

REVIEW

Kara, Siddharth. 2023. *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 274 pp. ISBN 978-1-250-32407-8

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The reflection of the sky in the ocean bestows a serene cerulean hue, reminiscent of the coveted cobalt shade once revered by both the Persian Empire and the Ming Dynasty for its illustrious use in art and pottery. Over the course of the 21st century, society has traversed a vast path in recognising the pivotal role of cobalt, a mineral now indispensable in myriad aspects of our lives. Cobalt stands as a ubiquitous mineral, serving as a fundamental component in lithium-ion rechargeable batteries that power a plethora of devices, ranging from smartphones and tablets to laptops and electric vehicles. The significance of this mineral extends beyond its role in batteries; it plays a critical part in various industrial applications. Today, cobalt finds itself essential not only in lithium-ion batteries but also in electric propulsion systems for ships and in the production of superalloys utilised in the manufacturing of jet engines, gas turbines, and magnetic steel. Above this foundational usage lies a realm of gleaming innovation embodied by electric vehicles championed by technology giants such as Tesla, Rivian, Renault, and Volvo. However, beneath this surface of prosperity lies the stark reality of the cobalt industry, particularly in regions like the Congo, where the supply chain originates from copper mines. These mines represent a world unto themselves, where despair looms large. Here, the lives of men, women, and children are burdened by meagre daily wages and human rights violations. In this context, the colour of cobalt shifts from serene blue to a haunting red on the palette of human suffering.

The book *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives* by Siddharth Kara, published in 2023, is the first of its kind exposé of the cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where approximately 75 per cent of the world's cobalt supply is mined in grotesquely inhuman conditions. This first-hand testimony of life in the mines is painted in red, as the toll taken on both people and the environment is insurmountable.

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Kara is a Rights Lab Visiting Professor of Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery at the University of Nottingham. He previously served as a British Academy Global Professor with the Rights Lab. He is widely recognised as an author, researcher, and screenwriter, and, most notably, as an activist who has consistently examined and exposed the harsh realities of modern slavery worldwide. Kara's research travels across over fifty countries have equipped him to undertake empathetic stocktaking exercises of societal wrongs such as child labour, sex trafficking, and modern slavery. *Cobalt Red* is, therefore, the result of his extensive exploration of 31 mining sites in the Katanga region in south-eastern Congo. His deft research aptly brings forth the grinding ordeal of the “artisanal” miners (p. 7) – those who are not officially employed by mining companies but undertake mining activities in a freelance capacity, often with rudimentary tools and even bare hands. The book was a Pulitzer Prize Finalist in General Nonfiction for 2024.¹

Kasai and Katanga are the two mining and mineral-extracting regions of the country, with Kasai known for diamonds and Katanga for metals. The DRC is estimated to have \$25 trillion worth of untapped minerals and ores, almost the same as the combined GDP of the U.S. and Europe. The book spans seven chapters and lays forth a dreadful picture of prominent mining sites in various provinces of Katanga, which have become both the literal and geographical periphery of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but far bleaker and more ravaged by the millions of hapless voices that surreptitiously depict the modern face of an atrocious Conradian world. The blistering profit-making intentions of foreign mining companies have cratered mines, where the people of the DRC pour day in and day out into inescapable servitude. Mining in Katanga is a profession with no alternative – if the people of Katanga want to survive, they have to dig.

The DRC is a violence-ridden space, embroiled in skirmishes since the Rwandan genocide of 1994. It has also famously hosted the First African World War and witnessed an attempt at secession by Katanga. Today, as it grapples with renewed tensions with Rwanda and sees the re-emergence of the M23 rebels, its mineral-rich zones are struggling with a hidden conflict where miners face “relative deprivation.” This conceptual lens is broadly applicable across Africa, as it helps explain how individuals and groups experience discontent when they perceive a disparity between their existing conditions and their legitimate expectations or entitlements. Most African states infested with active armed conflicts jeopardise a major

1 <https://www.pulitzer.org/finalists/siddharth-kara>

section of their population, who experience threats to life, loss of livelihood, displacement, and harrowing survival choices. Cobalt mines reflect the dearth of governance and fragility of statehood in the DRC. In the book, Kara navigates his way to elusive cobalt mines by attaching a wrenching life experience to each visited site. Every chapter peels back a layer, unveiling a tale grievously told by some but experienced by many.

The book is structured across seven chapters, accompanied by an introduction that situates cobalt at different levels of the value chain, particularly highlighting its most opaque and problematic segments. The first two chapters – *Unspeakable Richness* and *Here It Is Better Not to Be Born* – focus on Lubumbashi, a major mining hub in the southeastern Haut-Katanga province, as well as Kipushi, a historic zinc–copper mining site. The third chapter, *The Hills Have Secrets*, shifts attention to the Likasi–Kambove area. Together, these chapters expose the excruciating mining practices and the entrenched Chinese dominance over operations. The fourth chapter, *Colony to the World*, revisits the historical trajectory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo – from slavery and colonial exploitation to the postcolonial period – arguing that despite its formal sovereignty, the country continues to function as a de facto colony within the global economic system. The final three chapters – *If We Do Not Dig, We Do Not Eat, We Work in Our Graves*, and *The Final Truth* – lay bare the harsh realities of mining life, revealing a system structurally aligned with broader economic interests at the expense of miners’ welfare.

