

# Review

*The Congo: Plunder & Resistance*,  
David Renton, David Seddon and Leo Zeilig, 2007 (Z Books, London & New York, 2007)

Reviewed by Alan Lipman

This book tells of a sustained, bloodstained case of mayhem that affects us all; one that has been perpetrated on our continent since the 1870s. It continues at this precise moment, as you read this review, a terrible story, a tale of repeated, continuous tragic pillage, of oppressive, merciless exploitation.

The book is a record of people ripped from their families, their social groupings, their lands and homes by violent, brutal, externally engendered warfare. It is also a story of persistent, consistent resistance to gory looting.

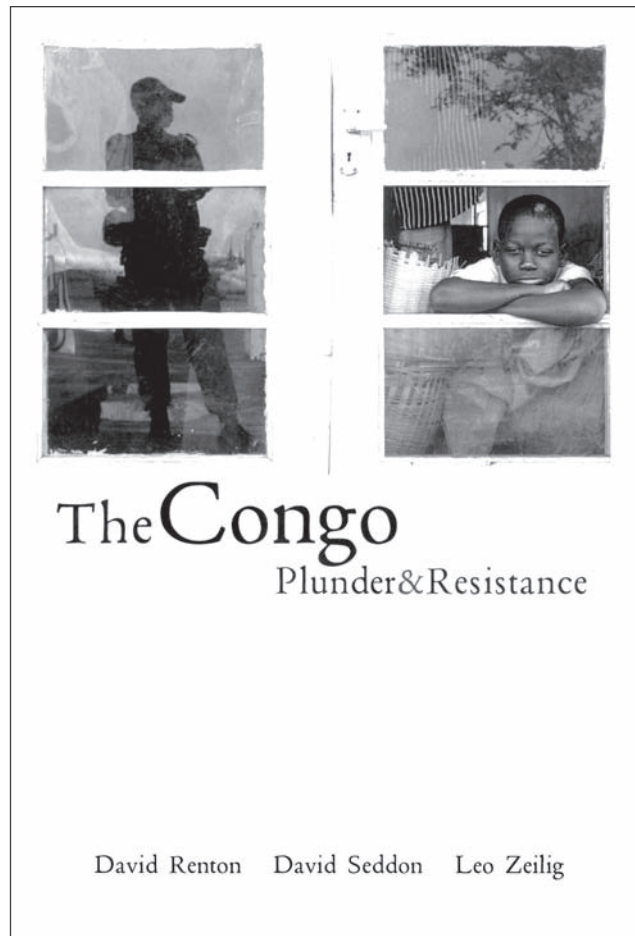
The authors analyse these acts of savage plunder across a vast, richly endowed chunk of African territory and in particular how it has devastated its inhabitants. They talk of a massive stretch of central Africa and its many people. For the authors, the Democratic Republic of the Congo stands in, as they are frequently driven to remind us, for imperialist Western rampaging across the whole continent.

Renton, Seddon and Zeilig have chosen to focus, in this book, on what is the most blatant instance. They do so fluently and, for me, with lasting effect. Although the three are all university academics, they write without the verbal baggage that often mars academic publications and that tend to debar non-academic readers. Their book is presented in accessible, direct, readable, straight-forward, readily understandable language. There is, as I recall, no obscure word-play, no supposedly learned references or barely concealed internal debates.

*Labour Bulletin's* readership can engage from the very outset with what the book offers. Readers need not fear its wide-ranging *Notes* which should not deter interested readers although these *Notes* are useful.

The first chapter, titled 'Missionaries and Traders', deals with the period 1870 to 1908. This was when the overwhelmingly Western and European governments and entrepreneurs saw themselves as explorers and missionaries sent to find the barbarous people of Africa and bring Christian values to them. They also brought trade.

In the Congo area, which was privately owned by King Leopold of Belgium, this meant imposing a system of near slavery for producing rubber. This system assured profits for King Leopold and his colleagues and, simultaneously, distorted the opportunities for



productive developments in this colonial territory.

The profits were as enormous as was the deprivation of the African population. In Europe, the King built grand palaces and public monuments while an estimated ten million Africans died, wretchedly. Despite an implicit censorship, there were widely circulated reports of vicious cruelty, of callous indifference to the lives of the local people.

