

Why is there a ‘Mobutu Gap’ in African history?

In 1965, Mobutu Sese Seko (formerly Joseph Desiré Mobutu) seized control of the Belgian Congo.¹ Supported by foreign powers but driven by his own political ambitions, he ruled for over three decades. In that time, his reign was marked by ‘a military dictatorship’, with harsh socio-economic consequences.² Despite the impact of his regime, the specific circumstances detailing his rise to power remains merely a footnote in most historical accounts. His rise is overshadowed by discussions of Western Cold War politics, the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and broader narratives of post-colonial African ‘strongmen’.

The ‘Mobutu Gap’ refers to the significant lack of focus on the ways that Mobutu gained control of the country. By addressing these issues, this study aims to highlight the implications of this gap in historiography and consider the importance of Mobutu’s rise as its own entity. It will analyse the Western influence on Congolese historiography and the historical emphasis on broader global crises. In this context, ‘Western influence’ refers to the primarily Cold War focusing historical narrative of Mobutu and the ways in which Western scholars framed African political history through external ideological lenses.

Mobutu’s rise to power requires examining the nuances of the internal politics, combined with Mobutu’s personal motivations and the role of external intervention in the country. This involves challenging the tendency of historiography to analyse this chapter of Congolese history using exclusively Cold War ideological frameworks.

References to ‘Congo’ or ‘Congolese’ specifically refer to the country later referred to as Zaire or later the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). When discussing the country before 1960, it will refer to the Belgian Congo. The Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) will not be discussed unless specifically noted.

The lack of focus on Mobutu’s rise to power is comprised of three main reasons, all of which will be discussed in detail. The first and most significant tendency is the temptation to prioritise Western

¹ James Dobbins, et al, *Overcoming Obstacles of Peace: Local Factors in Nation-Building* (RAND Corporation, 2013), p. 184.

² Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People’s History* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), p. 141.

viewpoints or Cold War politics over the internal politics of the country. This narrative, common in historiography, places blame on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Cold War dynamics for Mobutu's assumption of power without properly considering his own motivations or internal politics. These assumptions can be attributed to Weissman, who is often credited as the leading scholar on CIA involvement.³ The second reason is the growth of interest in Lumumba's assassination as a subject of historiography. This has led to an overemphasis on the importance of the event in Congolese history. In portrayals of the assassination, Mobutu is sidelined as a pawn in the murder rather than a political leader rising to power. Hence, his growth in power seems to be unprecedented or unexpected. The third reason is historiography's assumption that Mobutu's coup was an inevitable event or simply seizing a power vacuum. There is a focus on the removal of the mercenaries and the weakness of the government, but not how Mobutu seized control. These three staples are closely intertwined; however, they tell a cohesive narrative of why historiography is shaped with such a gap.

Because of these three main tendencies, there becomes 'The Mobutu Gap'. Historical accounts of Mobutu and the Congo often simplify Mobutu seizing power to a single line. This is exemplified by the likes of Weissman in how some historians examine his rise primarily through the lens of the CIA. Weissman, for instance, suggests that backing Mobutu was their most viable option in keeping influence over the country - as though the decision rested entirely in their hands.⁴ He writes in another piece that the CIA recognised Lumumba 'lost a power struggle' against Mobutu.⁵ Nzongola-Ntalaja describes Mobutu's rise as being the result of the CIA trying to retain control when African nationalism reached Congo.⁶ On the second tendency, De Witte, Fenby and Wright write that he 'assumed power in the aftermath of' the Lumumba assassination, for example.⁷ On the third, Dobbins claims that in three days he 'bloodlessly seized power' through his coup.⁸

³ Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 53.

⁴ Herman J. Cohen, Charles G. Cogan, and Stephen R. Weissman, 'Who Lost Congo? The Consequences of Covert Action', *Foreign Affairs*, 94.1 (2015), pp. 169-173 (p. 169) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483231>> [Accessed 7 February 2025].

⁵ Stephen R. Weissman, 'What Really Happened in Congo: The CIA, the Murder of Lumumba, and the Rise of Mobutu', *Foreign Affairs*, 93.4 (2014), pp. 14-24 (p. 14) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483553>> [Accessed 7 February].

⁶ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, p. 144.

⁷ Dobbins, *Overcoming Obstacles of Peace*, p. 184.

⁸ Weissman, 'What Really Happened in Congo', p. 20.

Considering Mobutu ruled from 1965 to 1997 – a span of thirty-two years – and that his regime had a large impact on the Congolese state, the brevity of this coverage in historiography is a concern.⁹ To emphasise the significance of this gap in scholarship, one can compare Mobutu to the likes of John F. Kennedy and Kwame Nkrumah. Michael Meagher and Larry D. Gragg include five chapters dedicated to Kennedy’s rise to power in their biography of him, dedicating a chapter to how his presidential campaign operated and was able to play into the vacuum of power.¹⁰ Similar analysis can be seen for Kwame Nkrumah in Henry L. Bretton’s coverage of him.¹¹ Mobutu does not receive the same treatment, historians merely mention that he ‘seized power’.¹² Despite the longevity of his reign, there is very little discussion of his appointment.

This lack of detailed examination into Mobutu’s rise as a political figure diminishes the complexity of post-colonial Congolese politics as well as the complex political manoeuvring done by Mobutu himself. His play into external backing, circumstance, and his expertise as a military leader contributed to his advance into power. For historiography, a more nuanced analysis, with focus on Congolese politics and Mobutu himself, is essential for understanding how Mobutu consolidated power in the country.

