

# **South Africa and the DRC: Has Rhodes passed on the baton?**

Shawn Hattingh

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In the heat of the struggle for statues like that of Rhodes – the arch-symbol of British imperialism – to be pulled down, and in the midst of the horror of the recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa, few people seemed to notice an announcement by Jacob Zuma that South African troops will remain at war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for another year.

Of course, Zuma made this announcement on behalf of the South African ruling class – comprised today of white capitalists and a black elite mainly centred around the state, Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and ‘traditional’ royal families. In this there was a real irony that while Rhodes’s likeness was falling from its perch at the University of Cape Town, and immigrants from other parts of Africa and Asia were being attacked because of sentiments stoked up by a rehabilitated relic of apartheid (the Zulu king, Zwelithini), the South African ruling class felt brash enough to say they will be continuing their own imperialist war in the DRC.

Like in all wars, including those promoted by the likes of Rhodes, it is not the ruling class that are actually doing the fighting in the DRC, but the sons and daughters of the working class. Reflecting on the First World War, Alexander Berkman noted that the working class are not really sent to war to save the poor or workers, but to protect and further the interests of the rulers, governors and capitalists of their countries<sup>1</sup>. This applies equally so today in the case of South African troops’ involvement in the DRC. Indeed, what South Africa’s war in the DRC shows is that the South African ruling class don’t just exploit and oppress the working class in South Africa, but the working class in many other areas in the rest of Africa. It also shows that both at home and abroad they will use violence to do so, including trying to turn different sections of the working class on one another, by amongst other things tapping into nationalism, racism, ethnic chauvinism and xenophobia.

## **South Africa’s war in the DRC**

South African troops have been stationed, in one capacity or another, for more than a decade in the DRC. They have stood guard over elections, they have been involved in ‘peacekeeping’, and at times they have also been involved in directly protecting the interests of the South African state’s ally, Joseph Kabila.

In 2013, the role of South African troops in the DRC, however, officially escalated. Almost 1400 new troops joined the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB). South African troops in fact make up the bulk of the FIB, with support from Malawi and Tanzania. The FIB’s task, including the South African troops that make up its rump, is to hunt down and kill members of guerrilla organisations in the Kivu region. To do so they have been launching operations with the DRC military against such groups.

At times the combat in this war has been fierce. In one day alone during the Battle of Kibati, in August 2013, South African troops – along with South African Air Force Rooivalk attack helicopters – killed over 500 members of the M23 rebel group. Such actions have seen the M23 effectively destroyed as a force. South African troops, along with their allies in the form of Tanzanian and DRC troops, are now beginning to make plans to strike at other rebel groups in the area.

The deployment of South African troops has not come cheap. Hundreds of millions of Rands has been spent on this by the South African state. Most of this has gone on state-of-the-art military equipment such as Rooivalk helicopters, while at the same time the troops themselves were

denied tents for months when they were first deployed to North Kivu. This oversight perhaps also provides an insight into the nature of South Africa's ruling class – the health and comfort of the working class troops they were sending to do their fighting in the DRC mattered little as long as they had the equipment to kill the enemy and stabilise the Kivu region, and North Kivu in particular.

One of the saddest parts of this – and there are many – is that most of the South African troops are proud of the role that they feel they are playing in the DRC. In interviews many believe that their mission to the DRC is humanitarian. Some feel they are protecting the local population from guerrilla groups.

Certainly these guerrilla groups, like the M23, are no angels. Leaders of the M23 clearly stoke up nationalist sentiments amongst the foot soldiers with the goal of getting their hands on the resources of North Kivu. War is brutal and brutalising as the M23 have been accused of multiple abuses including mass rape and murder. The M23, however, is not the most brutal group in North Kivu: another rebel group that South African troops are now making plans to move against includes members that were allegedly involved in perpetrating the genocide that took place in Rwanda 21 years ago.

