

In memory of Patrice Lumumba, assassinated on 17 January 1961

Friday 22 January 2021, by [TOUSSAINT Éric](#) (Date first published: 17 January 2021).

On 17 January 2021, we commemorate the 60th anniversary of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba (1925-1961).

Contents

- [Lumumba, a fighter for interna](#)
- [The sequence of events that](#)
- [Belgium's support for the \(...\)](#)
- [Lumumba has become an emblem](#)
- [Appendix 1 : Belgium's crimes](#)
- [Appendix 2: Belgium's crimes](#)

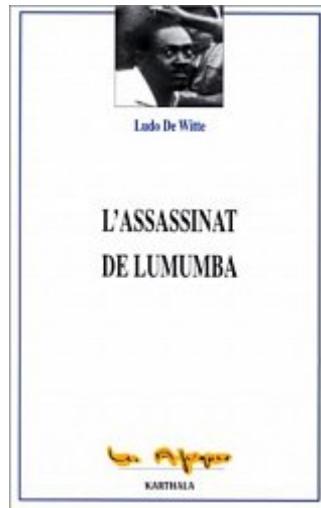
After a resounding victory in the first real elections in which the Congolese participated, Patrice Lumumba became Prime Minister of Congo from 24 June 1960 until his overthrow and imprisonment on 14 September of the same year by Colonel Joseph-Désiré Mobutu and his supporters. Mobutu then ruled the country, first in the shadow, then directly from 1965 until his overthrow in 1997.

Ludo De Witte : Lumumba was a victim of imperialism. Actually the powers that wanted to continue imperial rule in Congo, replace a colonial system with a neocolonial system, a system in which Africans would wield political power but controlled by Western powers and their corporations. This is the neocolonialism Lumumba wanted to fight and this is why he was assassinated.



On 17 January 1961, Lumumba, this great fighter for Congo's independence, for social justice and for internationalism, was tortured and then executed, along with several of his comrades, by Congolese leaders complicit with Western powers, as well as by Belgian police and soldiers. Lumumba was only 35 years old and could have continued to play a very important role in his country, in Africa and at a global level.

As journalist Colette Braeckman wrote, "*Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese Prime Minister who was illegally removed from office in September, placed under house arrest and then detained in Thysville, had been sent to Katanga on 17 January 1961. Five hours after his arrival on Katangan soil, he was put to death with his two companions Maurice M'Pollo and Robert Okito.*" [[1](#)]



Among the Congolese leaders who directly participated in the killing of Lumumba, we find Moïse Tshombé, self-proclaimed president of the Congolese province of Katanga, which seceded on 11 July 1960, less than two weeks after the independence of Congo on 30 June 1960. The Katangan secession proclaimed by Moïse Tshombe was supported by Belgium and the large Belgian mining corporations that controlled that part of Congo (see below) with a view to destabilizing the government led by Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba.

At least five Belgian policemen and soldiers were present at the assassination. Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, one of the major Congolese leaders responsible for the assassination of Lumumba, did not attend the murder as he was in the capital city in the West of the country.

Belgium's responsibility in the assassination of Lumumba in January 1961 was established by several historians, among whom [Ludo De Witte](#) in [The assassination of Lumumba](#) and was the subject of a [commission of inquiry](#) within the Belgian Parliament in 2001-2002. See also Ludo De Witte's [interview](#) in 2018, *(in French)*.

In it De Witte sums up in simple words the causes that led to the assassination of Lumumba:
"Lumumba was a victim of imperialism. Actually the powers that wanted to continue imperial rule in Congo, replace a colonial system with a neocolonial system, a system in which Africans would wield political power but controlled by Western powers and their corporations. This is the neocolonialism Lumumba wanted to fight and this is why he was assassinated."

We should remember the speech delivered by the the Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo, Patrice Lumumba, in reply to what Baudouin, King of the [fond ivoire]Belgians[/fond ivoire] had said, namely, *"Congo's independence is the culmination of the Belgian 'civilising mission' devised by the genius of Leopold II, which he launched with tenacious courage and which was continued with perseverance by Belgium."*



In his speech Lumumba insisted that justice be done for the Congolese people. Here is an English translation of it.

Speech delivered in Parliament after those by King Baudouin and President Joseph Kasavubu, on the day of the proclamation of the independence of the Republic of Congo.

"Men and women of the Congo,

Victorious independence fighters,

I salute you in the name of the Congolese Government.

I ask all of you, my friends, who tirelessly fought in our ranks, to mark this June 30, 1960, as an illustrious date that will be ever engraved in your hearts, a date whose meaning you will proudly explain to your children, so that they in turn might relate to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren the glorious history of our struggle for freedom.

Although this independence of the Congo is being proclaimed today by agreement with Belgium, an amicable country, with which we are on equal terms, no Congolese will ever forget that independence was won in struggle, a persevering and inspired struggle carried on from day to day, a struggle, in which we were undaunted by privation or suffering and stinted neither strength nor blood.

It was filled with tears, fire and blood. We are deeply proud of our struggle, because it was just and noble and indispensable in putting an end to the humiliating bondage forced upon us.

That was our lot for the eighty years of colonial rule and our wounds are too fresh and much too painful to be forgotten.

We have experienced forced labour in exchange for pay that did not allow us to satisfy our hunger, to clothe ourselves, to have decent lodgings or to bring up our children as dearly loved ones.

Morning, noon and night we were subjected to jeers, insults and blows because we were 'Negroes'. Who will ever forget that the black was addressed as 'tu' not because he was a friend, but because the polite 'vous' was reserved for the white man?

We have seen our lands seized in the name of ostensibly just laws, which gave recognition only to the right of might.

We have not forgotten that the law was never the same for the white and the black, that it was lenient to the ones, and cruel and inhuman to the others.

We have experienced atrocious sufferings, being persecuted for political convictions and religious beliefs, and exiled from our native land: our lot was worse than death itself.

We have not forgotten that in the cities the mansions were for the whites and the tumbledown huts for the blacks; that a black was not admitted to the cinemas, restaurants and shops set aside for 'Europeans' that blacks travelled in the barge's holds, under the feet of the whites in their luxury cabins.

Who will ever forget the shootings which killed so many of our brothers, or the cells into which were mercilessly thrown those who no longer wished to submit to the regime of injustice, oppression and exploitation used by the colonialists as a tool of their domination?