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The first major tendency of historiography which causes historians to sideline Mobutu’s ascension is the prioritisation of the Western perspective on Africa. Historiography overemphasises the importance of the Cold War on Mobutu’s rise and hence overshadows other possible narratives that may fill ‘The Mobutu Gap’. Because Mobutu’s rise happened within the heat of the Cold War, it is often simplified to being an example of containment. The events in the Congo took place alongside escalations in Vietnam and intervention in the Dominican Republic.¹³ Therefore, it is easy for historians to view it from the perspective of the global powers. Additionally, with the bulk of historiography looking at the Congo being comprised of Western scholars, the sources naturally take more interest in the Western

⁹ Jean-Louis Peta Ikambana, *Mobutu’s Totalitarian Political System: An Afrocentric Analysis* (Taylor & Francis, 2006), Preface & Chapter 6.

¹⁰ Michael E. Meagher and Larry D. Gragg, *John F. Kennedy: A Biography* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), p. 59, p. 61.

¹¹ Henry L. Bretton, *The Rise and Fall of Kwame Nkrumah: A Study of Personal Rule in Africa* (Pall Mall, 1967).

¹² Weissman, ‘What Really Happened in Congo’, p. 20.

¹³ Robert J McMahon, *The Cold War in the Third World* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 27, p. 53.

(American and Belgian) viewpoint. Mobutu was heavily influenced by these Western interests, but there is an over emphasis on their importance. Some historians claim that there is 'reliable' evidence that Mobutu was 'even discovered by the CIA'.¹⁴ These assumptions contribute majorly to the gap in historiography on Mobutu.

While the Western perspective dominates much of the historiography, it is important to recognise that this emphasis stems in part from a genuine role played by the Western powers. Because it is a former Dutch colony, Belgium was a major influence. Cohen describes the turbulent history as 'a direct outcome of Belgium's botched transition of Congo to independence in 1960'.¹⁵ The CIA also had a significant impact on the area. The United States (US) "must bear some responsibility for what Mobutu wrought."¹⁶ The CIA supported the Congolese National Army (ANC) during Mobutu's military rise, with a former CIA agent Stockwell claiming that Mobutu 'had the Agency's full support'.¹⁷ The CIA funded air support during the Congolese uprising against the mercenaries.¹⁸ Mobutu himself claimed that he relied on the US and Belgium financially for his coup in 1965.¹⁹

There is a lot of documentation that after he was instated Mobutu relied on the US.²⁰ Gibbs correctly points out how it is 'well established' that Mobutu received financial support from America.²¹ In the first ten years of his reign, he worked closely with the US ambassador and received advice from them.²² This widespread narrative of CIA importance for Mobutu's reign is best exemplified by the work of Weissman. He claims that when Mobutu didn't turn to the US for support, his 'initiatives devolved into abject failure'.²³ Mobutu was supported by a collection of Western states to 'prop up his

¹⁴ Fasih Raghob Gauhar, 'The United States and Overthrowing of Democracy in Congo', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 70 (2010), pp. 869-879 (p. 872) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44147734>> [Accessed 11 February 2025].

¹⁵ Cohen, 'Who Lost Congo?', p. 110.

¹⁶ Weissman, 'Who Lost Congo?', p. 172.

¹⁷ John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story* (Deutsch, 1978), p. 206.

¹⁸ Ludo De Witte, 'The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu, 1963-5', *International History Review*, 39.1 (2017), pp. 107-125 (p. 110) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2016.1189951>>

¹⁹ Guahar, 'The United States and Overthrowing of Democracy in Congo', p. 874.

²⁰ Piero Gleijeses, "'Flee! The White Giants Are Coming!": The United States, the Mercenaries, and the Congo, 1964-65', *Diplomatic History*, 18.2 (1994), pp. 207-237 (pp. 221-222) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24912382>> [Accessed 11 February 2025].

²¹ David N. Gibbs, 'Review: Misrepresenting the Congo Crisis', *African Affairs*, 95.380 (1996), pp. 453-459 (p. 456) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/723578>> [Accessed 7 February 2025].

²² Cohen, 'Who Lost Congo?', p. 169.

²³ Weissman, 'Who Lost Congo', p. 172.

regime', according to De Witte.²⁴ Thus, Western support for Mobutu's regime is undeniable, he likely would have utilised the financial and military support to gain influence in his rise to power. The issue arises when one considers whether this support is overemphasised. Especially because it was not only the US that Mobutu relied on; historians also mention Nkrumah as being a significant supporter of Congolese independence – as he was an advocate for African nationalism.²⁵ European countries such as France were also involved in his promotion to leadership.²⁶ The US involvement is easily the most documented influence, but that does not necessarily mean it is entirely responsible.

Historians often speak assertively of Mobutu's rise being the responsibility the CIA, leading to the assumption that the agency effectively selected and appointed him as leader. Among these historians, Weissman is perhaps the most notable, claiming that Mobutu 'would never have been able to consolidate control' without the CIA's support.²⁷ Weissman is not the only historian to assert this. Nzongola-Ntalaja argues Mobutu was an instrument for the US to 'penetrate [...] the Congolese economy.'²⁸ He further notes that Lawrence Devlin, the CIA operative in Brussels, used Mobutu as his informer – which implies that he was involved directly in CIA operations.²⁹

Devlin himself claimed that the CIA could take credit for both the fall of Lumumba and the subsequent coup, reinforcing the perception of American orchestration behind key political events.³⁰ Yet, this interpretation is not without critique. Young and Turner, for example, argue that Weissman fails to fully explore the extent of CIA involvement in Mobutu's coup.

