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Mercenaries and the Congo Crisis

Patrick S. Baker

Soldier Of Fortune

Down through history men have done it all the time.
You fight on foreign shores not protecting your Fatherland.
Yours is an act of aggression, something not very grand.
A Soldier of fortune fighting for filthy money.

—Anonymous

Mercenaries have existed as long as organized armies have existed, and for as long as they have existed, they have been despised and denigrated. Aristotle wrote against them, as did Machiavelli.¹ Yet there has always been a "market for mercenaries."² In the mid-twentieth century, the best market for mercenaries was the newly independent Republic of the Congo. Indeed, within Africa the 1960s were a "golden age" of mercenarism.³

This paper will examine the specific circumstances during the Congo Crisis of 1960-67 that precipitated this new heyday of the mercenary, the responses to this new mercenarism, and mercenarism as a military, political, and economic phenomenon in post-colonial Congo. By focusing on the Congo Crisis, this paper will illustrate the circumstances that encourage the wide-scale use of mercenary soldiers and will examine counter-mercenary operations. Further, it will explore mercenarism as a driver for United Nations interventionism and Cold War conflict in the post-imperial Third World. Lastly, it will analyze the economics of mercenarism.

The Republic of Congo declared itself independent from Belgium on June 30, 1960. No other country in the world was as woefully unprepared for self-government as the former Belgian Congo. Among a native population of 13.7 million, there were only thirty college graduates and not one Western-trained native Congolese lawyer, doctor, or judge.⁴ Nine different political parties ran candidates in the first national election, but only two of the parties offered candidates outside of their own tribal power centers. The winning party, Patrice Lumumba's Mouvement Nationale Congolais (MNC), won only thirty-three seats in the 137-seat legislature. Lumumba became Prime Minister and the opposition leader of the

Alliance des Bakongo (ABAKO) party, and they elected Joseph Kasa-Vubu President of the Republic.⁵ This arrangement guaranteed inter-governmental conflict.

The one public institution on which the government had to depend was the *Force Publique*, the national *gendarmerie*; a unit of soldiers, serving as a heavily armed police force. The *Force* had to maintain order, if the newly elected government was to survive. It was an army of twenty-four thousand men led by one thousand Belgian officers, with no Congolese above the rank of sergeant. Only five days after independence, the *Force* mutinied over low pay and lack of advancement for natives. The main targets of the mutineers were Europeans. They beat European men, raped some women and there were even reports of cannibalism.⁶ On 7 July, Lumumba renamed the *Force Publique* the *Armée Nationale Congolaise* or ANC. He dismissed all the Belgian officers and appointed Congolese in their place. He also promoted the entire army one grade, leaving the ANC as the only army in the world with no privates.⁷ These moves failed to quell the violence.⁸

Meanwhile, between 9-11 July, in order to protect its own citizens and other Europeans, Belgium deployed thousands of paratroopers and a naval force. The Belgian government did not ask permission to send these troops. While the elite Para-Commandos did manage to suppress the violence in some areas, in others the Belgian forces overreacted, which sparked even more bloodshed. This new round of mayhem caused the Belgians to occupy most of the major cities, including the capitol of Leopoldville.⁹

In the midst of this chaos, Moïse Tshombe, leader of the *Confederation des Associations Tribales du Katanga* (CONAKAT) party and administrative head of Katanga Province, declared that mineral-rich region independent of the Congo. *Union Minière*, the Belgian mining company had strong economic interests in the region and feared the Lumumba government would seize its assets. The mining company's leaders appealed to the Belgian government for help. Belgian troops soon disarmed and expelled all ANC troops from Katanga. Former *Force Publique* officers set about training a Katangan *Gendarmerie*. A team of Belgian military officers, labeled a "technical advisor team" landed in Elisabethville, the Katangan capitol, to aid Tshombe.¹⁰

In desperation on 11 July, Lumumba and Kasa-Vubu in a rare show of cooperation, made a joint appeal to the United Nations for help. On 14 July, the Security Council met and voted on a mandate for the UN to deploy forces to the

Congo to restore order. Within days, over four thousand troops from twelve countries were in place. By early August 1960, they had largely fulfilled the original mandate with all Belgian troops out of the country, except those in Katanga, and reestablished some measure of order.¹¹ However, anxious to reunite the entire country and facing yet another secession crisis, this time in diamond-rich South Kasai, Lumumba shrilly demanded the UN launch military actions to bring the rebel provinces to heel. He did not receive an answer, and so on 15 August, he asked the Soviet Union for direct military aid.¹² The USSR quickly reacted to Lumumba's request by sending a fleet of fifteen Ilyushin Il-14 transports, two hundred trucks, and military advisors from both Czechoslovakia and Russia.¹³ Moving quickly, Lumumba had the ANC seize Luluabourg, the capitol of South Kasai. These troops then moved toward the Katangan border. An alarmed Tshombe dispatched a force that stopped the government offensive cold.¹⁴

The request for Soviet help was too much for the West leaning Kasa-Vubu. On 5 September, the president dismissed Lumumba as prime minister. Lumumba responded by dismissing Kasa-Vubu from his post. Fearing a Soviet takeover of the Congo, the United States, through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), aided General Mobutu, Chief of Staff of the ANC, in a coup. In this coup, Mobutu placed Lumumba under arrest and supported President Kasa-Vubu. Lumumba tried to escape, but Mobutu soon recaptured him. Mobutu then had the former Prime Minister shipped to Katanga. On 17 January 1961, at Tshombe's orders, a firing squad led by a Belgian officer killed Lumumba. The CIA also colluded in his death.¹⁵