Patrice Lumumba : Who will ever forget that the black was addressed as 'tu' not because he was a

friend, but because the polite 'vous' was reserved for the white man?
[...] We have not forgotten that the law was never the same for the white and the black

All that, my brothers, brought us untold suffering.

But we, who were elected by the votes of your representatives, representatives of the people, to guide our native land, we, who have suffered in body and soul from colonial oppression, we tell you that henceforth all that is finished with.

The Republic of Congo has been proclaimed and our beloved country's future is now in the hands of its own people.

Brothers, let us commence together a new struggle, a sublime struggle that will lead our country to peace, prosperity and greatness.

Together we shall establish social justice and ensure for everyone a fair remuneration for their labour.

We shall show the world what the black man can do when working in liberty, and we shall make the Congo the pride of Africa.

We shall see to it that the lands of our native country truly benefit its children.

We shall revise all the old laws and make them into new ones that will be just and noble.

We shall stop the persecution of free thought. We shall see to it that all citizens enjoy to the fullest extent the basic freedoms provided for by the Declaration of Human Rights.

We shall eradicate all discrimination, whatever its origin, and we shall ensure for everyone a station in life befitting their human dignity and worthy of their labour and their loyalty to the country.

We shall institute in the country a peace resting not on guns and bayonets but on concord and goodwill.

And in all this, my dear compatriots, we can rely not only on our own enormous forces and immense wealth, but also on the assistance of the numerous foreign states, whose co-operation we shall accept when it is not aimed at imposing upon us an alien policy, but is given in a spirit of friendship.

Even Belgium, which has finally learned the lesson of history and need no longer try to oppose our independence, is prepared to give us its aid and friendship; to that end an agreement has just been signed between our two equal and independent countries. I am sure that this co-operation will benefit both countries. For our part, we shall, while remaining vigilant, try to observe the engagements we have freely made.

Thus, both in the internal and the external spheres, the new Congo, our beloved Republic to be created by my government, will be rich, free and prosperous. But to attain our goal without delay, I ask all of you, legislators and citizens of the Congo, to give us all the help you can.

I ask you all to forget your tribal quarrels: they weaken us and may cause us to be despised abroad.

I ask you all not to shrink from any sacrifice that might ensure the success of our grand undertaking.

Finally, I ask you unconditionally to respect the life and property of fellow-citizens and foreigners who have settled in our country. If the conduct of these foreigners leaves much to be desired, our Justice will promptly expel them from the territory of the Republic; if, on the contrary, their conduct is good, they must be left in peace, for they, too, are working for our country's prosperity.

The Congo's independence is a decisive step towards the liberation of the whole African continent.

Our government, a government of national and popular unity, will serve its country.

I call on all Congolese citizens, men, women and children, to set themselves resolutely to the task of creating a national economy and ensuring our economic independence.

Eternal glory to the fighters for national liberation!

Long live independence and African unity!

Long live the independent and sovereign Congo!"

[gris](Source :

<https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/lumumba/1960/06/independence.htm>)[/gris]

Lumumba, a fighter for internationalism

Before becoming Prime Minister, Lumumba had woven steadfast connections with a number of anti-imperialist, panafricanist and internationalist movements and people. In December 1958, he attended the All African Peoples' Conference in Accra where he met among others the Caribbean-Algerian psychiatrist and freedom fighter [Frantz Fanon](#), the Ghanaian president [Kwame Nkrumah](#) and the Cameroonian anti-colonialist leader Félix-Roland Moumié. [2] He made a speech in which he said, *"The fundamental aim of our movement is to free the Congolese people from the colonialist regime and earn them their independence. We base our action on the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man — rights guaranteed to each and every citizen of humanity by the United Nations Charter — and we are of the opinion that the Congo, as a human society, has the right to join the ranks of free peoples."* He concluded with the following words, *"This is why we passionately cry out with all the delegates: Down with colonialism and imperialism! Down with racism and tribalism! And long live the Congolese nation, long live independent Africa!"*

It is important to point out that during the year 1959, the repression organised by colonialist Belgium resulted in the deaths of dozens if not hundreds of people.

At the end of the All African Peoples' Conference, Lumumba was appointed a permanent member of the co-ordinating committee, as Saïd Bouamama recalls in his *Figures de la révolution africaine*. [3] Lumumba was also in close contact with Belgian anticolonialist and anticapitalist militants such as [Jean Van Lierde](#), who worked in support of the revolution in Algeria and who maintained close ties [4] with the weekly *La Gauche* and its main driving force, Ernest Mandel.

A few weeks after the conference in Accra, Lumumba and his movement held a meeting to report on the proceedings of the anticolonialist summit in Léopoldville, then capital of the Belgian Congo. He called for the independence of Congo before an audience of 10,000. He described the goal of the *Mouvement National Congolais* as *"to liquidate the colonialist regime and the exploitation of men by men."* [5]

According to *Le Monde Diplomatique* of February 1959, a riot broke out in Léopoldville following the

conference, beginning 4 January 1959. This is what the French monthly had to say: *"The origin of the riot is directly related to the All-Africa Peoples' Conference in Accra. It was as the leaders of the Mouvement National Congolais — headed by the president of the movement, Mr. Lumumba — were preparing to hold a public meeting on the subject that the unrest first broke out. With the authorisation of the Governor General of the Belgian Congo, Mr. Cornelis, a delegation of Congolese nationalists, led by Mr. Lumumba, had travelled to Ghana in December. It was as the delegation was preparing to report on its visit and its work, on 4 January, that the police gave the conference attendees and those who had come to hear them the order to disperse."* [6]

It is important to point out that during the year 1959, the repression organised by colonialist Belgium resulted in the deaths of dozens if not hundreds of people. One example of the extent of the repression: in October 1959, during the national congress of the *Mouvement National Congolais* (MNC) in Stanleyville, police fired into the crowd, killing 30 and wounding hundreds. Lumumba was arrested a few days later, tried in January 1960 and sentenced to six months in prison on 21 January 1960.

But protest was so intense that out of fear, the regime in Brussels decided to defuse the situation by calling local elections in which the Congolese were allowed to participate. Lumumba was freed on 26 January, only a few days after his sentencing. Finally, following the local elections, a general election was held in May 1960, the first in the history of the Belgian Congo. The *Mouvement National Congolais* (MNC) won the election and as a result Lumumba was appointed prime minister.