Weissman also suggests that the CIA used bribes to install Adoula before Mobutu, further implying that both leaders were strategically placed in power by the agency.³¹ Nevertheless, it is important to consider more tempered assessments, such as the view that 'although the CIA was very active in Congo during that country's first five years of independence, the agency's actual impact on events there was peripheral.'³²

Through overemphasising the importance of US involvement, a narrative that Mobutu was put in power by Cold War dynamics seems to emerge. The Belgian Congo was seen as having a geopolitical

²⁴ De Witte, 'The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu', p. 122.

²⁵ Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, p. 366.

²⁶ Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, p. 374.

²⁷ Weissman, 'What Really Happened in Congo', p. 21.

²⁸ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, p. 147.

²⁹ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, p. 144.

³⁰ Weissman, 'What Really Happened in Congo', p. 18.

³¹ Weissman, 'What Really Happened in Congo', p. 18.

³² Cohen, 'Who Lost Congo?', p. 170.

significance. Congolese uranium was perceived as invaluable to the nuclear race.³³ It was ‘second only to Vietnam’ in its worth for strategic placement, according to the US ambassador in Leopoldville.³⁴ Because of this, Congo attempted to adopt a nonalignment campaign to prevent itself from becoming a proxy war.³⁵ However, after independence it was ‘sucked into the whirlwind of the Cold War.’³⁶ Gijs suggests that the extent of involvement was shaped by the dynamics of the Cold War, which he sees as the primary factor influencing relations between Belgium and Congo.³⁷

Because of Cold War narratives, Mobutu’s rise is seen in historiography as a Cold War strategy. This is because Mobutu had expelled Soviet and Czech diplomats and crushed communist influence in Congo, accomplishing ‘something which the best Western counterespionage services could only have dreamt of’.³⁸ Although communism ‘was languishing well before Mobutu,’ his crackdown finalised its eradication by the mid-1960s.³⁹ With instability mounting, Western powers, including Belgian foreign minister Paul-Henri Spaak, ‘asked Mobutu to intervene’, with the US backing him as “the most sensible leader in the current mess”.⁴⁰

US and Belgian backing of Mobutu suggests that Mobutu’s rise was less about a popular or constitutional process and more about Cold War politics. Cohen critiques Weissman on this assumption, noting that the ‘attribution of blame for all of Congo’s initial instability [...] to the CIA is wildly off the mark.’⁴¹ Mobutu’s rule is framed as a consequence of Cold War geopolitics rather than as a pivotal moment in Congolese history. Reid writes that the US ‘installed a friendly dictator’ because he aligned with Western values in the Cold War arena.⁴²

In contrast to the extensive focus on American influence, the role of the Soviet Union (USSR) is comparatively limited yet often invoked to justify Western intervention. This justification adds to the

³³ Anne-Sophie Gijs, ‘Fighting the Red Peril in the Congo. Paradoxes and Perspectives on an Equivocal Challenge to Belgium and the West (1947–1960)’, *Cold War History*, 16.3 (2016), pp. 273–290 (p. 276), doi:10.1080/14682745.2016.1163340.

³⁴ G. McMurtrie Godley, ‘Statement in Leopoldville’, 30 October 1965. *National Security Files, Country Files: Congo*, Box 85.

³⁵ Festus U. Ohaegbulam, ‘The Democratic Republic of the Congo and the International Politics of Nonalignment’, *Africa Today*, 15.6 (1968), pp. 8-11 (p. 9) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4184966>> [Accessed 11 February 2025].

³⁶ Gleijeses, “‘Flee! The White Giants Are Coming!’”, p. 209.

³⁷ Gijs, ‘Fighting the Red Peril in the Congo’, p. 273.

³⁸ Gijs, ‘Fighting the Red Peril in the Congo’, p. 287.

³⁹ Gijs, ‘Fighting the Red Peril in the Congo’, p. 288.

⁴⁰ De Witte, ‘The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu’, p. 120.

⁴¹ Cohen, ‘Who Lost Congo?’, p. 169.

⁴² Stuart A. Reid, *The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of the CIA and a Cold War Assassination* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2017), pp. 14-15.

narrative that Mobutu was a Cold War prop put in place rather than a political leader who climbed to power. The Soviet Union was interested in the Belgian Congo as it achieved independence because of how rich it was in minerals.⁴³ However, there had not been any significant communist party or Soviet intervention.⁴⁴ Under Lumumba, the Soviets began sending money and weapons, but it was never anywhere near the extent of the American intervention in Congo.⁴⁵ The emphasis of their importance is therefore overblown. Cogan implies that the assassination of Lumumba was because of the Soviets, by saying that when 1,000 Soviets arrived in the country, the CIA ‘concluded that Lumumba was impossible to deal with.’⁴⁶

Western powers such as Belgium and the US responded with a mixture of Cold War anxiety. Belgium’s actions showcase the lingering colonial policy reframed through an anti-communist lens.⁴⁷ Belgium attempted to justify its military involvement by warning of potential Soviet threats to Congolese uranium, thereby seeking US support to reinforce Belgian defences, framed as part of broader national security.⁴⁸

The US itself was concerned about growing Soviet influence and chose to back a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission, hoping this would prevent the Congolese from turning to the USSR.⁴⁹ American concerns over Soviet advance were explicit, with officials viewing Congo as ‘perilously close to Moscow's influence’, which spurred deeper involvement in the country’s political affairs.⁵⁰

Amid this complex geopolitical landscape, Mobutu seemed to emerge as the West’s ideal partner for retaining influence. Despite Soviet denunciations of him as ‘an instrument of Belgian and American monopolies, borne to power by a “colonial-racist armed rabble”’⁵¹ - the US relied on Mobutu to safeguard key strategic interests in central and southern Africa.⁵² During the first Congo crisis, Western policymakers viewed him as possessing the qualities to be a Cold War ‘strongman’, someone who could enforce order and uphold capitalist interests.⁵³

⁴³ Weissman, ‘What Really Happened in Congo’, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Weissman, ‘What Really Happened in Congo’, p. 24.