Unfortunately the allies of the South African troops also do not have clean hands. Generals from the DRC military, alongside whom South African troops have been fighting, have also been accused of being the architects of war crimes. Likewise, there have been a few incidents in which South African troops have been accused of criminalities in North Kivu, including rape. Indeed, war is a messy business and it is almost never based on humanitarian ideals or on ethical considerations: there are usually more unsavoury reasons behind wars mainly centred around the political and economic interests of ruling classes. In the DRC the South African troops fighting there are indeed pawns that are being used by the South African ruling class and their local allies for their own political and economic interests – they are in fact, as will be discussed later, being used to clear rebel groups so that sections of the South African ruling class can take advantage of mineral and oil concession that they own in North Kivu. In the process, working class soldiers are being brutalised and turned into killers.

## **What are the interests of the South African ruling class in the DRC?**

The South African ruling class view the DRC as a strategic country that has the potential to produce vast profits not only for privately owned South African companies, but also state owned ones. Already there are many South African linked companies that have interests in and/or have invested in the DRC, including MTN, Barloworld, Nandos, Shoprite, AECI, African Rainbow Minerals, Famous Brands, Aveng, Standard Bank, Group Five, Metorex, PPC Cement, Raubex, Grindrod, and Super Group. As part of these operations, South African linked companies are not only involved in extracting the DRC's natural resources, but also exploiting the DRC's working class as a source of cheap labour and a market for their goods.

Over and above private interests in the DRC, the South African state too has economic and strategic interests in the DRC. The state owned oil and gas company, PetroSA, has operations in the DRC. The South African state too views the Congo River as a potential source of electricity that could at one stroke deal with the short fall of electricity that South Africa is facing. As part

of this, and for or over a decade, the South African state along with the state owned electricity company, Eskom, have been negotiating with the DRC state to build a series of hydro-electric dams on the Congo River that would supply South African industry with up to 40 000 MW of electricity a day. In 2013 a treaty was finally signed between the two states to concretely go ahead with the project and immediately the South African state put aside R 200 billion for the project.

## **The embrace of imperialists and the local ruling class**

Due to the fact that the South African ruling class views the DRC as so strategic it has used various means to try and get a foothold in the country, and subsequently expand that foothold. In doing so the South African ruling class has been competing with other imperialist powers such as the United States, Britain, Canada and China.

The South African ruling class's initial attempts to get a foothold into the DRC were linked to its bid to bring about peace talks between warring parties in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The aim of this was to try and bring adversaries together to end the conflict so that a stable environment could be achieved for investors. From the point of the South African ruling class that meant South African investors. Through such talks the Second Congolese War was ended by the Sun City deal in 2003, although not all groups laid down their weapons. An outcome of the Sun City deal was that it did indeed become easier for corporations, including South African ones, to operate in the DRC.

During the first term Presidency of Jacob Zuma, the Minister of Defence, Lindiwe Sisulu, was blatant about the interests of South Africa in promoting peace agreements such the Sun City peace deal. She said:

“Business investments began flooding into the DRC after the attainment of peace, helping the country to start rebuilding itself. South African mobile telecommunications network companies, Vodacom and MTN, mining companies, Standard Bank and state-owned electricity provider Eskom have invested in the DRC. Some South African farmers are also growing crops in the DRC”<sup>2</sup>

In the aftermath of the Sun City deal there have been further South African sponsored talks between the DRC state and the rebel groups that refused to demobilise and new one which arose. These talks have been stop-start affairs and the South African state has often been accused by parties opposed to Joseph Kabila's regime of only being interested in promoting the interests of South African companies in the DRC through such talks. At times power sharing deals have been struck, but Kabila has always come out of these with his position at the top of the state assured. Recently the latest round of talks with rebel groups, such as M23, collapsed with the South African state openly backing Kabila. Indeed, since the early 2000s a close relationship has developed between the Kabila regime and the South African state.