The sequence of events that led to the coup against Lumumba and to his assassination

Following Lumumba's speech of 30 June, the Belgian government, the monarchy and the heads of the major Belgian companies present in Congo decided to destabilize Lumumba and provoke the secession of Katanga, the province where most of the raw materials (copper, cobalt, radium) were extracted. Congolese accomplices immediately stepped up in the form of Moïse Tshombé, proclaimed president of Katanga on 11 July 1960, President Joseph Kasa-Vubu, who revoked Lumumba in September 1960 despite having no constitutional authority to do so, and Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, who led a coup d'état a few days later and had Lumumba arrested, despite the fact that his ministers had expressed their confidence in him and that his party was the leading party in the parliament. Mobutu, who had had a military career during the colonial period and was a former journalist for the pro-colonial press in Congo, had managed to be appointed to the rank of colonel in the new army and quickly turned against Congo's elected government.

The operation leading to Lumumba's execution was directly accompanied and directed by Belgians on orders from Brussels. On 17 January 1961, Lumumba, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito were taken in an airplane piloted by a Belgian crew to Élisabethville, the capital of Katanga, and handed over to the local authorities. They were then tortured by Katangese leaders, including Moïse Tshombé, and by Belgians. They were shot that evening by soldiers under the command of a Belgian officer.

Belgium, as a member of NATO, had a heavily-equipped military zone in Western Germany extending from the Belgian border to that of the Soviet-aligned countries. The Belgian general staff had at its disposal a considerable military arsenal, at least partly originating in the USA, and NATO allowed them to deploy aircraft, troop transports and even warships which bombarded Congolese positions in the Congo estuary. The US government and CIA were also at the controls "alongside" the Belgians, with whom they had decided to assassinate Lumumba. [7]. France was also on board. In a

telegram dated 26 August 1960, the director of the CIA, Allen Dulles, told his agents in Léopoldville, concerning Lumumba: *"Consequently, we concluded that his removal must be an urgent and prime objective and that under existing conditions this should be a high priority of our covert action."* [8]

We should mention that on 12 August 1960, Belgium had signed an accord with Tshombé, recognising *de facto* the independence of Katanga. The attempts made by Lumumba's government to deal with the secession were fully legitimate, but were fought against by the major Western powers.

Despite his arrest by Mobutu, Lumumba did not capitulate and maintained contact with the ministers who remained faithful to their commitments, and with his comrades. A clandestine government led by Antoine Gizenga was established in Stanleyville. Lumumba managed to escape from his jailers on 27 November 1960 and attempted to join up with the government in Stanleyville, but was arrested a few days later in transit. In January 1961, with Lumumba still highly popular, Mobutu and the Western powers feared that a popular revolt would lead to the leader's liberation and decided to have him executed. The operation leading to Lumumba's execution was directly accompanied and directed by Belgians on orders from Brussels. On 17 January 1961, Lumumba, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito were taken in an airplane piloted by a Belgian crew to Élisabethville, the capital of Katanga, and handed over to the local authorities. They were then tortured by Katangese leaders, including Moïse Tshombé, and by Belgians. They were shot that evening by soldiers under the command of a Belgian officer.

According to the testimony of Belgian Gerard Soete, then police commissioner in charge of setting up a *"Katangese national police force"*, the three bodies were transported 220 kilometres from the place of execution, and were buried in the earth behind a termite mound, in the middle of a wooded savannah.

The AFP, which had collected this testimony, reports that three days later the bodies were moved again to delete any possibility of tracking them. Soete said he was accompanied by *"another white man"* and a few Congolese when they cut up the corpses with saws and dissolved them in acid. [9]



Belgium's support for the Mobutu dictatorship

The Belgian army intervened twice in the Congo to help Mobutu and his dictatorial regime to crush the resistance of Lumumbist organizations, first in November 1964 with the operation Red Dragon and Black Dragon, respectively at Stanleyville and at Paulis. On this occasion, the operation was jointly led by the Belgian army, Mobutu's army, the General Staff of the US army and mercenaries, among whom some anti-Castro Cubans.

In a speech delivered at the UN General Assembly in November 1964, Ernesto Che Guevara condemned this intervention, as he also did in a speech delivered in Santiago de Cuba, *"today, the most poignant and pervasive memory that stays with us is that of the Congo and of Lumumba. Today, in that country that is both so distant and so near to our hearts, historical events have occurred which we have to know about, as we have to learn from what has been experienced. The*

other day, Belgian parachutists assaulted the city of Stanleyville.” (excerpt from Che Guevara’s speech in Santiago de Cuba on 30 November 1964, on the occasion of the 8th anniversary of the town’s uprising led by Frank País (translation CADTM, from the [French version](#)).

The second intervention of the Belgian army occurred in Kolwezi in the heart of the mining area of Shaba (Katanga) in May 1978 in collaboration with the French army and Mobutu’s army.

Litigation still in progress in Belgium concerning the assassination of Lumumba

The Belgian courts have not yet handed down a judgment concerning the murder of Lumumba. If the case has remained open, it is only due to the ongoing actions of all those who are determined to see justice done. The Lumumba family continues its actions toward revealing the truth. A Belgian examining magistrate is still in charge of the case since it has been classified as a war crime to which no statute of limitations applies. And as the family’s attorney, Christophe Marchand, pointed out to Belgian television on 23 June 2011 *“the main instigators are all dead today (...) but former advisors and attachés of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are still alive.”*



Lumumba has become an emblematic figure

The figure of Patrice Lumumba has traversed history and still serves today as an example for all who champion the emancipation of peoples. Lumumba never surrendered.

Such was his popularity under the regime of the dictator Mobutu that the latter decreed Patrice Lumumba a national hero in 1966. Not satisfied with having overthrown him in September 1960 and with being one of the main organizers of his murder, Mobutu attempted to steal a part of his aura. The day of his execution, 17 January, is a bank holiday in Congo-Kinshasa.

In Brussels, after years of actions by anticolonialist militants, the municipal council voted on 23 April 2018 to create a square, the Place Patrice-Lumumba, which was officially inaugurated on 30 June of the same year, the date of the 58th anniversary of the independence of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

But all of that amounts to very little.

Beyond the need to disseminate the truth about Lumumba’s struggle and to demand that justice be done him, his struggle and that of all the women and men of Congo who fought against all forms of spoliation, oppression and exploitation must be continued.