⁴⁵ Gleijeses, “‘Flee! The White Giants Are Coming!’”, p. 209.

⁴⁶ Cogan, ‘Who Lost Congo?’, p. 170.

⁴⁷ Gijs, ‘Fighting the Red Peril in the Congo’, p. 273.

⁴⁸ Gijs, ‘Fighting the Red Peril in the Congo’, p. 276.

⁴⁹ Weissman, ‘What Really Happened in Congo’, p. 14.

⁵⁰ Guahar, ‘The United States and Overthrowing of Democracy in Congo’, p. 877.

⁵¹ Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, p. 370.

⁵² Guahar, ‘The United States and Overthrowing of Democracy in Congo’, pp. 871-872.

⁵³ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, p. 143.

The issue with assuming that Mobutu was an American puppet is that it creates a rough estimation of the narrative of how he claimed leadership without properly considering the nuance of what happened. This, therefore, contributes to the gap in historiography and leaves the events of his appointment relatively underdiscussed.

This tendency to prioritise the Western perspective has resulted in an overemphasis on Cold War dynamics to explain Mobutu's rise to power. While the US and Belgium played undeniable roles in the Congo Crisis – by financially backing the army and being involved in political manoeuvring – this narrative simplifies and overshadows the reality. By framing Mobutu primarily as a Cold War puppet, historians risk ignoring the internal Congolese dynamics, the agency of Mobutu himself, and the broader African context in which his ascent occurred. The assumption that the CIA installed Mobutu is a compelling argument, but it is often told without any nuance. Through this, the specifics of Mobutu's appointment as leader have been lost. Historiography, therefore, seems to assume that he gained power because the CIA placed him in power. This distortion reflects how the concerns over Cold War dynamics shape the historiographical interpretations. These assumptions are at the expense of acknowledging other factors such as postcolonial struggles or internal complexities. Therefore, while Western involvement was significant, a more balanced perspective is needed. Mobutu was not merely a Cold War instrument, but an active political actor.

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The second tendency of historiography is the overemphasis on the importance of Patrice Lumumba's assassination. In January 1961, Lumumba was assassinated in Katanga.⁵⁴ Since then, his death has received high interest in Cold War historiography. Mobutu's ascension, by comparison, has been reduced to a secondary consequence of the assassination as a result. While the death of Lumumba is a significant event, its prominence overshadows critical analysis of Mobutu's rise. Mobutu is sidelined as a culprit of the murder who happens to seize control afterwards. Instead of examining the extermination as a turning point in the nation, it should also be seen as step in Mobutu's rise to power. Mobutu was invaluable to the assassination and utilised the murder to his advantage in the broader

⁵⁴ Gerard Emmanuel, and Bruce Kuklick, *Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba* (Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 1.

political landscape, further analysis of this must be considered to fully understand the complexities of Mobutu's leadership.

Lumumba's political downfall and eventual assassination have been overemphasised because of the initial mystery over the events that took place. Its early lack of coverage, combined with the Cold War narratives, and controversy surrounding it have led to a tendency to overemphasise the importance of his assassination.

The event sparked 'a ferocious campaign of disinformation' around the world about what happened to Lumumba.⁵⁵ It had a dramatic public impact at the time, causing various demonstrations in the US and Belgium.⁵⁶ Despite this controversy, the murder was shrouded in mystery for 'almost forty years'.⁵⁷ This stems from an extensive cover-up operation by the players involved.⁵⁸ Lumumba's death has hence become a contentious topic, surrounded by denial and contradicting evidence.⁵⁹ Over time, various investigations have attempted to resolve the reasoning behind the case. Since these investigations and the release of documents detailing his assassination, historiography on the subject has become rich in detail. De Witte, Fenby and Wright, for example, recount the story on almost an hour-by-hour basis.⁶⁰

In 1975, one investigation into Lumumba's murder revealed CIA plans for his assassination.⁶¹ This has fed into the already rampant narrative that Lumumba and Mobutu were Cold War props. The issue with this is that it ignores the other complexities of the assassination and places an assumption that Mobutu's appointment was merely an act of the CIA. Scholars such as Gibbs claim that Mobutu was 'working for the CIA' and because he 'played a key role in [Lumumba's] death', the CIA is responsible.⁶²

It is believed that the CIA's misconception of Lumumba being a Soviet pawn is what led to his assassination. Due to this, historiography tends to pay 'particular attention to the role played by the United States' in the murder.⁶³ Historiography leans more towards questioning the moral responsibility

⁵⁵ Ludo De Witte, Renee Fenby, and Ann Wright, *The Assassination of Lumumba* (Verso, 2022), p. xix.

⁵⁶ Thomas R. Kanza, *Conflict in the Congo: The Rise and Fall of Lumumba* (Penguin, 1972), p. 322.