If Leopold met with any resistance he ordered, according to historian Charlie Kimber, "African soldiers in the pay of their Belgian masters...to smash opposition. To demonstrate that they had not wasted their bullets they hacked the hands from their victims, alive or dead. The novelist Joseph Conrad wrote that it

was extraordinary that a world that no longer tolerated the slave trade could blithely ignore the Congo.”

These revelations led to popular demands for reforming Leopold's personal fiefdom. Eventually, political shifts in Belgium dictated what occurred. Once the socialist groupings of that country acknowledged the demands for reform, the picture changed.

These changes are covered in Chapter 2, 'Miners and Planters'. This takes the reader from 1908 to 1945. This covers the period of the annexation of the Congo by Belgium, during which time some reforms took place.

For example, the colonial state set up institutions such as schools and hospitals. It also developed road and rail transport expressly in support of copper mining operations. Nonetheless the material conditions of forced labour remained. People were virtually forced to work.

This met with intensified opposition. There were, for example, the miners' strikes of 1941 and similar action by dockworkers in 1945. Although, as a consequence of long established forced labour, workers were not sufficiently organised in trade unions, a working class had nevertheless come forcefully into being.

The following chapter, 'Rebels and Generals', deals with the post-1945 years, when the local people, rather than a Western power, played the significant role.

It was an era of popular mobilisation, of mass protest, of widespread debate about the end of colonialism and how a democratic society might be built. All this, and there was a great deal, came to an abrupt end in 1961 when the democratic prime minister Patrice Lumumba was severely beaten and shot by a Belgian firing squad. His remains were dissolved in acid. His death, according to the authors, was contrived by Belgium and the US with the "connivance of the United Nations" who refused to intervene.

The defeat of this promising movement, lead at once to civil war.

Then Chapter 4, 'The Great Dictator' in which discussion centres on Western support for the sadistic, greedy, militaristic Joseph-Desire Mobutu who emerged from that civil strife.

Mobutu, like the late King Leopold, turned the country into virtually his own private property mainly by using the central bank and the mining companies to amass a gross personal fortune.

In 1971 the country was renamed Zaire in a flimsy attempt to demonstrate and placate local nationalism. The great dictator remained in absolute power for some 30 years, always with Western backing and always in the teeth of opposition from, especially, city-rooted democratic movements.

Chapter 5 called 'The Failed Transition', describes the 1990-92 country-wide protests among workers, the poor and students which turned into desperate, angry food riots. This instability was, however, not able to topple Mobutu. Under intense pressure, he accepted a surface liberalisation that tolerated political parties and even an all-party National Conference. But this transition failed, as did similar movements in Africa, leaving the Congo's deeply entrenched poverty intact.

Finally Chapter 6, 'Speculators and Thieves'. Here, in probably the most dense pages of the book, Renton and his co-authors describe "how over the last dozen years an older model of military state capitalism has given way to private capitalism... not just in the Congo but globally, the demands of the West have become more urgent."

Among other matters, they indicate how, in parallel with the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda, there have been deadly clashes between Congo-based Tutsi and Hutu people.

The UN has reported these and other instances of local warfare as

encounters in which foreign companies "ready to do business regardless of elements of unlawfulness" are "the engine of the conflict in the Congo."

Western, principally US interests are supreme. In the context of 'naked plunder, theft and greed,' Mobutu was replaced by Laurent Kabila who was followed by his son, while "the entire country [was] stripped bare." It is a tragic story, typical of post-colonial central Africa.

There are three aspects of this long-endured plunder that call for emphasis. The total number of people reputed to have died due to the Congo's almost 150 years of grinding exploitation cannot be calculated. As a guiding approximation, consider the estimate published by the International Rescue Committee for the period since the beginning of the 1998 rebellion to April 2004. The figure is horrifying: 3.8 million deaths over a half-decade. Carnage has, clearly, been the order of the day!

And the continuing, the overriding cause: "Behind the dead stood the profits of regional powers and multi-nationals... there is no better example of this group than American Mineral Fields. Though listed on various stock exchanges the authors describe this company as little more than 'adventurers' who lacked sufficient capital to invest in the concessions... sold to them by Kabila."

Over the century and a half of open theft, the peoples' resistance has been determined. The independence struggle is one instance of this strong resistance. "During the independence struggle of autumn 1959 and spring 1960, it was popular resistance that led to the country's first elections and moulded politicians of the stature of Lumumba." The Congo is a lasting case of *la lotta continua*. LB

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