That is why the CADTM feels that the Belgian authorities must:

- Recognise publicly and name all of the abuses and crimes committed against the people of

Congo by Léopold II and the Belgian monarchy, and make official excuses;

- Deepen and extend the task of remembrance by involving the appropriate personnel both in public education and popular educational activities and including in institutional areas;
- Restore all Congolese cultural property to the Congolese;
- Actively support the review of all colonialist symbols in public spaces in Belgium;
- Conduct a historical audit of debt in order to make unconditional financial reparation and retrocession for the amounts extracted during the colonisation of Congo;
- Take action within the multilateral institutions (World Bank, IMF, Paris Club, etc.) so that their members totally and unconditionally cancel repayment of all odious debt on the Democratic Republic of Congo;
- Publicly support all moratoria on repayment of debt enacted by the government of Congo in order to improve the public health system and face the epidemic of CoViD-19 and other diseases which cause deaths that would be entirely preventable if expenditures on public health are increased.

The CADTM supports the various collectives calling for actions in Belgium in the wake of the *Black Lives Matter* protests and all those who are taking action in the area of awareness of colonialism.

The CADTM supports the Congolese people in facing the health, economic and social consequences of the CoViD-19 crisis. In spite of the diktats of creditors and the serious failures of successive Congo governments, which have resulted in severe repression and flagrant denial of fundamental human rights, social movements in Congo have resisted. The CADTM supports these and other struggles for social justice.

To learn more about relations between Belgium and Congo: See Appendices 1 and 2 and read Éric Toussaint, "[Reply to the letter by Philippe, King of the Belgians, about Belgium's responsibility in the exploitation of the Congolese people.](#)"

To learn more about Congo's illegitimate debt: "[Généalogie de la dette en République démocratique du Congo](#)" (in French)

Appendix 1 : Belgium's crimes before Congo's independence



Belgium's crimes before Congo's independence (1885-1960)

One may consider it a certainty that the King of the Belgians, and the Congo Free State, which he governed with the agreement of the Belgian government and parliament of the time, are responsible for deliberate 'crimes against humanity'.

One may consider it a certainty that the King of the Belgians, and the Congo Free State, which he governed with the agreement of the Belgian government and parliament of the time, are responsible for deliberate 'crimes against humanity'. These crimes are not blunders; they are the direct result of the type of exploitation to which the Congolese population was subjected. Some prominent authors have spoken of 'genocide'. I propose not to create a debate focused on this issue because it is

difficult to agree on figures. Some serious authors estimate the Congolese population in 1885 to have been around 20 million, and write that in 1908 when Leopold II transferred the Congo to Belgium, thus creating the Belgian Congo, there remained 10 million Congolese. These estimates by reputable authors are, however, difficult to verify in the absence of a population census.

The colonial period when Belgium owned the Congo (1908-1960)

Leopold II tried to get rid of the Congo since by making it over to Belgium he would also shake off the debts he had accumulated with various banks. Acceding to his request, Belgium inherited the debts contracted to exploit the Congolese people. The King had hoarded the extracted wealth as private loot while he had ordered enormous expenses from Belgium to strengthen its power and image. But big Belgian and foreign capitalist corporations had also had their share: Belgian arms manufacturers and traders, companies that supplied equipment, those that collected and processed natural rubber, and many others.

The Belgian State thus inherited the Congo and Leopold II's debts, which led to further exploitation of the Congolese people.

While the Congo was a Belgian colony, big Belgian capitalist companies made maximum profit thanks to the exploitation of the huge natural resources of the country, notably in terms of minerals of all kinds. The Belgian State was paying off Leopold II's debts and contracting new ones to better help big capital to accumulate maximum profit.

The Congolese people had no rights to speak of. The education system was pitifully inadequate because Belgium wanted to prevent the Congolese from entering higher or university education.

Not only were the Congolese people exploited in their native land, but they were also called upon to fight for Belgium during the various wars it was involved in, notably with an eye on the German colonies of Rwanda and Burundi to the East of the Congo. Thousands of Congolese died away from home fighting wars waged by European capitalist powers.

During the Second World War, the US made the atom bombs that annihilated Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 with uranium extracted for the Congolese province of Katanga. And indeed as Belgium was on the winning side in the First World War, it was able to extend its colonial territory with Rwanda and Burundi, wrenched from the German Empire through the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

During the Second World War, the US made the atom bombs that annihilated Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 with uranium extracted for the Congolese province of Katanga. By way of thanks the US canceled the debt Belgium owed them.

On the other hand, when Belgium agreed to the Congo's independence on 30 June 1960, it expected the Congolese government led by Patrice Lumumba to take over the debt Belgium had accumulated with the [World Bank](#) over the 1950s to exploit the 'Belgian' Congo.

Lumumba refused. This was one of the reasons that induced Belgium to plan and directly participate in Lumumba's murder of in January 1961.

Appendix 2: Belgium's crimes after Congo's independence

With the World Bank aiding and abetting, Belgium forced the Congolese people to pay a

debt that had been used for their colonial exploitation

In the book [*The World Bank: a never-ending coup d'Etat*](#) originally published in 2006, [10] I pointed out the fact that the debt Belgium had contracted with the World Bank during the 1950s had been unjustly relegated to the Congolese people thanks to Mobutu's complicity when he organized the arrest, then actively participated in the murder, of Lumumba.

How did it work? Violating the right to self-determination, the World Bank granted loans to Belgium, France and the UK to finance projects in their colonies. [11] As acknowledged by the Bank's historians, *"The loans, which served to alleviate the dollar shortages of the European colonial powers, were largely directed to colonial interests, especially mining, either through direct investments or indirect assistance, as in the development of the transport infrastructure related to mining"*. [12] Those loans made it possible for colonial powers to reinforce the yoke under which they kept colonized people. They contributed to supplying colonial metropolises with minerals, farm products, fuel. In the case of the Belgian Congo, the millions of dollars that were granted for projects decided by the colonial power were almost entirely spent by the Congo's colonial administration to buy products exported from Belgium. All in all the Belgian Congo 'received' loans for US \$120 million (in three tranches), 105.4 million of which were spent in Belgium. [13] For Patrice Lumumba's government it was just unthinkable to pay the World Bank a debt that had been contracted by Belgium in order to exploit the Belgian Congo.

The World Bank and Belgium violated international law when in the 1960s they forced onto the newly independent Congo the burden of debt contracted for its colonization.

Things changed in 1965: after Mobutu's military coup, the Congo, now renamed Zaire, acknowledged that it had a debt towards the World Bank; of course the debt had actually been contracted by Belgium to exploit the Belgian Congo.

