story: The United Nations and the Congo's former colonial power, Belgium, played equally important roles in the drama. If the subtitle does not capture everything, fortunately Reid's book does. Thoroughly researched, well organized, and engagingly written, *The Lumumba Plot* is the best account available in English on Patrice Lumumba and the events surrounding the Congo's independence.

Lumumba was born around 1925 (the records are not clear) in Onalua, a hamlet in the center of Belgium's vast African colony, and was educated by US missionaries. Intelligent and widely read, fluent in French, Lumumba was an évolué, the term used at the time for Europeanized subjects, destined for low-level administrative positions in the colonial apparatus (the post office, in Lumumba's case). Such a fate was far too small for this restless intellectual, however. Lumumba's political consciousness developed rapidly, influenced by travel to Europe and other African countries which, like his homeland, were emerging from the shadow of colonialism. He became a leader in the nascent Congolese independence movement and, in a rushed and confused transition, was elected the country's first prime minister. He took office on June 30, 1960. Almost immediately, the country spiraled into chaos: The Congolese army mutinied, and as politicians jockeyed for influence in the capital, rebellion spread in the provinces. One of those provinces, Katanga, seceded and its unrecognized government was to play a key role in the Lumumba story.

The crisis generated profound concern in Washington. The Cold War was at its zenith. Cuba was in Fidel Castro's hands. Two months before the events described in *The Lumumba Plot*, Francis Gary Powers was shot down in his U-2 over the Soviet Union, plunging US-Soviet relations into the deep freeze. There was a burgeoning insurgency in Southeast Asia. Although Reid's book is mostly silent on how these wider events influenced US policy toward the Congo, they surely must have mattered, and Washington spared little effort to ensure the country did not gravitate toward the Eastern Bloc. To achieve this goal, the United States exercised diplomatic pressure (including using its influence in the United Nations) but it would be CIA and its indefatigable station chief in Leopoldville, Lawrence Devlin, who played the decisive role for the United States.

Like many Westerners, Devlin did not initially write off Lumumba. At one point, Devlin saved Lumumba's life in the face of an angry mob when the two were traveling together in the interior. Devlin would do the same later for a then obscure Congolese army colonel, Joseph Mobutu. But Devlin, again like others, soured on Lumumba. The reasons for this are important since they explain why Lumumba failed and Mobutu triumphed. This, and not assassination plots, is the significance of Reid's book. While remaining broadly sympathetic to



Prime Minister of the Congo Patrice Lumumba and members of his delegation at the United Nations to meet with UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, July 24, 1960. (UN)

Lumumba, Reid dissects the mystique and the reality objectively and masterfully.

Lumumba was an inspiring, eloquent speaker and a visionary. But he was also impulsive, sometimes paranoid, and had a pronounced tendency to alienate individuals and constituencies, foreign and Congolese alike, he needed to make his government work. He often told people what they wanted to hear, eroding trust even in those who were inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt, like the US statesman Ralph Bunche, the United Nations representative in the Congo at the time. Lumumba's credibility was further damaged by the fact that once he became prime minister, his fledgling government barely functioned. It was chaotic, undisciplined and riven by ethnic and political infighting.

Without the United Nations to help him, Lumumba's tenure as prime minister, brief as it was, probably would have been even shorter. In fairness, Lumumba was not wholly or even mostly to blame for this. It was Belgium's avowed policy to withhold from the Congolese any training, education, or positions of responsibility in preparation for their independence. This shortsighted and cynical strategy deprived the country of the human capital it desperately needed, leaving the Congo and its new prime minister unprepared for the trials they were about to face.[a] The three main external parties—the United Nations, the United States, and Belgium—contributed to the problem by stoking divisions as they sought outcomes that would best protect their interests. Lumumba's soaring rhetoric and inspired vision of an independent and free Congo could not overcome these obstacles. As Reid puts it, Lumumba "was his country's greatest politician and perhaps its worst statesman."

Mobutu's Pivotal Role

Mobutu emerges as the key anti-Lumumbist leader, and in the pages of Reid's book he appears, in contrast to Lumumba, almost competent, cleaning up after Lumumba's messes, all the while growing more and more frustrated with his mercurial prime minister. Devlin was a shrewd judge of character, and he knew everyone in Leopoldville. He saw potential in Mobutu, whose status as a military officer was also an advantage: Devlin recognized that, then as now, the army would be a pivotal political factor in the Congo. When the time came, and with the support of CIA, Mobutu made his move. And so we see Colonel Mobutu (no field marshals in the Congo, yet) appearing in the fateful newsreel with Lumumba, arms crossed, tinted glasses glinting, presiding over the operation that would dispatch his rival, thereby taking the first steps along the path to his 32-year reign as the undisputed dictator of the Congo.

a. For an account of the Congolese independence crisis and the death of Lumumba from the Belgian perspective, see *The Assassination of Lumumba* by Ludo De Witte (Verso. 2001).

Reid demonstrates how much Mobutu needed Devlin, and not just for CIA's checkbook. Lumumba was not killed immediately after his arrest. Mobutu was paralyzed about what to do with his prisoner and at times seemed on the edge of a nervous breakdown (he was just 30 years old at the time). Lumumba was enormously popular in parts of the Congo and had lost none of his power to mesmerize a crowd. The United Nations was having second thoughts about its previous anti-Lumumba stance, and some newly independent African nations, as well as the Soviet Union, were agitating for Lumumba's freedom. In addition, according to Reid, Mobutu possessed a curious sense of residual respect, even fear, toward Lumumba. Devlin had no such scruples.