⁵⁷ De Witte, Fenby and Wright, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, p. xix.

⁵⁸ De Witte, Fenby and Wright, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, pp. 133-152, pp. 154-157.

⁵⁹ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, p. 3.

⁶⁰ De Witte, Fenby and Wright, *The Assassination of Lumumba*.

⁶¹ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, p. 3.

⁶² Gibbs, 'Review: Let Us Forget Unpleasant Memories', pp. 176-177.

⁶³ Reid, *The Lumumba Plot*, p. 14.

of the CIA, and places much of the responsibility on them for the assassination.⁶⁴ Emmanuel and Kuklick spend much of their work discussing the morals behind the US assassinating Lumumba without properly elaborating on whether they did.⁶⁵ They describe America as having a decision between ‘lesser evils’, implying that the US appointed Mobutu in place of Lumumba.⁶⁶

The US feared that communism spreading in Africa would be detrimental and avoided it by any means.⁶⁷ Cohen asserts that President Eisenhower nearly deployed NATO forces to Congo to counter Lumumba’s reign, citing his anti-Belgian stance and supposed Soviet sympathies.⁶⁸ The Eisenhower Administration alleged that Lumumba “was an African Castro, a Soviet instrument.”⁶⁹

Emmanuel and Kuklick, however, contend this by mentioning that ‘generic anticommunism [did not] motivate the president.’⁷⁰ During his reign, Lumumba made it clear that he would not accept foreign control over his governance. He asked for support from the United States and the USSR, visualising a centralized state that could later join the Pan-African Union.⁷¹ Lumumba was viewed as trying to push the West away, but it was more in a post-colonial sense than in a communist-leaning sense.⁷² Despite Lumumba’s efforts to remain neutral to both blocs, the West perceived him increasingly through Cold War anxieties. The CIA and US government became highly concerned by Lumumba, comparing him to Hitler and Castro.⁷³ Eisenhower even reportedly “expressed his wish that Lumumba would fall into a river full of crocodiles”.⁷⁴

These perceptions grew unease within the US government, which began to frame Lumumba not as a political challenge, but as a threat to regional stability. Communist or not, Lumumba was perceived as a persistent source of instability in Congo by W. Averell Harriman. In a message to Kennedy, he described him as a “rabble-rousing speaker” and a “shrewd maneuverer” who would

⁶⁴ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, p. 148.

⁶⁵ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, pp. 136-141.

⁶⁶ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, p. 137.

⁶⁷ Bruce Kuklick, ‘Killing Lumumba’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 158.2 (2014), pp. 144-152 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24640202>> [Accessed 7 February 2025], p. 144.

⁶⁸ Cohen, ‘Who Lost Congo?’, p. 169.

⁶⁹ Gleijeses, “Flee! The White Giants Are Coming!”, p. 209.

⁷⁰ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, p. 148.

⁷¹ Gijs, ‘Fighting the Red Peril in the Congo’, p. 20.

⁷² Kuklick, ‘Killing Lumumba’, p. 150.

⁷³ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, p. 148.

⁷⁴ ‘The Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-60’, *Africa US Department of State*, 14 (1992), p. 459.

“continue to cause difficulties.”⁷⁵ The US saw him as having left-wing advisers and Soviet influences.⁷⁶

This growing threat perception culminated in discussions within the US administration about the most effective means of neutralising Lumumba. Members recall discussions about whether operations should be covert or military.⁷⁷ Some individuals assert they recall the President issuing a specific order for Lumumba’s assassination.⁷⁸ The CIA employed various tactics to silence Lumumba, to certain levels of success.⁷⁹ They began ‘Operation Wizard’, which aimed to remove Lumumba’s authority as leader and support his political opponents.⁸⁰ Eventually, the CIA sent instructions to “assassinate Lumumba in any way” possible.⁸¹

Weissman argues that the US ‘acknowledge that the CIA contributed to the fall of Lumumba, who lost a power struggle with Joseph Mobutu, the pro-Western head of Congo's army.’⁸² Here, he implies that Mobutu was not put in place by the US but instead showed more strength than Lumumba. Ultimately, as events unfolded, Lumumba’s political downfall occurred less because of direct US imposition and more as a power struggle within the Congo itself.

By catering the narratives to Cold War ideology, historians inadvertently obscure the longer-term consequence of the unchallenged rise of Mobutu. Mobutu’s appointment, while aided by Lumumba’s removal, is hence often treated as a secondary event. This narrow framing risks reducing a complex postcolonial dynamic into a Cold War proxy, neglecting how Mobutu was enabled, and sustained beyond the immediate affair of Lumumba’s assassination.

Mobutu himself is often mentioned offhandedly as a character who emerges within the assassination story and takes Lumumba’s place. Some historians assume that Mobutu was simply positioned by the CIA to take over from Lumumba after his assassination.⁸³ Historiography speaks about the CIA installing Cyrille Adoula as Prime Minister in 1961.⁸⁴ Gibbs recounts how he won by four votes, crediting it to America’s lavish support of him.⁸⁵ This same narrative is used to credit Mobutu’s rise to

⁷⁵ Reid, *The Lumumba Plot*, p. 350.

⁷⁶ Reid, *The Lumumba Plot*, p. 350.

⁷⁷ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, p. 143.

⁷⁸ Kuklick, ‘Killing Lumumba’, p. 150.

⁷⁹ Weissman, ‘What Really Happened in Congo’, p. 16.

⁸⁰ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, pp. 145-146.

⁸¹ Kuklick, ‘Killing Lumumba’, p. 151.