International law is very clear on this point. A similar case occurred in the past and was decided on by the Treaty of Versailles. When Poland retrieved its status as an independent state after the First World War, it was decided that debts contracted by Germany to colonize the part of Poland it had occupied would not be charged to the newly independent state. The Treaty of Versailles signed on 28 June 1919 stipulated: *"There shall be excluded from the share of such financial liabilities assumed by Poland that portion of the debt which, according to the finding of the Reparation Commission... arises from measures adopted by the German and Prussian Governments with a view to German colonisation in Poland."* [14] The Treaty provides that creditors who have lent to Germany for projects on Polish territory can claim their due only from that colonial metropolitan power and not from Poland. Alexander Nahum Sack, the theoretician of odious debt, specifies in his 1927 law treaty: *"When the government contracts debts in order to subject the population in part of its territory or to colonize it with nationals of the dominant nationality, etc., those debts are odious for the native population in that part of the territory of the debtor State."* [15]

Things changed in 1965: after Mobutu's military coup, the Congo, now renamed Zaire, acknowledged that it had a debt towards the World Bank

The Treaty of Versailles decreed that the German Empire would lose its African colonies and that their debts would be cancelled. In this respect, Sack quotes part of the Allied Powers' reply to Germany, that was not ready to accept such debt cancellation because it meant it would have to foot the bill. They said, *"The colonies should not bear any portion of the German debt, nor remain under any obligation to refund to Germany the expenses incurred by the Imperial administration of the Protectorate. In fact, it would be unjust to burden the natives with expenditure which appears to have been incurred in Germany's own interest, and it would be no less unjust to make this*

responsibility rest upon the Mandatory Powers which, in so far as they may be appointed trustees by the League of Nations, will derive no benefit from such trusteeship.” [16]

This fully applies to the loans the Bank granted Belgium, France and the UK for the development of their colonies. Consequently, the World Bank and Belgium violated international law when in the 1960s they forced onto the newly independent Congo the burden of debt contracted for its colonization.

Belgium’s support of Mobutu’s dictatorship

Furthermore, Belgium sent high-ranking advisors to the Congo under Mobutu’s dictatorship, among them Jacques de Groote, who had taken part in the Belgian-Congolese round table to prepare the independence of the Belgian Congo in the first months of 1960. Mobutu also participated in the opening of the round-table conference in Brussels. Between April 1960 and May 1963, de Groote was an advisor to Belgium’s Executive Director at the [IMF](#) and World Bank in Washington. On November 24, 1965 Mobutu seized power for good by staging a coup against President Kasavubu. From March 1966 to May 1969, de Groote was an economic advisor to the de facto government of Mobutu, while also working as an advisor at the National Bank of the Congo. He played an active role in the design and implementation of the economic policy of the country as well as in the negotiations between Mobutu, the IMF, the World Bank, and the US government.

In the period 1973–1994, Jacques De Groote was one of the Executive Directors of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and one of the governors of the World Bank (IBRD). He was an active member of a hard core in the Belgian political class while representing its interests and those of big private corporations within international institutions. [17]

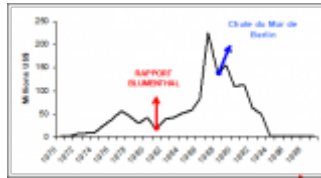
At the end of the 1970s, Erwin Blumenthal, a senior IMF official, German banker, and former Director of Foreign Affairs at the Bundesbank, made a damning report about Mobutu’s management of Zaire. [18] He warned foreign creditors that they should not expect repayment as long as Mobutu remained in power.

Between 1965 and 1981, the government of Zaire borrowed about \$5 billion from foreign creditors, and between 1976 and 1981 there were four restructuring programmes authorised by the [Paris club](#) concerning part of its external debt amounting to \$2.25 billion (see the figure below on the amount of debt in Congo-Kinshasa during Mobutu’s dictatorship). All of this debt falls into the category of odious debt, and can therefore be considered null and void.

The very poor economic management and systematic embezzlement by Mobutu of part of the loans did not lead the IMF and World Bank to stop their assistance to Mobutu’s dictatorial regime. Strikingly enough, after the Blumenthal report was submitted, the Bank’s disbursements increased (so did the IMF’s disbursements, but they do not show in the chart below). [19] Clearly, the choices made by the World Bank and the IMF are not mainly determined on the basis of sound economic management. Mobutu’s regime remained a strategic ally of the US and other influential powers in the Bretton Woods institutions (e.g., France and Belgium) as long as the Cold War lasted.

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Congo-Kinshasa (Zaire under Mobutu): World Bank disbursements



From 1989-1991 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, later followed by the crumbling of the Soviet Union, Western powers began to lose interest in Mobutu's regime. All the more so since in many African countries (including Zaire) national conferences were taking place and making democratic claims. The World Bank reduced its lending before stopping its loans altogether in the mid-1990s.

Under Mobutu's rule (1965-1997), the IMF and the World Bank were instruments serving US policy and geostrategy, which rewarded Mobutu for his support in the Cold War.

"In many cases, the loans were used to corrupt governments during the Cold War. The issue was not whether the money was improving a country's welfare, but whether it was leading to a stable situation, given the geopolitical realities in the world."

Joseph E. Stiglitz, Chief Economist of the World Bank from 1997 to 1999, Nobel Laureate in Economics in 2001, on a French television show L'Autre mondialisation (The Other Globalization), on Arte, March 7, 2000

Therefore, the IMF and the WB, where de Groote was a senior official, became complicit in the abuses committed by the Mobutu regime against human, economic, social and cultural rights inasmuch as they maintained their support for the dictatorial system, which did not at all honour its financial obligations.

"The issue of the moral responsibility of the creditors was particularly apparent in the case of Cold War loans. When the IMF and the World Bank lent money to the Democratic Republic of the Congo's notorious ruler Mobutu, they knew (or should have known) that most of the money would not go to help that country's poor people, but rather would be used to enrich Mobutu. It was money paid to ensure that this corrupt leader would keep his country aligned with the West. To many, it doesn't seem fair for ordinary taxpayers in countries with corrupt governments to have to repay loans that were made to leaders who did not represent them."