Perhaps recalling the axiom that if you shoot at the king you had better kill him, the CIA chief was in constant touch with Mobutu's inner circle about the Lumumba problem. There was no need for poisoned toothpaste or sniper rifles now. Another solution was at hand: to send Lumumba to the breakaway province of Katanga, whose leader, Moise Tshombe, despised Lumumba and where the Belgians still had influence. The former prime minister and two of his aides were bundled onto an airplane and flown south. Hours later, they were executed. By all accounts, Lumumba faced his death with dignity.[a]

CIA Involvement

No book about Lumumba would be complete without mention of the CIA's role in Lumumba's death and whether Washington actually ordered it. *The Lumumba Plot* addresses the question but keeps it perspective as one element of a larger story. Reid concludes that that in a meeting in August 1960, Eisenhower did in fact direct that Lumumba be removed. Eisenhower's language was ambiguous, but his intent was not. He wanted Lumumba out of the way and the president "was not too fussy about how," in the words of Richard Bissell, the CIA's deputy director for plans at the time. CIA headquarters advised Devlin of this decision and dispatched the infamous vials of poison to Leopoldville, in addition to providing the station with funds for the purpose of eliminating the prime minister, to be used at Devlin's discretion. The poison was never employed because events on the ground, as well as Devlin's operational instincts, suggested to the Leopoldville station chief that a different course of action might be best.

However history judges US policy toward the Congo, Devlin comes across in the pages of Reid's book as competent and effective. Salacious stories about exotic toxins and the broader debate about assassination as a policy tool have tended to overshadow Devlin's qualities as a chief of station. Energetic, independent, and decisive, Devlin developed a wide range of contacts in the Congo, established a close relationship with the US ambassador in Leopoldville, Clare Timberlake, and was able to translate guidance from Washington, which was often vague and dilatory, into action on the ground. It helped that Devlin had access to substantial sums of money (by the standards of the day), consistent with the Congo's status as a front-burner foreign policy issue at the time. Devlin was not one to be deterred by challenges. On one occasion, faced with the need to pay off Congolese politicians who had been sequestered by the UN in a building outside Leopoldville, he found a sewage tunnel into the compound and transferred the cash that way. Devlin would return five years later for a second stint as COS Leopoldville, a tour that would be almost as eventful as his first.[b]

What If?

In his afterword, Reid speculates about what might have been if Lumumba had survived. He argues that Lumumba was neither viscerally anti-American nor an ideological Marxist. This conclusion is credible and in hindsight probably a more accurate assessment of him than the CIA, many in the UN, and certainly the Belgians, held at the time. Had he lived, according to Reid, Lumumba may well have ended up presiding over a left-leaning but moderate and independent regime. Perhaps.

Predicting what might have been in the Congo case is especially difficult because Lumumba's trajectory across

a. Less so his captors. Lumumba was hastily buried, exhumed, and reburied. Eventually his dismembered remains were destroyed with acid. In 2022, the Belgian government repatriated Lumumba's gold tooth, which had been wrenched from his jaw as a trophy by Belgian police commissioner Gerard Soete. See Damian Zane, "Patrice Lumumba: Why Belgium is returning a Congolese hero's golden tooth," BBC News, June 20, 2022.

b. An analysis of the CIA's covert action programs in the Congo can be found in "CIA's Covert Operations in the Congo, 1960–1968: Insights from Newly Declassified Documents," by David Robarge, *Studies in Intelligence* 58, no. 3 (September 2014).

the firmament of African politics was exceptionally short: the main events described in this 600-page book took place over the course of less than a year. There were other possible outcomes. There is a whiff of the demagogue about Lumumba, and readers of *The Lumumba Plot* would do well to keep in mind Albert Camus' observation: "Every revolutionary ends up by becoming either an oppressor, or a heretic." Laurent-Desiré Kabila, who took power after Mobutu, was as autocratic and sinister a leader as the Congo has ever seen; while it would be unfair to equate Lumumba and Kabila it is worth remembering that the latter styled himself as Lumumba's political heir. (They shared another connection: Kabila died 40 years to the day after Lumumba's death, shot by one of his own bodyguards.)

But the afterword does not detract from the book. Reid's scholarship is impressive, and his narrative refreshingly free of polemic, allowing the reader to judge: an achievement in its own right given the enduring controversy about Lumumba and the fact that he was appropriated as a symbol almost immediately after his death, and remains one to this day. (Exactly what he symbolized depends on who you talk to.) If Reid indulges in a little speculation at the end of the book, he does so judiciously and appropriately.

In 1997, Mobutu's regime, rotting from within after decades of corruption, unable to cope with the changes brought about by the end of the Cold War, collapsed. Mobutu himself escaped his predecessor's fate. He fled into exile in Morocco, where he died of cancer months later. Mobutu's fall would precipitate a crisis far more catastrophic for the people of Zaire, as it was then known, than anything they experienced at independence.

This might explain a curious fact: The Lumumba story resonates more widely outside the Congo than in it. There is no Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University in Kinshasa, only in Moscow (its European accreditation was suspended after the Russian invasion of Ukraine). An award-winning film about Lumumba's life was produced and directed by a Haitian.[a] No statue of Lumumba presides over Kinshasa's main thoroughfare, Boulevard 30 juin, even though no one had a bigger role than Lumumba in making that date meaningful in the nation's history. He has no namesakes in major cities or airports and his name is rarely evoked by Kinshasa's political leaders today. Lumumba is a symbol, but, preoccupied with the daily challenges of survival, not for most Congolese.

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The reviewer: Paul Kepp is a retired CIA operations officer who traveled many of the same roads as Larry Devlin.

a. In Raoul Peck's film *Lumumba* (2000), Lumumba is played by a French actor.