⁸² Weissman, ‘What Really Happened in Congo’, p. 14.

⁸³ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, p. 152.

⁸⁴ Gibbs, ‘Review: Misrepresenting the Congo Crisis’, p. 455.

⁸⁵ Gibbs, ‘Review: Misrepresenting the Congo Crisis’, p. 455.

power as being funded and supported by the US. This is inaccurate, for the US did not initially push for Mobutu to be put in place. The CIA made efforts to dismiss Lumumba and assist Kasavubu in becoming leader in his place during 1960.⁸⁶ Therefore showcasing that the CIA did not entirely back Mobutu at this point. As Emmanuel and Kuklick write: 'The CIA's influence on Mobutu in September [...] is overestimated.'⁸⁷

Responsibility of the assassination is often placed solely on the CIA. Mobutu himself is therefore usually referred to as a mere pawn within the story. While the Agency 'had not actually assassinated him' it is claimed to have been heavily responsible.⁸⁸ The US did not admit any responsibility, only that they had been 'kept informed' of Belgium's plans.⁸⁹ Claiming that the CIA had 'no direct role in Lumumba's eventual death'.⁹⁰ The US was not directly responsible for Lumumba's killing, it was Lumumba's 'African enemies' that plotted and enacted assassination.⁹¹

While it is true that 'two Belgian law enforcement officers commanded the African firing squad that shot him', this should not eclipse the agency exercised by Mobutu himself.⁹² From the beginning, Mobutu was more than a pawn in the assassination. In 1960, sensing political instability, he formed the 'College of Commissioners' to help manoeuvre his way into power.⁹³ His ability to act decisively and direct orders is shown in his initiative to suspend 'parliament and the constitution', which positioned himself as the de facto ruler.⁹⁴

This sequence of events underscores the issue of focusing intensely on Lumumba's assassination. Scholars neglect Mobutu's rise, treating it as an unforeseen consequence. The hyper focus on Lumumba's death has contributed to the gap in historiography by creating a narrative of martyrdom rather than political analysis. The solution to this problem is to focus less on the complexities of Lumumba's murder or the cover-up mission, and focus instead on the broader context it appears in. When focusing on how Mobutu worked his positioning during the assassination and contributed to the plot, a more accurate narrative of Mobutu's rise within the assassination can be seen.

⁸⁶ Gauhar, 'The United States and Overthrowing of Democracy in Congo', p. 873.

⁸⁷ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, p. 112.

⁸⁸ Gibbs, 'Review: Misrepresenting the Congo Crisis', p. 454.

⁸⁹ Gauhar, 'The United States and Overthrowing of Democracy in Congo', p. 875

⁹⁰ Martin Kettle, 'President ordered murder of Congo leader', *The Guardian*, 10 August 2000, p. 1.

⁹¹ Kuklick, 'Killing Lumumba', p. 152.

⁹² Kuklick, 'Killing Lumumba', p. 152.

⁹³ Emmanuel and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, p. 112.

⁹⁴ Weissman, 'What Really Happened in Congo', p. 16.

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Mobutu's military acquisition of the country (his two coups in 1960 and 1965) are often sidelined as inevitable events in response to the Cold War dynamics and Lumumba's assassination. There is a lot of coverage of Mobutu's two coups, but very little focus on how he manipulated the political situation for them to be successful. De Witte credits the coup as being 'Mobutu's rise to power', without elaborating how he managed to manipulate the situation.⁹⁵ Historiography surrounding the 1960 and 1965 coups tend to highlight external factors – notably the CIA backing and anti-communist rhetoric – at the expense of a deeper analysis in how Mobutu played into the post-independent disarray. While international involvement was undeniably significant, simplifying Mobutu's seizing of power to a result of American intervention neglects the complex internal dynamics and deliberate political choices he made. Historiography frames Mobutu as being a passive figure enacting American interests, which diminishes the structural weaknesses that he exploited in gaining prominence. It was instead Mobutu's manipulation of internal political issues and harnessing international anxieties about communism that could allow him to present himself as a viable leader.

Mobutu emerges as a key figure in the 1960 coup à fact, dismantling authority and establishing a new leadership. He proved himself to be a strong candidate for military rule over the country. However, historiography portrays a narrative that America is responsible for Mobutu's coups, therefore undermining his political manipulation of the situation. While the US was heavily involved, it has been portrayed as crucial to instalment of a new government.

The US was complicit with the coup, however, the extent of this 'support it enjoyed [from] the West' is unknown.⁹⁶ It is well established in historiography that Mobutu received external backing from the CIA.⁹⁷ Young and Turner claim that after the coup, his control over the armed forces and support from the CIA solidified his role as a key political arbiter in the country.⁹⁸ This much is true, however, historical narratives of this coup place emphasis on the anti-communist consequence. Through removing Lumumba, he expelled Soviet and Czech diplomats, suppressed communist sympathizers, and eliminated the perceived communist threat.⁹⁹ When historiography places emphasis

⁹⁵ De Witte, 'The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu, 1963-5', p. 121.

⁹⁶ Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, p. 53.

⁹⁷ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, pp. 146-147.

⁹⁸ Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, p. 51.

⁹⁹ Gijs, 'Fighting the Red Peril in the Congo', p. 287.

on this anti-communist narrative, it inadvertently implies he was an anti-communist pawn used by the Americans.

