Crisis in the Congo
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Crisis in the Congo

The Rise and Fall of Laurent Kabila

François Ngolet
For Tristane and Malina
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Preface

This book is a history of a critical period in Africa’s first continental war, a history that was researched and written—but not finished—by François Ngolet. A brain tumor took him from us quite suddenly on April 11, 2005. One day, he seemed fine; the next day, he was in the hospital; three days later, he was gone.

François’s death left everyone who knew him stunned and shattered. I and the rest of his colleagues in the College of Staten Island’s history department staggered through the rest of the school year in a daze; I daresay the department has yet to fully recover from losing François. He was, in many ways, the heartbeat of the place. François joined the department in 1995, the first historian hired in twenty years, and in time became equal parts big brother and mentor to nearly all who came after him. He welcomed us, took us under his wing, pushed us to remain focused on our research, and ran interference—taking committee assignments so we would not have to—to protect us.

As anyone who knew him could report, François possessed a spectacular smile and a musical laugh; if you were his colleague, he made you happy to go to work; and if you were his student, you felt lucky to be in his classroom. In any setting, he could play equal parts comic, intellectual, and catalyst for lively discussion. We knew him as a kind of hallway pundit and philosopher, leading discussions on current events with National Public Radio blaring in the background. His students knew him as a passionate and engaging teacher, stalking back and forth in front of the classroom, slapping the board with his hand, and emerging from each class meeting as if from battle, his smart suit spattered in chalk dust.

In the days and weeks after François’s passing, the conversations in the department’s corridors and stairwells had an amazing consistency: students mourned their favorite teacher, and colleagues marveled that so many of us thought of him as our closest friend.

For the entire time that I knew François, he had been working on this book. In the spring of 2005, he felt close enough to finishing the book that he paused to draft an introduction; sadly, just days before he went into hospital, his computer crashed, and he lost the introduction. And then it seemed, when we lost him so suddenly, that the book would not ever be completed.
As a result, this book is the product of François Ngolet’s years of research and writing, but it is not, obviously, the same book he would have produced had he lived to complete it. We can only guess at how he might have finished it, revised it, and framed the whole thing for publication. Thanks to a host of people, however, we have the next best thing: a book that sprang almost entirely from François’s capacious mind and then was cultivated, pruned, and brought to full flower through the loyalty of our publisher and the heroic efforts of two people: one of François’s dearest friends and one of mine.

The manuscript that François left behind was long and largely unedited. The first several chapters (of a projected ten) were in pretty good shape, complete segments of a larger whole. The rest of the chapters were rougher, something between long compilations of notes and first drafts. And that introduction was gone altogether. Fortunately, that did not scare off Ella Pearce, the editor of Palgrave Macmillan’s African Studies list. With some significant help, we thought we could pull the book together for publication. The critical first step came courtesy of Didier Gondola, François’s friend and fellow Congo scholar who wrote the Introduction. The project might have died if Didier had not intervened at that crucial moment. In the meantime, the dean of Arts and Humanities at the College of Staten Island, Francisco Soto, came up with some money to pay a freelance editor to work on getting the manuscript into publishable shape. Ella and I agreed that the ideal editor to take on the job would be our mutual friend Brendan O’Malley, himself not long out of publishing and now a Ph.D. candidate in history at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center. Brendan worked tirelessly, in the midst of juggling numerous other responsibilities, to get François’s chapters into book form. It is not at all an overstatement to say that Brendan’s name could easily grace this book’s cover too. We simply would not have a finished book if not for his efforts which, over time, far, far outstripped his wages. It is a testament to his loyalty that this project did not ruin our friendship. Finally, when it turned out that our finished manuscript had come in over the projected word count, Didier again saved the project by whittling it down.

In addition to Didier and Brendan, a large community of people helped to see this project through to completion. Maybe most importantly, François’s widow, Kim, has been steadfast in her commitment to getting François’s work published. None at Palgrave, including several successive editors of the African history list—Ella Pearce, Luba Ostashevsky, and Chris Chappell—has ever wavered in their support for the project, and for all the right reasons. Michael Elf too made indispensable interventions at Palgrave, and right when we needed it. At the College of Staten Island, Provost David Podell and Dean Francisco Soto showed sensitivity and grace in quietly supporting this project and
urging it on. With David’s and Francisco’s help, François’s colleagues in the Department of History at the College of Staten Island have named a seminar room in his honor and have long looked forward to the day when this book would be published. I am so happy that that day has come.

Finally, this book is dedicated to François’s daughters, Tristane and Malina. My fondest memories of François are of our long conversations about our daughters. His love for his girls was boundless. And on more than one occasion he told me that although Tristane and Malina were growing up in the United States, he hoped they would come to know Gabon, to know Africa. I still picture him walking near his Lambaréné family home, holding his girls’ hands, smiling in the equatorial sun. Tristane and Malina, your Dad wrote this book for you.

