



Patrice Lumumba: A Jacana Pocket Biography

Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja

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Patrice Lumumba evokes strong reactions, either of admiration or intense dislike, a figure who was seen either as divisive or as a unifier. To this day, conspiracy theories abound as regards his assassination and the complicity of western interests. Clarifying many of the issues, this book is more importantly a frank discussion of the circumstances of Lumumba's life and death and the involvement of the United States, Belgium and the United Nations, the moderates and political opponents of Lumumba, business interests, even the mining industry in South Africa that conspired to have Lumumba "removed".

Nzongola-Ntalaja's admiration for Lumumba is clear from the beginning and readers are accordingly made aware that this factual account will be peppered with personal opinions and comments. It makes for some trying reading in places, yet this is one of the book's greatest strengths as it highlights the emotions that Lumumba evokes, then and now. It also situates a unique interpretation of the

circumstances in which the Congolese found themselves at that time.

The book chronicles Lumumba's birth, his brief schooling, his employment in the public and private sector, and his political journey in search of independence for the Congo. It was surprising to learn that Lumumba actually – and successfully – tried to become part of the evoules (the Congolese elite), and even sought "matriculation", gaining status as a privileged Congolese, similar in certain respects to the Belgians in the Congo. It also highlights the change of his vision of a Congo where Belgians and Congolese could live together to one of full independence for all Congolese.

The writer goes out of his way to provide an explanation for some of Lumumba's less stellar actions, such as stealing from the post office and his engagement with the Soviet Union. Be that as it may, with a limited education and a desire to learn more and do more, Lumumba rose up the ranks of various representative organisations to eventually become a representative of the Congolese people

in their struggle for independence. While Lumumba might have had the majority support, one that transcended tribal and geographical differences, it was very clear that the chips were stacked against him. It was interesting to read of the impact of the cold war on the Congo. According to the writer, the US and the UN developed an anti-Lumumba attitude due to his close connection with the Soviets. While it is not clear whether he was pro-American or pro-Soviet, his call for assistance from the Soviets to help enforce a UN resolution resulted in belligerence from the UN.

This is a must-read for South Africans, particularly because it highlights the actions taken by colonial powers to remain in power in Africa, the impact of such actions, and how complicity can lead to very dangerous outcomes. This has major lessons for the South Africa of today. The book makes one appreciate our democracy even more and perhaps would inspire readers to relook at the present state of our country and make the right decisions. [NA](#)