Some historians view the coup as being entirely an American decision, Nzongola-Ntalaja outright claims ‘that the coup was engineered by external forces determined to promote Western interests.’¹⁰⁰ Gleijeses implies that the US ‘plotted a military coup’, which asserts that the coup was American responsibility.¹⁰¹ Instead, Larry Devlin tipped off Mobutu about the assassination of Lumumba, which can be portrayed as a recommendation to pursue the coup rather than a plot.¹⁰² It is dangerous to imply that the CIA were more involved than they were, because it undermines the internal justification for the coup and Mobutu’s grip on power.

The coup led the US – under international pressure – to support reconvening the Congolese parliament in forming a new government.¹⁰³ Kasavubu was placed as leader but quickly lost confidence from his people and the US.¹⁰⁴ The resulting disarray from the reorganising of government created a political vacuum that Mobutu meticulously exploited. Mobutu used the breakdown of Lumumba’s rule as a pivotal opening to seize control, for he had been preparing and waiting for a moment to take control.¹⁰⁵ On the 14th of September, Mobutu staged a “peaceful revolution”, removing leaders and civilian government.¹⁰⁶ Within three days, he orchestrated his coup, which Devlin described as “the best possible solution.”¹⁰⁷

Hence, the aftermath of Lumumba’s death should be seen as an instrument in Mobutu gaining influence through his own strategy and manipulation. Historical narratives fail to properly account for Mobutu’s manoeuvring of power within these circumstances. It was this event that convinced the US to find favour with Mobutu; one US analyst claiming that “the United States must support Mobutu”.¹⁰⁸ He essentially proved his capabilities of political manipulation by his own strength, without the US first propping him as leader.

On the 24th of November 1965, Mobutu seized power from President Kasavubu in his second coup. Historiography speaks quite surely about Mobutu ‘deposing Kasavubu’ and obtaining Presidency over

¹⁰⁰ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, p. 146.

¹⁰¹ Gleijeses, “Flee! The White Giants Are Coming!”, p. 210.

¹⁰² Reid, *The Lumumba Plot*, p. 454.

¹⁰³ Weissman, ‘What Really Happened in Congo’, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ Ikambana, *Mobutu’s Totalitarian Political System*, Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁵ Reid, *The Lumumba Plot*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁶ Reid, *The Lumumba Plot*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁷ Weissman, ‘What Really Happened in Congo’, p. 20.

¹⁰⁸ De Witte, ‘The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu’, p. 120.

the country.¹⁰⁹ He declared the Second Republic and neutralised rival politicians.¹¹⁰ Mobutu was installed as leader through military action rather than through a formal democratic process. However, there is a tendency to also frame this coup as an inevitable outcome, primarily due to CIA support. This narrative continues to oversimplify the political context and undermines the actions of the Congolese. Historians have, therefore, undermined the responsibility of Mobutu and the Congolese by framing the coup as a Cold War proxy. The CIA is viewed as the subject and Mobutu as the object, whereas the CIA is merely a powerful support for Mobutu's own decision-making.

The extent of the CIA involvement is well-documented and indisputable. Between 1964 and 1965, the CIA played a major role in supporting the coup. Financial and military assistance was invaluable for achieving victory and would define the dynamic later during his reign. Mobutu triumphed with the support of the CIA, UN troops and the Congolese army (ANC).¹¹¹ The agency not only funded covert operations but also facilitated military interventions. "The CIA moved swiftly to support the suppression of the uprising, funding US air support".¹¹² American C-130 aircraft handled the logistics and were the only transport systems used to move supplies.¹¹³ America also provided a covert air force of T-28s and B-26s.¹¹⁴ Additionally, the US Air Force conducted napalm bombings in support of Mobutu-aligned forces.¹¹⁵

Receiving support from the US was not reactive, it was strategic. As noted, 'the decision to rely on white mercenaries [...] came down [...] to a question of costs.'¹¹⁶ The US was hesitant to directly support Mobutu, so to credit their strategy entirely would be foolish.¹¹⁷ Washington was not even aware of Mobutu's plans to become president when they began funding the coup, Larry Devlin reportedly withheld evidence of his ambitions.¹¹⁸ This suggests that by not fully disclosing Mobutu's ambitions, Devlin may have signalled indirect support for the coup, allowing it to unfold despite potential disapproval from the US. Therefore, implying that it was Mobutu's political manipulation that put him in power, not merely US strategy.

The historiographical treatment of his coup in 1965 often fails to reckon with the agency of Congolese actors and Mobutu's own strategy. By privileging the CIA's role, it risks reaffirming a neo-

¹⁰⁹ Gauhar, 'The United States and Overthrowing of Democracy in Congo', p. 873.

¹¹⁰ De Witte, 'The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu', p. 121.

¹¹¹ Gleijeses, "Flee! The White Giants Are Coming!", p. 210.

¹¹² De Witte, 'The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu', p. 110.

¹¹³ Gleijeses, "Flee! The White Giants Are Coming!", p. 219.

¹¹⁴ Reid, *The Lumumba Plot*, p. 451.

¹¹⁵ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, p. 137.

¹¹⁶ Gleijeses, "Flee! The White Giants Are Coming!", p. 235.

¹¹⁷ De Witte, 'The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu', p. 121.

¹¹⁸ De Witte, 'The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu', p. 121.

colonial narrative that places African politics in the hands of foreign powers. Mobutu's rise was not inevitable - it was made possible through a mix of internal weaknesses, external interventions and Mobutu's manipulation.