This structural progression is complemented by a detailed, ground-level account of how cobalt actually moves through this system, beginning in the mineral-rich Katanga region, which holds more cobalt reserves than the rest of the world combined and thus constitutes the first link in the global supply chain. In practice, heterogenite – the cobalt-bearing ore – is extracted by *creuseurs* (“diggers”), artisanal miners who operate informally under hazardous conditions, often without safety equipment or adequate compensation. Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) plays a critical role in sustaining the formal mining industry in the Congo, with much of the labour performed by these miners. They extract ore-bearing rocks, transport them in raffia sacks, and sell them to *négociants* (traders) and *comptoirs* (depots), also known as *maisons d’achat* (buying houses), which together form an informal commercial ecosystem facilitating trade. From there, the ore enters the formal supply chain, passing through processors or concentrators, then to commercial-grade refiners, and ultimately reaching battery manufacturers. This detailed mapping of cobalt’s journey

is particularly well documented in the first chapter, *Unspeakable Richness*, which also begins to uncover the broader patterns of exploitation across the Haut-Katanga and Lualaba mining provinces.

The book, in its exhaustive attempt to cover each aspect of the cobalt trade out of Katanga, presents a few contrasting images. Firstly, the tech barons are prostrate about the ethical and responsible sourcing of minerals. Secondly, there is the gruesome state of industrial mines, where tragedies are abundant and tunnels run deep, militias guard the mining process, and toxic effluents from primary refining units run into dwindling water bodies, thus degrading the environment. Thirdly, China's stronghold in the cobalt mining industry is portrayed since the imposition of the Mining Code on the DRC in 2002. In 2009, Joseph Kabila brokered a deal with the Chinese government to render development projects to the country in return for mining concessions. Apart from mining activities, China also leads the cobalt processing chain. When analysing China's broader Indian Ocean aspirations, its port diplomacy has an essential underpinning. For example, the semi-refined form of cobalt is transported by China Molybdenum Co. to the ports of Dar es Salaam, Durban, and various small ports of Mozambique before being shipped to Hainan. Today, Chinese companies own 15 out of 19 primary industrial copper-cobalt mining concessions. Fourthly, the book portrays a passive presence of Artisanal Mining Cooperatives and model mining sites such as the CHEMAF Model Site and Congo DongFang Mining (CDM) Model Site, extensively covered in chapter six, *We Work in Our Graves*, where the so-called formalised mining ventures shroud grievous mining situations with a few amenities.

Though Kara's painstaking efforts are worth acknowledging in building this book and bringing attention to child labour, subhuman working conditions, insufficient wages, and severe injuries that often take lives or result in lifelong impairments for the miners, the biggest contribution of the book is the meticulous assessment of the situation on the ground within and underneath the mines. Any analysis of conflict in Africa risks remaining superficial unless it is grounded in close, context-sensitive engagement. In this respect, Kara's field-based research is particularly valuable, as it foregrounds empirically rich narratives that capture the lived experiences of diverse actors within the mining sector of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). However, the book has limitations. While it serves the purpose of investigating modern slavery in the DRC, it fails to trace cobalt's various journeys out of the country. The recalibration of the land-based usage of cobalt against that of the ocean also seems to be

missed. Cobalt is yet to realise its full potential in the shipping industry, but mining and shipping are connected via their respective importance to steel. The usage of lithium-ion batteries in ships is still emerging and, at present, contributes toward reducing emissions, improving energy efficiency, enhancing safety, and enabling the integration of renewable energy sources, thus helping to formulate a more sustainable and environmentally friendly maritime industry.

Overall, *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives* by Siddharth Kara presents a deeply disturbing and eye-opening account of the cobalt mines in the DRC. It sheds light on the inhumane conditions, human rights violations, and modern slavery that prevail in these mines, where the lives of miners are sacrificed for the supply of cobalt that powers our modern devices and industries. The book is a significant contribution to the understanding of the dark side of global supply chains and the urgent need for responsible sourcing and ethical practices in the mining industry. Moreover, it remains true that artisanal mining is a precondition to cobalt mining, as the process helps in fetching the cobalt of the highest grade. Industries across sectors are part of international coalitions like the Responsible Minerals Initiative (RMI) and the Global Battery Alliance (GBA), which promote the responsible sourcing of minerals in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights. However, during his research, Kara failed to see any action from these coalitions on the ground. Tech giants that fully benefit from the stable properties of cobalt, and sectors like shipping and aviation that are likely to reap the upcoming advantages of cobalt, need to make these coalitions impactful and result-oriented.