Joseph Stiglitz, Globalization and Its Discontents, 2002

Mobutu and his clan used the State coffers as a steady and plentiful source of personal enrichment with three different kinds of misappropriation: legal, illegal, and mysterious expenditures. The legal ones, such as the presidential endowment, was allocated without any control. The illegal expenditures are described in the Blumenthal report (this secret report was made public in 1982), [20] which indicates that it was impossible to control the State's financial transactions since the presidential office hardly made a distinction between personal expenses and public spending. Erwin Blumenthal identified at least seven bank accounts held abroad that were used to channel money directly to Mobutu's personal bank accounts or to corrupt political figures. Erwin Blumenthal's message was clear: *"The corruptive system in Zaire with all its wicked and ugly manifestations, its mismanagement and fraud will destroy all endeavours of international institutions, of friendly governments and of commercial banks towards the recovery and rehabilitation of Zaire's economy. Sure, there will be new promises by Mobutu, [...] but no (repeat: no) prospect for Zaire's creditors to get their money back in any foreseeable future."* [21]

Since 1979, the main lenders to Mobutu's regime, closely connected to the IMF, had known and been aware of these fraudulent practices, and of the risk they were taking by continuing to lend to Mobutu.

As indicated in this report, the third category of embezzlement consisted of "mysterious expenditures." One of the State's largest budget items (accounting for 18% according to a 1989 World Bank study) was "other goods and services," a hotchpotch with little information on how the expenditures were allocated. According to World Bank experts, most of the money was used for extravagant expenditures as well as to purchase military equipment. This shows that the World Bank was also well aware of the illegal use made of the loans it was granting.

By the mid-1970s, it was clear that the money injected into Zaire in the form of loans or grants was systematically misappropriated. They were either directly transferred to personal bank accounts held abroad [22] or invested in prestigious, inadequate, and/or useless projects that helped many people to get richer, but certainly did not help the sustainable industrialisation of the economy. For instance, according to the *Office of ill-gotten gains* (Office des biens mal acquis, OBMA), which was created at the National Conference, Mobutu supposedly pocketed a 7% commission on the value of the Inga hydroelectric plant. The investigation could not be pursued to its conclusion because of resistance from official circles. [23]

J. de Groote actively supported Mobutu's regime and intervened several times to improve the relationships between the IMF, the World Bank and Mobutu, although he was very well placed to know in detail what Blumenthal denounced in his report. He also knew about the serious violations of human rights committed by the Mobutu regime.

Yet in 1994, at the end of his term, de Groote said he was satisfied with his action vis-à-vis Congo-Kinshasa. While all along, the vast majority of the Congolese people lived in great misery, the persecutions and assassinations of opponents were rife, and the economy was devastated.

Progression of debt in Congo-Kinshasa during Mobutu's dictatorship

From 1965 to 1969, Congo-Kinshasa's foreign debt stock [24] rose from \$32 million [25] to \$159 million (US dollars). The first major jump occurred in 1970, when in a single year, the debt stock doubled, increasing by \$180 million. It jumped again in 1973, when the price of copper and other raw materials skyrocketed on international markets. With significant budget resources and reserve currency, the regime could borrow massively. This was the heyday of costly major projects or white elephants, which would only become profitable in the distant future. Up until 1979, on average its debt stock increased by nearly \$700 million per year and was mostly in the private sector. The recurrent problem during this period is the fact that these sums were used for investments that would only generate returns in a distant and very uncertain future.

Neither the debtor nor the creditor demonstrated adequate financial discipline, according to which loan conditions should coincide with the characteristics of a project.

Sectors like energy, transportation and communications, as well as public works, are indispensable for the development of a country, because they are required in order to develop productive activities. However, these projects were not based on sound economic principles, either in terms of expertise or in terms of how they were financed and executed.

For example, Zairian stakeholders, and in particular the Zairian State, requested and obtained from financial institutions (especially private ones) expensive short- and medium-term commercial loans to fund projects that would only be profitable at best in the very long term. Such infrastructure investments should instead be funded by low-interest, fixed rate, very long-term loans. This type of borrowing only really exists between States, which offer each other privileged conditions.

Neither the debtor nor the creditor demonstrated adequate financial discipline, according to which loan conditions should coincide with the characteristics of a project. For example, in the case of the Inga dam, which was supposed to produce electricity for all of Zaire and its neighbouring countries, the funding came from a medium-term commercial loan. However, it took nearly ten years to build the dam, and it could have been calculated that it would only become profitable twenty or thirty years later. As a result, the original loan could only be paid back by taking on more debt.

The situation gradually became unbearable and Zaire could no longer make the payments due on this loan. In addition to the poor choice made in terms of the kind of loan, there was an increase in the price of oil and a decrease in the price of copper. Pressure mounted when Zaire decided to stop making payments on its loan. The IMF intervened and signed the first stabilisation programme with Zaire, which included the usual IMF conditionalities such as a currency [devaluation](#), public spending cuts, and [guarantees](#) that Zaire would continue repaying its debt. [26] Zaire's creditors allowed it to defer its loan payments, and also to reschedule its overall debt. Between 1976 and 1981, Zaire's debt was renegotiated four times by the Paris Club corresponding to a total amount of \$2.25 billion (US), [Paris Club website: www.clubdeparis.org] and between 1976 and 1983 Zaire signed [three structural adjustment](#) agreements with the IMF. In 1983, its debt was renegotiated for the fifth time, and \$1,490 billion of it were rescheduled.

It is interesting to observe how generous the IMF was at this time with regard to this country, which was such a bad payer and was not respecting IMF conditionalities.

Between 1979 and 1984, Zaire's debt stock increased only slightly, as Zaire attempted to meet its debt obligations. During this period of time, the net financial transfer was barely positive. On the whole, the disbursements paid to Zaire by its creditors were mainly used to service its debt.

Between 1984 and 1990, Zaire's debt stock increased by 70% (based on constant prices). Meanwhile from 1982 to 1988, it received loans from the IMF (\$600 million), the World Bank (\$650 million), and Western governments (\$3 billion), but commercial banks refused to continue lending it money. During this same period, despite the warnings of an IMF representative, Erwin Blumenthal, Zaire was held up as a model student of the IMF. [27] This foreign complacency can only be justified on the basis of political and geo-strategical considerations. For example, despite warnings from the United States' ambassador on how difficult it would be to control the allocation of the foreign aid disbursed, Mobutu's regime was given full support by the US government, and President Ronald Reagan requested that military aid be doubled to thank Mobutu for having supported US troops in Chad. [28] In 1987, under pressure from the United States, the IMF approved a structural adjustment loan despite the strong objections made by senior IMF officials. At that very time, Mobutu was allowing American troops to use its territory and military bases to engage in military operations in Angola. [29]

Before 1986, the money borrowed was mainly used to repay the debt so there was little chance of using it for investments. The total investment budget was estimated to be around \$65 million in 1985, and it was subsequently cut to \$40 million. Later, when investment projects regained popularity, Zaire's debt stock increased considerably.

