

# BOOK REVIEW

**Erik Kennes and Miles Larmer. *The Katangese Gendarmes and War in Central Africa*.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. xvi + 289 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780253021397.

*The Katangese Gendarmes and War in Central Africa* by Erik Kennes and Miles Larmer is a testament to the value of new perspectives on Congolese history. During the early 1960s, scholars considered Katangese troops to be the tool of continuing neo-colonial domination by Belgian political and commercial interests over the Democratic Republic of the Congo. After Katangese leader Moïse Tshombe managed to rebound from the defeat of the Katangese secession to become the Congolese prime minister in 1964, Katangese units played a crucial role in defeating the leftist revolt of the Armée Populaire du Congo. Outside observers, recognizing the role of covert U.S. funding for the Katangese forces within the Congolese army, viewed the soldiers again as pawns of Western intervention. After dictator Mobutu Sese Seko ousted Tshombe in 1965, Western social scientists assigned the subsequent purge of the Katangese into dominant tropes of nation-building. The Katangese switched loyalties from the Portuguese effort to stay in Angola to the Angolan Marxist MPLA regime in 1975 and led two invasions of the DRC in the late 1970s, defying the model of Cold War politics that had served as the lens for examining Congolese politics under Mobutu. Using interviews and a range of archival sources, Kennes and Larmer place the choices and options available to Katangese soldiers at the center of their analysis.

The ideal of forming a Katangese nation, rather than serving as a patchy smokescreen for Western intervention, became a unifying goal that could fit into widely divergent ideological frameworks. Furthermore, leaders of the Katangese political exile movement wove together a foundation that drew from Marxist critiques of Mobutu's regime while appropriating Mobutu's cultural nationalism. In keeping with the secretive record of Katangese military units, most of the details on how the Katangese military leadership pushed onward rely on accounts and documents that cannot easily be verified. For example, Katangese military officials claimed that they had reached an agreement that the MPLA would help the Katangese invade the DRC in 1975. Since the Congolese government backed the MPLA's anti-Communist FNLA rivals in the opening of the Angolan civil war, such an agreement would have been certainly logical, but the MPLA

ultimately was not willing to try to oust Mobutu directly. The fact the Katangese rebels never could produce a written copy of this deal, not surprisingly, favored the MPLA, who then used the Katangese as a bargaining chip with Mobutu.

As Kennes and Larmer point out, Mobutu's opponents drew from a wide range of ideological positions, despite being based in the Marxist-Leninist state of Angola. The Katangese invasions of the Democratic Republic in 1977 and 1978, far from being a Soviet plot to seize central Africa as U.S. officials believed, drew criticism from Angola's patron Cuba as a poorly-planned attack. Cuban and Angolan officials restrained the Katangese, even though the rebels trounced the Congolese forces and briefly seized much of the mineral wealth of the country. After the French and Moroccan governments sent troops to defeat the Katangese, the rebels found themselves unable to muster a response. Kennes and Larmer's mastery of the intricacies of Congolese exile politics under Mobutu is remarkable. The Katangese military made numerous liaisons with an array of older and younger Congolese dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s, as the Katangese rebel movement fractured among individual factions. Kennes and Larmer's approach is reminiscent (on a much smaller scale) of the dissection of internal divisions outlined by Stephen Ellis in his work on the African National Congress in exile. Unlike the ANC, the Katangese never managed to gain enough resources and support to operate independently of its Angolan patrons. After the fall of Mobutu in 1996, some Katangese rebel leaders entered Congolese politics and drew on the popularity of the former rebels in Katanga province to establish themselves in provincial politics.

Overall, this is a strong and innovative book. One minor disappointment is the lack of attention to the experiences of family members who accompanied the rebels into exile or to the experiences of the rebels beyond formal politics and military action. Another lies in the relative lack of discussion on how regional leaders and ordinary people in Katanga viewed the Katangese military movement. Despite these criticisms, *The Katangese Gendarmes and War in Central Africa* deserves a wide reading among scholars of nationalism and decolonization in post-colonial Africa.

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### For more reading on this subject, see:

Clark, John F. 1998. "Foreign Intervention in the Civil War of the Congo Republic." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 26 (1):31–36. doi:10.1017/S154845050000559X.

Nzongola-Ntalaja, Georges. 1994. "Violation of Democratic Rights in Zaire." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 22 (2):9–11. doi:10.1017/S1548450500004637.