The South African state has, in fact, become a firm backer of Kabila. It has spent money and sent advisors in order to build state institutions and capacity in the DRC, and even spent R 123 million on the DRC elections in 2011 (much of which went to pay companies with links to the African National Congress (ANC) and old apartheid state to print ballot papers). During these elections South African troops were deployed to also ensure stability. When accusations surfaced that the elections had been fraudulent, the South African state immediately backed Kabila. This

earned the ire of sections of the population – when then Minister of Defence Lindiwe Sisulu visited the DRC in the run up to the elections her cavalcade was stoned by people angry at the imperialist role South Africa’s ruling class plays in the DRC and their backing of Kabila.

Relations between the Kabila regime and their backers in Tshwane (Pretoria) have become so close that there are regular visits by President Jacob Zuma and his ministers, accompanied by CEOs of private and state owned South African companies, to the DRC. During these visits numerous trade and investment deals have been brokered. These have been very lucrative for the South African ruling class. Along with gaining mining rights, construction deals, tax breaks etc; 21% of all imports into the DRC now come from South Africa. In return, Kabila gets backing from the South African state – although like all ruling classes in countries that face imperialism, Kabila will often play one imperialist power off against another in order to get the best possible deal for himself and the local elite that surround him.

Perhaps the most lucrative deal that was fostered during one of these visits was in 2010. Shortly after Zuma had visited Kabila in 2010, where Zuma and the ANC had been offered oil concessions, the Kabila regime revoked the oil concessions of a British oil company, Tullow Oil, and handed them over to two companies owned by Zuma’s nephew, Khulubuse Zuma, and lawyer, Michael Hulley. These concessions are in North Kivu – the same area South African troops have been deployed to end rebel activity.

There are in fact a number of South African companies, besides the ones owned by Zuma’s nephew and lawyer that have mineral rights and oil concessions in North Kivu. Another oil company with top ANC officials as board members – SACoil – has also been given oil concessions by the Kabila regime in North Kivu. The threat that these concessions would never be exploited starkly arose in 2012 when M23 captured the largest city in the Kivu region, Goma. It was after this that the South African state committed combat troops to the FIB to clear this threat, and other threats posed by other groups. South African troops are, therefore, in reality fighting in North Kivu to try and wipe out all of the rebel groups in the area so that the oil concessions and mineral rights that the South African ruling class have can be taken advantage of.

## **Perhaps Rhodes would be proud**

Perhaps Rhodes, and those that ran in his circles, would actually be proud of the contemporary South African ruling class. The ruling class in Rhodes’ day set up the system whereby capitalism in South Africa became defined and based on extremely cheap black labour. To create a source of cheap black labour, Rhodes and the rest of the ruling class sent working class soldiers – in the name of nationalism – to wage wars against the remaining independent black societies across southern Africa. Indeed, Rhodes personally financed the invasion of what now is known as Zimbabwe in order to secure a pool of cheap labour, but also the resources of the area. To keep all of this in place, the black population was racially oppressed in southern Africa. At the same time, to prevent the working class from uniting, racial, ethnic and nationalist tensions were stoked up by the ruling class. Black workers on the mines, drawn from right across southern Africa after conquest, were separated from one another on ethnic lines and encouraged to attack one another on the mines after hours. Likewise, if black workers went on strike, white workers were encouraged to scab and attack them and vice versa.

Some of this system remains in place today. The difference, when compared to Rhodes's day, is that a black elite centred around the ANC has joined white capitalists in the ruling class. However, this ruling class still relies on extremely cheap black labour, along with the national oppression of the black working class to ensure the system remains in place, as the main source of their wealth. They too sometimes play into racist, nationalist and xenophobic sentiments to try and keep the working class divided. Indeed, during the recent Xenophobic attacks it was two members of the ruling class, king Zwelithini, and Edward Zuma (Jacob Zuma's son who has business interests across southern Africa) that called for the attacks. But Rhodes, despite being a British imperialist, would perhaps be most proud that the contemporary South African ruling class kept up and furthered the tradition South Africa being an imperialist power in the rest of Africa. Indeed, not even Rhodes, despite being the architect of genocidal wars in southern Africa, managed to wage a war in far off DRC, by sending foot soldiers to kill and die, to get its wealth.

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