Michael S. Foley
Sheffield, England
François Ngolet’s sudden departure on April 11, 2005, has left a void among family members, friends, and colleagues. Ngolet was a family man, a father of two lovely daughters, Tristane and Malina. He was, for all his friends and colleagues, as passionate for intellectual pursuit as he was for his family’s wellbeing. Ngolet was born in Lambaréné, Gabon, in 1961, at the maternity ward founded by none other than Dr. Albert Schweitzer, as part of a missionary hospital that the Alsatian physician, philosopher, and musician had established there in 1913. Ngolet, the iconoclast that he was, liked to quip about being delivered by Schweitzer, the epitome of the colonial civilizing mission and the “white man’s burden,” and growing up to become a passionate historian who often indicted colonization and its postcolonial avatar, globalization. After completing a B.A. in History at the University of Libreville, Gabon, he moved to Montpellier, France, where he completed his graduate studies and earned a Ph.D. in African history in 1994 at the Université Paul-Valéry.

His decision to specialize in the history of Gabon was not dictated by the autochthonous edge alone nor was it justified only by his familiarity with the land and the peoples of Gabon. Ngolet created a niche and filled a gap in a field long deserted by historians based outside of Gabon in favor of the ubiquitous West Africa or the Central African conundrum. In fact, Gabon is so imperviously tucked between West Africa and Central Africa that it seems off the beaten tracks, a backwater territory explored only by rare audacious erudites such as French geographer Gilles Sautter, historian Jan Vansina and sociologist and anthropologist Georges Balandier. Half the size of France and home to some of the most diverse ecosystems on the planet, Gabon had long mystified researchers with its low population density. With less than 1.5 million inhabitants, Gabon ranks 226th in the world in terms of population density, coming close to desertic countries such as Libya or Chad and sub-polar Canada or Iceland.
Following Sautter’s majestic work, François Ngolet attempted to tease out this demographic anomaly. Unlike Sautter, who used broad brush strokes to depict the historical and social forces, from slavery to colonization, that colluded to ebb population growth in Equatorial Africa, Ngolet focused on the Bakele people of the Gabon Estuary. Using a multidisciplinary approach and his intimate knowledge of Bakele’s oral tradition, Ngolet examined how internal as well as external factors militated against demographic gain along the Gabon Estuary.

After he moved to the United States, Ngolet’s academic career as well as his personal life were profoundly impacted after he befriended Christopher Gray, another historian of Gabon who grew up in Massachusetts and was three years older than Ngolet. Ngolet and Gray, for those of us who saw them interact together, had so much in common: Gabon, of course, and their staunch third-world outlook and activism, but also their passion for life, their love of friendship, and the fact that they never took themselves too seriously. Together, they published one important article that explores the ways in which the timber industry in the Middle Ogooué area of Gabon thwarted the creation of a stable “labor market” that integrated the demand of the colonial wage-earning sector with the needs for the local economy. Gray and Ngolet first presented their findings at the *Africa’s Urban Past* conference held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in June 1996. This was where I met them for the first time. I became instantly fond of them and could rarely think of one without thinking of the other. Gray and Ngolet were like identical twins, united in their love for life and the academic pursuit of the complexity of the land where Ngolet was born and that Gray had adopted. In October 2000, Gray died of cancer, leaving behind his Congolese wife Kisanga and his three children. He was forty-two. A rising star in his department at Florida International University, Gray actively participated in the development of several programs there. His book *Colonial Rule and Crisis in Equatorial Africa: Southern Gabon, ca. 1850–1940* was published posthumously by the University of Rochester Press with the assistance of many people, including his former adviser Phyllis Martin. Ngolet too departed at age forty-two. Like Gray, he left behind the fruit of many years of meticulous but unfinished research and writing that speaks volumes to his versatility.

Like most African Studies specialists, Ngolet was dismayed at the horrific events that unfolded in Rwanda in 1994 and climax in the worst genocide the African continent had ever experienced in its postcolonial years. With nearly 1 million victims, clubbed or hacked to death by machetes within less than 100 days, the Rwandan genocide stands out in the postwar era as an aberration, not only for the apathetic posture adopted by the international community but also for the mass indoctrination and mass participation that spurred individuals and groups into
butchering their own neighbors and even their own relatives, because of either their ethnicity (Tutsi) or their political views (moderate Hutu). For all of these reasons, scholars, activists, victims, as well as perpetrators have contributed to the enormous corpus of memoirs, studies, and fictional works about the Rwandan genocide, in Kinyarwanda, French, and English. The Rwandan genocide served also as a trigger that unleashed a catastrophe of such magnitude that it came to be known as Africa’s first continental war, a conflict that continues to wreak havoc in the heart of Africa.

Even though the Rwandan crisis has elicited a considerable number of books, only a few of them have attempted to link the turmoil in neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with patterns of retaliatory violence that surfaced in the Great Lakes region in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. The Tutsi-led Rwandan government in Kigali has so deftly tapped into the West’s sense of guilt that the international community continues to look the other way and to silence the “other genocide,” the plight of the Congolese people. By all accounts, the current war in the eastern Congo, considered to be the bloodiest conflict since World War II (with a toll of nearly 6 million lives since 1997), has received scant coverage from the international media compared to Rwanda or Darfur. It also has not led to the kind of public outcry and mobilization that is commensurate with the magnitude of human and ecological loss. Admittedly, Congo’s tragedy has been fueled by transnational corporations’ insatiable greed for its abundant mineral ore deposits, including coltan, and not by ethnic conflicts that existed in the region from time immemorial.

