

Book Review: Congo

by Blog Admin

June 19, 2013

*The Democratic Republic of Congo has become one of the world's bloodiest hot spots, and despite recent peace agreements and democratic elections, the country is still plagued by army and militia violence. **Thomas Turner's** insightful book discusses how the deep-rooted causes of conflict have not been adequately addressed, and shows how current attempts to rebuild the shattered state and society of DRC are doomed to fail. **Joel Krupa** recommends this illuminating and important book for its passionately written chapters and rigorous analysis.*

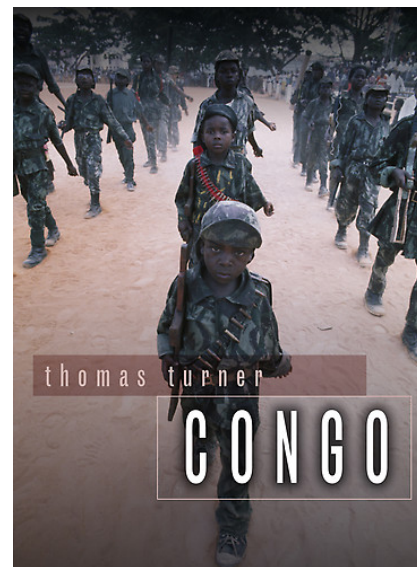
Congo. Thomas Turner. Polity. April 2013.

Find this book:

The Belgian Congo. Zaire. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). No matter the name currently in place, this country (ranked among Africa's largest in terms of land mass) has garnered world renown for its sprawling jungles, majestic eastern lowland gorillas, and Muhammed Ali's famous knockout win over heavyweight champion George Foreman in the capital of Kinshasa. Unfortunately, the DRC is even better known for extreme manifestations of the most unsavoury aspects of human nature: [acts of appalling cruelty epitomized in a seemingly endless cycle of horrific sexual violence](#), persistent [kleptocratic tendencies](#) among the political leadership, and [foreign-backed militia assaults](#) which perpetuate a war that, to date, has killed well over 20 million people since the end of World War Two.

Within this dark framework begins the austere titled book *Congo* by Thomas Turner. A deeply knowledgeable DRC Country specialist for non-government organization Amnesty International USA and author of *The Congo Wars*, Turner is an able guide with ample background on this nuanced region's multi-faceted character. His writing is a rich examination of the key components of the Congolese state's decrepitude: nightmarish patterns of sexual and physical violence, dishearteningly misallocated mineral and hydrocarbon deposits, politicized identity crises, and sour relationships with neighbouring countries (Burundi, Angola, Rwanda, and Uganda being prime foci). Few stones are left unturned as he systematically addresses a wide array of complex issues in an intelligent, readable manner.

Compact, information-dense, and frank, *Congo* mostly avoids (often dull) academic theorizing as concrete facts and figures are coolly unleashed at a prodigal rate. Turner has a way of keeping things moving, making the book an enjoyable read in spite of its undeniable rigour. Relative Africa novices – certainly a group in which this reviewer belongs – may find Turner's frequent use of organizational acronyms, relentless blitz of complex Congolese names, and jumpy writing style a bit hard to handle at times (hopefully, a detailed list of abbreviations provided at the beginning of the text and meticulous explanatory notes highlighted at the conclusion will do much to remedy this), but this is probably necessary given the number of actors involved. Other criticisms, however, do not really come to mind; quite simply, this book is excellent.



kindle edition

amazon

The still-flailing Republic's problems are deep-rooted, but some of the best documented cases commenced with the European 'discovery' of the Congo Free State. Under brutal Belgian rule, the Congolese people suffered mightily. The sheer scale of the cruelties visited on the colonized indigenous peoples – barbaric mass sexual violence, gruesome beheadings, and other atrocities – were facilitated by a hegemonic tripartite governance structure (Catholic Church, government administrators, and powerful state-backed corporate interests) that was corroborated by complicit international forces including the Americans and the French. Even independence, realized in 1960, brought little reprieve from misery and foreign political interference. Turner notes that “when newly independent Congo plunged into chaos in 1960, that chaos was Belgium's fault in three main senses... Belgium had exported the controversy between Catholics and anti-clericals into its colonies [making governing under immense fragility all but impossible due to the lingering enmity between the two groups]... [in addition] Congo's nascent elite had given almost no apprenticeship before being asked to direct the country.” Thirdly, and perhaps worst of all, Belgium continued to attempt to influence and destabilize the struggling region after liberation, thereby dooming the DRC's prospects and ushering in disorder.

It is rare that one feels upset when reading an academic assessment on virtually any issue, but a chapter entitled “Congo's War Against Women” will leave even the most hardened cynic queasy in the stomach. Congo holds the dubious distinction of being one of the worst places on Earth to be a woman, and plain-spoken Turner explicates the intricacies underlying this phenomena. It should be noted at this juncture, however, that men are certainly at risk of sexual violence too, even though data on male rapes is even more difficult to procure. Absent here is any single case of an outlying out-of-control militia, rogue child soldiers, or a depraved citizenry; instead, a picture emerges of a toxic concoction of foreign forces, civilians accustomed to lawlessness, abject poverty, patriarchal cultural customs, and government-backed entities that are all contributing to an anarchic fray which, ultimately, culminates in sky-high levels of HIV infection, countless women who cannot return to their loved ones due to the “shame” of being gang raped (often in front of their families or young children), and large numbers of unplanned pregnancies. Prospects going forward seem bleak; Turner contends that “the war against women is likely to continue, unless a modicum of order is restored to the country, and unless the Congolese address the multiple dimensions of culture that underpin and justify the war against women... [these can be summarized] as the culture of impunity, the culture of violence, and the culture of rape”. A sombre prophecy, but one that is depressingly well-backed by much available evidence.

While it will not evoke the same sensations of revulsion as the chapter on the state of Congolese women, a section on the Congolese resource curse is fascinating. Said curse is multi-dimensional. For one, certifying minerals as conflict-free is troublesome when a phenomenon known as re-exporting is pervasive (see [this comparable story from Sierra Leone](#) for further insight). The perennially meddling Rwandans and Ugandans use proxies to illicitly gain access to Congolese natural resources before sending them out into international markets – a trend with predictable outcomes of violence and debauchery. Equally engrossing is a debunking of what Turner believes to be [overly simplistic marketing campaigns targeting conflict minerals](#). Although it certainly makes for a nice sound bite or news article, avoiding the purchase of coltan-laden cell phones or mineral-containing gaming consoles is somewhat incoherent and unlikely to resolve the substantive issues. Among other things, Turner believes that “the relationship between conflict minerals and sexual violence, in particular, however, is far less direct than the NGOs suggest... much of the [DRC] violence is not directly linked to minerals”.

Surveying the better-illuminated landscape at the end of the text, two things become clear. One, extremes of violence, destitution, and flawed governance are not going away any time soon. Indeed, it seems that the persistent chaos across Central Africa is likely to accelerate as various organizations jockey for a piece of the twenty-five trillion dollar resource wealth that the country holds and as [the effects of climate change become more obvious](#). Counter-intuitively, the second finding is that there is limited cause of optimism over the long-term, likely an unexpected outcome to some readers of this largely pessimistic piece. Yes, DRC is a failed state, but [recent experiences in the written-off-as-hopeless clan nation of Somalia](#) show that change in even the most the difficult and radicalized of circumstances is possible. What will ultimately happen, however, is anyone's guess – but we need not collectively forsake the DRC just yet.

Joel Krupa is an energy and environment researcher at the University of Toronto, studying under Dr. Danny Harvey. He was educated at Oxford. [Read more reviews by Joel.](#)