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**PROFILE: DR. LAZLO PASSEMIERS**

In the context of a tense political landscape and student-led decolonisation protests in South Africa, it is a rarity to come across scholars who can acknowledge, and work from the starting point of their personal history and yet reach towards the upper bars of scholarship. One such scholar is an emerging cold war historian of transnational African politics, Dr Lazlo Patrick Christian Passemiers, a lecturer in the Department of History and postdoctoral research fellow at the International Studies Group, University of the Free State.

A Belgian national, Lazlo has lived in South Africa since the age of 15 when his family moved from Brasschaat, a town near Antwerp in Belgium, to retire in Cape Town in 2002. Blending into the South African socio-political life, Lazlo has developed a research framework that connects his social, academic and personal commitment to the issues of justice and reconciliation, weaving this into his own immigrant status in South Africa.

A multilingual scholar, who writes in English but has worked with English, Afrikaans, Dutch, French and Portuguese language sources, Passemiers has been a meritorious student all through. At Stellenbosch University, he completed his BA, BA (Hons) in History, MA in History all passing with *Cum Laude* distinction. After writing two important research projects, Passemiers was invited by the Centre for Africa Studies at the University of Free State to write a PhD with a full scholarship. His new home was the then-recently launched International Studies Group (ISG) that shaped and inspired Passemiers to look beyond South African history to the transnational history of decolonisation. He credits most of his academic and historiographic nurturing to the ISG which

he says, with a rarity of enthusiastic admiration, is the “best thing happened to me”.

For his PhD, Passemiers explored South African and Democratic Republic of Congo’s (DRC) conflict during the 1960s. Congo’s independence from the colonial Belgium in 1960 at the height of cold war brought many interdependent dependencies. During the stellar leadership of Patrice Lumumba and his fatal conflicts with President Joseph Kasavubu, political cracks developed over loyalties to pro-west or pro-Soviet standings.

Lumumba’s popularity in the revolutionary movements and people-centric policies was unsettling to the United States (US). Thus, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) station at Leopoldville (Kinshasa) devised a story which stated that Lumumba was orchestrating a plot to assassinate Col. Joseph Mobutu of the Congolese National Army. This provoked Mobutu to arrest and assassinate Lumumba, paving a path for Mobutu’s iron fist rule of 32 long years in the country. These details are documented on the United States, Department of State, Office of Historian’s webpage.

This story, when elevated above from the cold war dichotomy between United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) has many layers and depths residing in the region’s political relations with the rest of the continent. Passemiers explores exactly these by looking at the southern African bloc and its relations with the region in light of DRC’s early five years of diplomatic activities. His research offers an intimate portrait of the region that represents an influential commentary on the political complexity of South Africa and DRC relations.

The DRC’s conflict not only had Black people fighting against each other but also had the settler minority white population in an impasse of sort. In the wake of DRC’s post-independence turmoil, the white residents of the country fled in numbers to apartheid South Africa. And it was not just DRC, but 17 other African countries claimed independence that saw “white flight”. South Africa was a preferred destination. However, after South Africa claimed its independence from minority-white rule in 1994, many of the same white stock decided to leave democratic South Africa ruled by the black majority. Passemiers’ “Uhuru Hoppers” is a transnational history project which reflects on these racial and national dynamics as he examines the impact of decolonisation on the white communities in Southern Africa’s white-minority ruled states from 1960-1994. This angle of historical enquiry promises to cast a much-needed lens on the colonial white power structures as well as give us nuanced perspectives of individual lives of white people who many times were conflicted with their original class and national status in new postcolonial African nation states.

The status of white refugees of DRC and other southern African countries in South Africa was certainly mired by cultural shock as they migrated. Yet it could become a feasible option. Why? Passermiers foregrounds this as a “racial solidarity” between the whites of South Africa and Congo. In an interview with me, he stressed the importance of an “analytical study of global whiteness, how it forms in certain, specific conditions in host society”.

The apartheid South African government’s active role in taking white refugees from Congo was substantial. It offered petrol and oil allowance for those with their automobile, second class railway or bus tickets and daily allowances. White South African communities and societies gave their homes, vacation houses, and donated money, blankets and groceries to local relief organisations. However, this was not to last long as the hierarchical white caste system of South Africa graded white minorities according to their background and birth. The racial solidarity with, and in, apartheid South Africa invites attention to colonial whiteness as a conceptual possibility. The historiographic development pursued by Passermiers does a great service to the history of Africa as a continental enterprise that has many unresolved complexities.

Passermiers has already achieved much in this regard, as his expertise in the history, complexity and meaning of white flight. His book, *Decolonisation and Regional Geopolitics: South Africa and the Congo Crisis, 1960-1965* (2019) was published under the “The Routledge Global 1960s and 1970s” book series.

Historian Duncan Money, a former colleague of Passermier at the University of the Free State and now a researcher at Leiden commented on the importance of Passermier’s scholarship that does a good job of “integrating South Africa back into the scholarship in African Studies, by stressing that decolonisation in South Africa was transnational in character”.

The research projects that Passermiers managed to develop has significance for the individuals whose stories are most often unpopular in the general public perception. As an early career historian who has a smell of dusty papers of three continents on his hands, Passermiers blends his personal history, his interest and as well as devotion to the field of African history. A rare appreciation to the affected people’s history, Passermiers has done a great service to the scholarship of race, nationhood and decolonial political histories.

As someone who has worked in South African academia, I can attest to the fact that given its complication and demanding rigour it is difficult to find one’s place in this vibrant, often competing academic sphere. Passermiers has managed to establish himself as a young scholar and teacher. Aside from

the impressive list of publications to his credit, his potential projects hold the same respect of merit that he has been setting for himself thus far.

Speaking about his experience of being a European-born white male living in South Africa. He says it is “not easy to blend into the white South African society due to the accent which is an immediate differential marker”. This experience, as both insider and outsider, has helped to sharpen his analytic focus onto the themes of race, nation and decolonisation that he researches.

Passermiers lives in Bloemfontein in South Africa's Free State with his South African partner Mikateko Mathebula who is also a scholar at the University Free State. Passermiers now plans to dedicate his attention to the new “Uhuru Hoppers” project and devote attention to his students of “Postcolonial African history” and “Apartheid African History” courses.

This profile is the first in the series of what will be a regular feature in the *Southern Journal for Contemporary History*. We aim to feature the work, interests, achievements and historiographic innovations of early career historians.