As of 1990, Mobutu's regime became isolated on the international scene. The fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of the Cold War, and there was not as much interest in having Mobutu as an ally. As of this moment, the flow of disbursements to his regime dried up, and the net transfer to Zaire became negative starting in 1990, as stated in a World Bank report (1996). [30] According to the same report, in 1994, Zaire paid \$201 million more than it received from international financial institutions. In 1991, the IMF broke off its relations with Zaire, and the World Bank would follow suit in 1993. With no new foreign disbursements, Zaire no longer had enough cash to service its debt, and had to suspend its repayments in 1994. The interest and penalties accrued, which increased the debt stock significantly.

All of this debt can be considered to be odious debt, because it was contracted by the dictator Mobutu, and as such it should have been entirely cancelled when Mobutu's regime collapsed.

Belgian private corporations systematically derived profits from the relationships between Belgium and the Congo

The excerpt below speaks for itself. It was pronounced by Jacques de Groote in a speech given in 1986 to a group of Belgian company directors, and then published in the *Bulletin de la Fédération des Entreprises de Belgique* (Newsletter of the Federation of Belgian Companies). *“The advantages Belgium derives from its participation in the activities of the Group’s institutions- as do all World Bank member countries – can be measured in terms of flow-back, that is to say the relationship between, on the one hand, the total amount of disbursements made by the IDA (International Development Association, which is part of the World Bank Group) or the World Bank in favour of a country’s companies, when these companies sign contracts, and, on the other hand, the contributions of this country to the Bank’s capital, as well as to the IDA’s resources. Flow-back is thus the relationship between what the companies obtain via the sales of equipment or consulting services and what Belgium provides as a contribution to the IDA’s resources and to the Bank’s capital. The flow-back from the World Bank toward industrialised countries is significant, and has continually increased: for all industrialised countries, it has increased from 7 to 10 from the end of 1980 to the end of 1984. In other words, for one dollar put into the system, the industrialised countries got back \$7 in 1980 and receive \$10.5 today.”* [31]

Jacques de Groote after the end of his term at the IMF and World Bank

In his interview with Béatrice Delvaux from Le Soir in March 1994, at the end of his term at the IMF, de Groote congratulated himself on the role he had played in the decision made by Belgium to adopt the neoliberal agenda in the 1980s.

Béatrice Delvaux : *“You did, however, from Washington play a major role in the orientation of Belgian economic policy. You provided a guarantee from the IMF for the economic shift at the beginning of the 1980s, in close relationship with the Poupehan group?”* [32] J. de Groote's response: *“Absolutely, and I’m extremely proud of this. I am even extremely satisfied. At that time, we completed studies that enabled the major economic policy options to be defined for Belgium, which were then discussed with Alfons Verplaetse, [33] and other figures including Wilfried*

Martens.” [34]

These statements provide a good illustration of the close relationships between figures like De Groote and the key political leaders in a particular country. De Groote acknowledged, moreover, that the independence of the Belgian National Bank was only for the form, because Belgian (monetary) policy was defined in a very small, secretive circle bringing together key stakeholders, ranging from the Prime Minister to the Governor of the National Bank, and including the head of the Christian Unions and representatives of corporate management, all in cahoots with the IMF.

Belgium’s attitude after Mobutu’s fall

Belgium was complicit in whitewashing the odious debt accumulated by Mobutu. Instead of acknowledging that it had to be cancelled because it was illegitimate, Belgium got involved in the setting up of a complex mechanism whereby the Congolese people were bound to lose and the creditors that had helped the former regime were to win

After Mobutu’s fall, in spite of pleas from the CADTM and other organizations, the Belgian government did not do anything to help the Congolese people retrieve the money that Mobutu and his clan had embezzled and invested in cash or real estate in Belgium. Yet a country like Switzerland had moved a long way in that direction, for once. But the ties between the Belgian ruling class and Mobutu’s clan were so tight that nothing conclusive was done even though some magistrates tried to take positive measures.

Later, Belgium was complicit in whitewashing the odious debt accumulated by Mobutu. Instead of acknowledging that it had to be cancelled because it was illegitimate, Belgium got involved in the setting up of a complex mechanism whereby the Congolese people were bound to lose and the creditors that had helped the former regime were to win.

[gris]Source of the two appendices: Éric Toussaint, “[Reply to the letter by Philippe, King of the Belgians, about Belgium’s responsibility in the exploitation of the Congolese people](#)”[/gris]

P.S.

- CADTM. 17 January 2021:
<https://www.cadtm.org/In-memory-of-Patrice-Lumumba-assassinated-on-17-January-1961>
- Translated by Snake Arbusto and Christine Pagnoulle.

Footnotes

- [1] Colette Braeckman, « Congo La mort de Lumumba Ultime débat à la Chambre sur la responsabilité de la Belgique dans l’assassinat de Patrice Lumumba Au-delà des regrets, les excuses de la Belgique REPERES La vérité comme seule porte de sortie Van Lierde l’insoumis», 6 February 2002
https://plus.lesoir.be/art/congo-la-mort-de-lumumba-noir-ultime-debat-a-la-chambre_t-20020206-ZOLGFG.html (in French)