Africa’s first continental war has led not only to a scramble for Congo’s minerals. It is deeply connected to territorial claims that are rooted in the absurdity of colonial boundaries. With an area larger than Western Europe, the Congo has long been held together, albeit with an iron fist, under Mobutu’s three-decade long dictatorship. Indeed, the Congo so dwarfed its neighbors in terms of both its resources and its sheer size that the demise of Mobutu and the civil strife that ensued aroused deep-seated convictions within the Great Lakes region that the Congo or at least some tracts of its territories were up for the taking. This thinking was largely promoted by foregone conclusions in Washington that the Congo was too big to be effectively governed and that only by balkanizing its territory could it survive the post-Mobutu chaos. In 1997, after thirty-two years in power, an ailing Mobutu was overthrown by a ragtag movement known as Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre (Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaïre—ADFL). The ADFL was initially backed by the new Tutsi-led Rwandan government and was led by a longtime yet obscure political foe of Mobutu’s regime. Few in the Congo had heard of Laurent-Désiré
Kabila until he assumed the leadership of the ADFL and agreed to be the instrument of Kigali’s territorial ambitions in the eastern Congo. However, this coalition of fortune was doomed to fail because it had to accommodate too many constituencies: its Rwandan backers, Congo’s political opposition to Mobutu’s rule, and its own military factions that ran the entire gamut from Mai Mai fighters (local militias) to Tutsi troops to child soldiers known as Kadogo. Its own ethnic cleavages, between Baluba of the Katanga region (Balubakat) and Congolese ethnic Tutsis (Banyamulenge) ended up undermining the tenuous equilibrium within the movement even before ADFL troops made their triumphant entrance into Kinshasa after a grueling seven-month trek from the eastern border where the rebellion had originally gathered steam. Moreover, Kabila’s inability to shed his cold war Marxist worldview alienated the support of Western governments and investors and made him vulnerable to attacks from the armed opposition.

François Ngolet’s book chronicles the making of this regional conflict, from the collapse of the ADFL coalition to the rise of Joseph Kabila, following Laurent Kabila’s assassination on January 16, 2001. More than a simple chronicle, the book follows the established genre of histoire immédiate (immediate history) that has shaped the historiography of the Congo since the first studies documenting what Colin Legum has called the “Congo Disaster.” In the early 1960s, as the Congo started its topsyturvy descent into the doldrums of civil chaos and became a cold war battleground, the CRISP (Centre de Recherche et d’Information Socio-Politiques) published a series of volumes, les dossiers du CRISP, that attempted to salvage contemporary documents, which CRISP scholars lamented could be lost for future generations, in order to “further the historical consciousness of the populations involved and to be ‘useable’ for actions in the near future.”

Only by intersecting both historical narratives and policy analyses did histoire immédiate acquire a solid foothold within the field of African Studies. Initially shaped by the cold war context and the Marxist approach of its promoters, notably Belgian historian and political scientist Benoît Verhaegen, histoire immédiate was apparently so untrammeled with histoire engagée that the two were essentially indistinguishable. More recently, Bogumil Jewsiewicki and a team of Congolese scholars have steered histoire immédiate in a direction that deliberately blurs the disciplinary boundaries between history and other related disciplines such as sociology and political science. Their narratives no longer revolve around historical processes as such but shed light on the way historical events are negotiated and reconstructed by individuals and communities. Hence, they give a prominent role to oral and local sources in a way that mirrors Pierre Nora’s notion of lieux de mémoire.
Ngolet’s book follows in this tradition of *histoire immédiate*. Part One of the book discusses the short-lived alliance created by Laurent Kabila and its collapse as a result of internal ethnic tensions within the ADFL, military defeats, and the refugee crisis. Failure to implement the road map called for by the Lusaka Peace Agreement (signed on July 12, 1999) led to an impasse that eventually eroded Kabila’s power and alienated some of his international backers. Part Two looks at Kabila’s failure not just in terms of his inability to abide by the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement and thwart rebellious patterns that mired the post-Mobutu era. Ngolet looks also at the cycle of retaliatory violence that turned victims into perpetrators and links ethnic tensions to broader patterns of international interventionism motivated by the scramble for Congo’s wealth. This was the case in the Kisangani episode when two splintered rebel factions of the original RCD (Congolese Rally for Democracy), backed by Rwanda and Uganda respectively, battled out for the control of Congo’s fifth largest city and its lucrative diamond trade. Finally, Part Three focuses on the tumultuous transition that put Joseph Kabila in power following his father’s assassination on January 16, 2001. Ngolet argues that Joseph Kabila’s power hinged on his willingness to revive the peace process rather than on breaking the military stalemate. Winning the peace rather than the war has indeed been critical in buoying Joseph Kabila’s power as he faced challenges to legitimize his presidency. François Ngolet’s book is likely to become a useful source for scholars who endeavor to tease out the events and developments that led to Africa’s first continental war.