Another issue with the assumption that Mobutu's ascent to power was an inevitable response to post-independent instability is that it perpetuates the notion that it was unplanned. This framing diminishes the complexity of Congolese political life and fails to emphasise how Mobutu utilised the structural weaknesses in gaining control. By framing Mobutu's rise as a natural resolution to chaos in the area, many historical accounts reduce the agency of Congolese leaders and reinforce a paternalistic narrative grounded in Cold War-era thinking.

Mobutu himself justified his coup by invoking national interest, 'claiming he wanted to restore peace and national unity' after the first Congo crisis.¹¹⁹ The first Congo crisis had devolved the state into chaos, with various economic factors coming to the fore, including inflation and economic decline.¹²⁰ This economic crisis is often treated as proof that democratic governance was unviable, which perpetuates strongman narratives. The image of Mobutu as a stabiliser for the struggling state was reinforced both internally and externally. Congolese elite and international actors, such as Spaak, saw Mobutu as a tool for reestablishing order. Spaak asked him directly to intervene in the political situation.¹²¹ Mobutu carefully cultivated his image as a loyal soldier and emerging politician, which helped position him as the most viable option as leader amongst the population.¹²²

The sequence of events in the coup have been interpreted through the lens of the African 'strongman' trope. Historiography often frames such post-colonial coups as an inevitable result of internal dysfunction, rather than deliberate acts. Mobutu, described as a good general, "who is more of a politician than a soldier", is seen more as somebody who stood up to a role needed to be taken rather than someone who played into politics to gain influence.¹²³

Mobutu's rise in prominence was not sudden, nor was it coincidence, nor was it simply filling a vacuum. As Chief of Staff and a central figure in Lumumba's downfall, Mobutu had already positioned himself as a powerful candidate for leadership. His rise is not merely a consequence of instability, but a calculated utilisation of affairs.

¹¹⁹ Ikambana, *Mobutu's Totalitarian Political System*, Chapter 4.

¹²⁰ De Witte, 'The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu', p. 109.

¹²¹ De Witte, 'The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu', p. 120.

¹²² De Witte, 'The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu', p. 109.

¹²³ De Witte, 'The Suppression of the Congo Rebellions and the Rise of Mobutu', p. 121.

Mobutu's coups in 1960 and 1965 should not be viewed through the singular lens of Cold War politics or American interests. Though the CIA played a significant role in supporting Mobutu, this alone does not provide the full narrative. Mobutu had clear political intent with his coups, leveraging political instability to gain influence. Mobutu manipulated the dynamics within the country and played into American interests to give off an image of good leadership. The American anti-communist narrative reinforces the preexisting neo-colonial view that politics in Africa is an American decision. Instead, Mobutu's coups must be viewed as calculated and strategic interventions shaped by a combination of domestic power struggles and his ability to garner Western support.

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Mobutu's rise to power represents a pivotal moment in post-independence Congolese history. Yet, despite its importance, it has been sidelined and neglected in African historiography. Through understanding why it has been neglected, the narrative can be accounted for and corrected. It can be seen how narratives are shaped not just by the events themselves, but how they are viewed by history.

The seizing of power in the 1960s marks the beginning of a transformation into the authoritarian state under the name of Zaire. Mobutu's thirty-two-year rule over the country led to economic disarray and various social issues. The events leading up to his rule – and subsequent manipulation of them – are crucial for defining Mobutu's governance. Mobutu's dictatorship became a model of twentieth century clientelism for the US in Africa and provided a significant change in direction for Congolese independence. However, Mobutu and his reign is often viewed independently from the events leading up to it. The story of how Mobutu took power is not simply a preface to his regime, but central to understanding his character and how he obtained control.

The 'Mobutu Gap'- the historiographical void surrounding his appointment and political agency – is a product of the three dominant tendencies which have been addressed thoroughly. These perspectives - Cold War centred narratives, an overemphasis on Patrice Lumumba, and assumptions over the inevitability of Mobutu's coup - reduce a complex political transition into a mere reactionary consequence or footnote in historiography. Diluting Mobutu's ascendancy is to discredit a major turning point in Congolese history. The solution to this gap is to reconceptualise Mobutu's rise not as a side-effect, but as a significant historical event worthy of its own separate investigation.

The Western narrative in historiography centres Cold War dynamics over internal politics or Mobutu's political manipulation. While foreign intervention undeniably shaped the events within the country, it has been overemphasised and rendered African political actors as secondary to Western

strategies. Mobutu is viewed as a puppet, a framing that takes away from his motivations and strategies. To address this, Mobutu's political manoeuvring should be centred, treating external influence as one factor among many, rather than the primary cause.

Lumumba's assassination is rightfully viewed as a defining moment in Congolese history. However, the focus it receives overshadows the broader power struggle that followed. The narrow lens focusing on how Lumumba was assassinated flattens the narrative to one of martyrdom and not political calculation. To correct this, Lumumba's assassination must be situated within the wider framework of Congolese leadership transitions. It should not be seen as the only focal point for history in the region, but as a catalyst for new and complex power dynamics in the country.

Historians frame Mobutu's coups as inevitable consequences of CIA involvement, instability after the assassination or the absence of leadership. Such narratives decontextualise Mobutu's own agency and obscure how power was seized. A better approach is to centre elements that restore the complexity and intentionality of Mobutu's rise.

The process leading to Mobutu's appointment as head of state is key to understanding the trajectory of post-colonial Congo. Only by re-centring internal political dynamics and broadening the scope of investigation can a more accurate account of Mobutu and Congolese history be portrayed. Through this, 'The Mobutu Gap' can effectively be filled in historiography.

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