- [2] Félix Roland Moumié (1925-1960), a leader of the anticolonialist and anti-imperialist struggle in Cameroon, was assassinated on orders from France in Geneva on 3 November 1960.
- [3] Saïd Bouamama, *Figures de la révolution africaine*, La Découverte, 2014, 300 p.
- [4] See the synthesis of Jean Van Lierde's intervention during a conference in Brussels in October 1995 in homage to Ernest Mandel
<http://www.ernestmandel.org/new/sur-la-vie-et-l-oeuvre/article/dernier-hommage-a-ernest-mandel>
- [5] Saïd Bouamama, *Figures de la révolution africaine*, La Découverte, 2014, p. 160-177.
- [6] Philippe Decraene, "L'Afrique noire tout entière fait écho aux thèmes panafricains exaltés à Accra" in *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 1959
<https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1959/02/DECRAENE/22920>
- [7] The Assassination Archives and Research Center, Interim Report: Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders, III, A, Congo.
http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/ir/html/ChurchIR_0014a.htm consulté le 15 janvier 2021
- [8] Saïd Bouamama, *Figures de la révolution africaine*, La Découverte, 2014, p. 160-177.
- [9] « Les aveux du meurtre de Patrice Lumumba »,
<https://www.thomassankara.net/les-aveux-du-meurtre-de-patrice-lumumba/>
- [10] Eric Toussaint, *Banque mondiale : le Coup d'Etat permanent. L'Agenda caché du Consensus de Washington*, co-published by CADTM / Syllepse / CETIM, Liège/Paris/Geneva, 2006, 310 pages. <http://cadtm.org/Banque-mondiale-le-coup-d-Etat>; translated into Spanish *Banco mundial: el golpe de estado permanente* Editorial Viejo Topo (Barcelona), 2007 ; Editorial Abya-Yala (Quito), 2007 ; Editorial del CIM, Caracas, 2007 ; Editorial Observatorio DESC, La Paz, 2007; into English *The World Bank: a never-ending coup d'Etat: the hidden agenda of Washington Consensus* Pub. VAK (Mumbai-India), 2007, also as *The World Bank : A Critical Primer*, Pluto Press, London; Michigan University Press, Michigan; *Between The Lines*, Toronto,; David Philip, Cape Town; and recently into Japanese.
- [11] The colonies for which the World Bank granted loans are, to Belgium the Belgian Congo, Rwanda and Burundi; to the UK, East Africa (including Kenya, Uganda and future Tanzania), Rhodesia (that became Zimbabwe and Zambia) as well as Nigeria, to which we must add British Guyana in South America; to France, Algeria, Gabon, French West Africa (Mauritania, Senegal, French Sudan that became Mali, Guinea-Conakry, Ivory Coast, Niger, Upper-Volta that became Burkina Faso, Dahomey that became Benin).
- [12] KAPUR, Devesh, LEWIS, John P., WEBB, Richard. 1997. *The World Bank, Its First Half Century*, Volume 1, p. 685-686.
- [13] The fact that Belgium was the beneficiary of loans to the Belgian Congo can be deduced from a table published in the WB's 15th Annual Report for 1959-1960. IBRD (World Bank), Fifteenth Annual Report 1959-1960, Washington DC, p. 12.
- [14] Article 92, see http://polandpoland.com/treaty_versailles.html.

[15] SACK, Alexander Nahum, *Les Effets des Transformations des Etats sur leurs Dettes Publiques et Autres Obligations financières*, Recueil Sirey, Paris, 1927. p. 158.

[16] Source : *Treaty series*, no. 4, 1919, p. 26. Cited by Sack, p. 162.

[17] In 2013, I devoted a book to this figure: *The Life and Crimes of an Exemplary Man*, <https://cadtm.org/The-Life-and-Crimes-of-an-Exemplary-Man> Though anecdotal, the list of decorations awarded to Jacques De Groote is quite telling: he is *Grand Officier de l'Ordre de Léopold Ier* in Belgium, i.e. the second highest Belgian distinction; Mobutu decorated him with the *Palme d'or* in Zaire; he is also *Grand Officier de l'Ordre d'Orange-Nassau* (Luxembourg), he is bearer of the *Orden für Verdienste* in Austria and received the *Red Star* in Hungary.

[18] It is worth mentioning that at the height of his power, Mobutu had people call him “*Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa Za Banga*” (which means Mobutu the unstoppable warrior who goes from one victory to another).

[19] The Bank's historians wrote that in 1982 “*Lured by Mobutu's guile and promise of reform and by pressures from the United States, France, and Belgium, the bank embarked on an ambitious structural adjustment lending program to Zaire*” in Devesh Kapur, John P. Lewis, Richard Webb, *The World Bank, Its First Half Century*, 1997 Volume 1: History, p. 702.

[20] In 1978, the IMF sent Erwin Blumenthal to the Central Bank of Zaire to improve its operations. In July 1979, he resigned after receiving death threats from those close to Mobutu.

[21] Erwin Blumenthal, “*Zaire: Report on her Financial Credibility*”, 7 April 1982, typescript, p.19.

[22] Mobutu even managed to intercept money before it actually reached the public coffers, as happened for instance with the \$5 million granted by Saudi Arabia in 1977 (Emmanuel Dunga, *Mobutu et l'argent du Zaïre* (Mobutu and the money of Zaire), 1992, L'Harmattan, p.157).

[23] Steve Askin and Carole Collins, “External Collusion with Kleptocracy: Can Zaire Recapture its Stolen Wealth?” in *African Political Economy*, 1993, no. 57, p.77.

[24] L'ENTREPRENEUR. 1980. « *Le lancinant problème de la dette extérieure du Zaïre* » (The problem of Zaire's persistent external debt), n°11, December 1980, p. 44-47.

[25] The \$32 million corresponds to the debt that Belgium and the World Bank imposed on the Congo with the complicity of Mobutu's regime. As stated above, during the 1950s Belgium borrowed \$120 million from the World Bank to develop its colonial projects in the Belgian Congo. Belgium had only repaid part of this loan before the Congo gained its independence on 30 June 1960. The remaining amount (\$32 million) was passed on to the Congo when Mobutu established his dictatorship in 1965.

[26] HAYNES, J., PARFITT, T. and RILEY, S. 1986. “*Debt in Sub-Saharan Africa: The local politics of stabilisation*,” in *African Affairs*, July 1986, p.346.

[27] Ibid, p. 347.

[28] NDIKUMANA, Leonce and BOYCE, James. 1997. *Congo's Odious Debt: External borrowing and Capital Flight*, Department of Economics, University of Massachusetts.

[29] Ibid, p.17.

[30] Ibid, p.18.

[31] FEB, 1986, p. 496-497.

[32] The *Poupehan* group was a lobby made up of the main conservative political leaders in the Belgian Christian Social Party, who played a key role in the neoliberal shift. See http://archives.lesoir.be/les-fantomes-de-poupehan-liberaux-et-fdf-veulent-enquet_t-19910917-Z04EPV.html

[33] Alfons Verplaetse was the Governor of the National Bank of Belgium, and a member of the Flemish Christian Social Party.

[34] Wilfried Martens, the Christian Social Prime Minister who put in place neoliberal policies in alliance with the Liberal Party.