



Fractured Pasts in Lake Kivu's Borderlands

The Lake Kivu region, which borders Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, has often been defined by scholars in terms of conflict, violence, and separation. In contrast, this innovative study explores histories of continuities and connections across the borderland. Gillian Mathys utilizes an integrated historical perspective to trace long-term processes in the region, starting from the second half of the nineteenth century and reaching to the present day. *Fractured Pasts in Lake Kivu's Borderlands* powerfully reshapes historical understandings of mobility, conflict, identity formation, and historical narration in and across state and ecological borders. In doing so, Mathys deconstructs reductive historical myths that have continued to underpin justifications for violence in the region. Drawing on cross-border oral history research and a wealth of archival material, *Fractured Pasts* embraces a new and powerful perspective of the region's history.

GILLIAN MATHYS is Associate Professor in African History at Ghent University, with particular research interests in the Great Lakes region. She has previously been appointed as an expert to the parliamentary commission on Belgium's colonial past. Mathys has contributed articles to journals including *The Journal of African History*, *Africa*, and *The Journal of Peasant Studies*.

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Fractured Pasts in Lake Kivu's Borderlands

Conflicts, Connections, and Mobility
in Central Africa

GILLIAN MATHYS
Ghent University



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To the late Prof. Alphonse Njangu Canda-Ciri without whom
this book would never have existed.

O lera omwana arhafa

To my son Lio, who brings me infinite joy and who causes
boundless chaos, and without whom this book would have
been ready a lot sooner.

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Preface

As I was correcting the proofs for this book, the security situation in the Lake Kivu region escalated dramatically. On January 28, 2025, M23/AFC (*Mouvement du 23 Mars/Alliance du Fleuve*) – Congo's strongest rebel group, supported by Rwanda as attested to in several UN reports¹ – seized control of Goma after days of intense fighting. Goma is North Kivu's capital city, a bustling urban center with over a million inhabitants. While M23 had been back on the stage since the end of 2021, 2024 was marked by rapid territorial expansion. As this book was by then already in the proof stage, these more recent developments are not part of its analysis. This is especially important when reading Chapter 9.

The recent surge in violence resulted in the displacement of around three million people in 2024 alone. Since the beginning of 2025, 400,000 people were forced to flee their homes.² This has pushed the staggering total of internally displaced individuals in the DRC to over an almost inconceivable seven million. Many of those who fled earlier combats found asylum in or around Goma, although often in extremely dire circumstances. The magnitude of the humanitarian disaster this last episode of violence has unleashed is almost unimaginable, and it will only bring further suffering to a region that has had no reprieve for over thirty years.

The capture of Goma seemed a repetition of 2012, when the same rebel group also took control of Goma. Like their predecessor, the CNDP (*Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple*), M23 then and now rallies around grievances firmly rooted in the Congolese context – such as the contested citizenship of and discrimination against Kinyarwanda speakers in the DRC, and the return of Congolese

¹ United Nation's Group of Experts (UNGoE), "Midterm Report S/2023/990"; "Final Report S/2024/432."

² WFP, "Flash Report."

Tutsi refugees to the DRC. However, many other Congolese interpret their external backing and the fact that they are mainly constituted of Kinyarwanda speakers within a longer history of Rwandan military involvement in Congo since the First Congo War (1996-97). From this perspective, M23 is not seen as a Congolese movement nor as one genuinely concerned with Congolese dynamics, but rather as yet another example of Rwandan aggression against the DRC and its people – an aggression often attributed to Rwanda's desire for Congo's vast mineral riches. Given Rwanda's ongoing military involvement in the DRC over the past three decades, albeit with varying intensity, this perception is understandable. Moreover, Rwanda has, at various points, exported significantly larger quantities of minerals like gold and coltan than it could have produced domestically.³

However, the denial of other dimensions in this explanatory model for the ongoing conflict has also caused a self-perpetuating feedback loop. Suspicions that Congolese Tutsi or Kinyarwanda speakers are not really Congolese are continuously “confirmed” by real (and sometimes imagined) backing by Rwanda, as well as by resource extraction for the benefit of Rwanda, often under the cover of these rebellions. This, in turn, makes it impossible to solve the very real grievances that helped forge these links between M23 and their predecessors and Rwanda in the first place.

Meanwhile, for Rwanda, genocide continues to loom large in Rwandan politics. The FARDC (*Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo*) has at times collaborated with the FDLR (*Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda*), a group regarded in Rwanda as the ideological heirs of those responsible for the genocide – an allegation supported by UN reports.⁴ At the same time, hate speech against Tutsi remains part of political vernaculars circulating in Congo. Impossible to separate from the political and military context described above, this has often been used by Rwandan cadres as a justification for their active interference in Congo's eastern provinces.

In both instances, it is difficult to separate (historical) anxieties rooted in real, lived experiences of violence and suffering from their political uses – suffering turned to political uses does not mean that the suffering and fear are not real. Underscoring and understanding these

³ See, amongst others, several rapports of the UNGoE in the bibliography.

⁴ UNGoE, “Midterm Report S/2023/990.”

dimensions is not the same as condoning the violence inherent in this situation – there is no justification for Rwanda violating the DRC's sovereignty by sending thousands of Rwandan troops across the border.⁵ Neither can hate speech and/or violence against Kinyarwanda speakers in general, or Tutsi in particular in the DRC be excused. Too much violence has been inflicted on others, invoking self-defence as an alibi, in the Great Lakes region as well as elsewhere.

Within this fraught context, histories of the present have often served political interests. These histories are not only part of this book's analyses but also shaped the context in which the research for this book was conducted. Bringing in the histories of connections, of friendship even, of communities around the lake, and refusing to let this book be decided by "national" frames were choices I made. This was an attempt to escape the presentism that this context of conflict and violence often imposes on analyses of the region, and because I think these other stories also need to be told. Given the context in which this book will be read, however, these choices carry potentially political consequences.

In the context of thirty years of armed conflict and war, such a stance might seem naïve, or failing to "read the room". After all, this is, for many, a question of life and death. I realize how easy it is for me to write about all of this while having the enormous privilege of never having to live through these experiences – analyzing the way people talk about the past, and how they mobilize it; deconstructing people's (his)stories; punching holes in people's narratives. It seems to come easily to academics to treat people's lives as text, as riddles to be solved, stories waiting to be conceptualized.⁶ Such meaning-making is very different when it is embodied and it comes from a place of lived experiences.⁷ Notwithstanding these caveats, I take responsibility for the choices I made in this book.

⁵ UNGoE, "Final Report S/2024/432"; UNGoE, "Midterm Report S/2024/969."

⁶ See for an expression of this, Xaxa, "I Am Not Your Data."

⁷ See, for example, Kalema, "The Mulele 'Rebellion'"; Mwambari and Sibomana, "Bodily Scars."

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How do I thank people for a book that has been part of my life for fifteen years, with many conflicted feelings attached? It means acknowledgments need to be meaningful and heartfelt, yet not overly emotional. It is not an easy task, especially because I have been deeply moved by the kindness I have been surrounded with during this project. Unfortunately, writing these words also highlights the void left by those who shaped this journey but are no longer with us. I will start with them.

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