At this point, just six months after independence, they split the Congo into four parts. Mobutu and Kasa-Vubu were in nominal control of the legitimate central government and its army. In reality, their power did not extend much beyond Léopoldville province. Leftist MNC leader, Antoine Gizenga, as Lumumba's successor, was *defacto* ruler of the eastern part of the country. Some ANC troops supported him, as did the Communist bloc. Tshombe continued to hold Katanga, with thinly disguised Belgian support. South Kasai also reasserted its independence with obvious Belgian assistance. Only the UN provided any stability.¹⁶

After Lumumba's murder, the UN decided to take stronger action in the Congo. In 1961, the Security Council passed two resolutions; 161(1961) which authorized force to prevent violence between contending parties of the civil strife

and 169(1961) which specifically authorized operations to detain and deport mercenaries.¹⁷

During the international and internal maneuverings, Katanga and its corporate sponsor, *Union Miniere* had been hiring mercenaries and buying weapons, including modern aircraft. These mercenaries were a mixed lot of French, German, and South Africans; some were combat veterans fresh from the French Foreign Legion's failed mutiny in Algeria, others had served in the German military (*Wehrmacht*) during World War II or Nazi party's Armed (*Waffen*) SS. These white soldiers of fortune provided much needed skills, like pilots, or they placed them in training and leadership positions in the native *Gendarmerie*.¹⁸

From the start, Tshombe had more enemies than allies and he used the foreign-led *Gendarmerie* to deal with his internal enemies.¹⁹ By August 1961, the *Gendarmerie* was a well-established, well-armed, and well-trained army. Belgian officers and sergeants, as well as some foreign mercenaries, effectively led it. It demonstrated, several times, that it was more than a match for the hapless ANC.²⁰ The numbers of mercenaries averaged about four hundred throughout the secession. Later in the crisis, besides leading and training the native military, they also organized mercenaries into separate units.²¹

At this point, UN forces essentially went to war against the mercenaries and Katanga. In April 1961, the first direct conflict between UN troops and white mercenaries took place; a confused skirmish in which white mercenaries clashed with Ethiopian troops. They killed several Ethiopians and captured about thirty mercenaries. The UN having, at that time, no mandate or legal system to handle the captured "dogs of war" simply expelled them from the Congo. Most soon returned.²²

On 1 August 1961, Kasa-Vubu appointed a new Prime Minister and the UN reorganized its forces, creating a separate command to deal with the Katanga Secession. The UN and the new Prime Minister demanded Tshombe expel his mercenaries. When it became clear that Tshombe was not going to respond to the demands of either the UN or the central government, the UN command decided to conduct its own anti-mercenary operations.²³

Operation Rumpunch, launched on 28 August 1961, came as a surprise to the Katangese and the mercenaries. The UN forces scooped up

about four hundred of the approximately five hundred foreign military personnel, including some regular Belgian military, without firing a shot.²⁴ While the operation was not completely successful, the new willingness of the UN to go after the mercenaries and otherwise apply political pressure resulted in only a few of the mercenaries returning to the fight. Only about one hundred known foreign fighters were still unaccounted for by 9 September 1961.²⁵

With this relative success under his belt, the UN Special Representative in Katanga, Conor Cruise O'Brien, decided to end the secession now. He issued an ultimatum to Tshombe to surrender all foreign military personnel and report to the national capital in twenty-four hours. Tshombe did not respond and the deadline passed. On 13 September 1961, the UN launched *Operation Morthor* ("Hammer" or "Smash" in Hindi). After some initial successes, Cruise O'Brien prematurely announced that the Katangan Secession was over. On 14 September, the Katangese struck back, strafing UN forces, and within three days, forced an Irish company of 184 men to surrender. On 21 September, they arranged a ceasefire.²⁶

Taking this stalemate as a victory, Tshombe and his *gendarmerie* upped the pressure on the UN by harassing officials, firing on UN troops and blockading their positions. In response to these actions, the UN launched *Operation Unokat* (a portmanteau of "UN over Katanga").²⁷ The UN forces attacked on 5 December 1961. The opening move was an air raid on the Katangese Air Force. UN jets also bombed and strafed Elisabethville. Then the ground forces went in. The fighting was fierce, with the mercenaries and the native *gendarmes* putting up stiff resistance. However, within two days, the UN had crushed the Katangese and their mercenary allies.²⁸

The clear victor of the UN in *Operation Unokat* resulted in about a year of political maneuvering. All the while Tshombe hired mercenaries to strengthen his military hand. By October, the numbers of mercenaries reached the pre-*Rumpunch* levels of between three hundred to five hundred men. Further, the Katangese continued to harass and fire on the UN forces. On 24 December 1962, Katangan troop and mercenaries attacked the UN military and inflicted several casualties on the international troops. The UN forces kept their heads down and took these attacks for four days; finally, on 28 December, they struck back, launching *Operation Grand-Slam*.²⁹ This time there was little or no resistance as the UN quickly occupied key points and major cities in the breakaway province. By 21 January 1963, the secession was over. One hundred or so mercenaries and several

thousand Katangan *gendarmes* retreated into Portuguese Angola.³⁰ Tshombe went into exile in Spain.³¹

The end of the Katanga Secession did little to restore order to the Congo.³² By early 1963, the Chinese and Cuban supported a revolt of Lumumbist in eastern Congo and the rebellion soon spread.³³ By July 1964, the Lumumbist fighters, called Simbas, had occupied half the country including Stanleyville.³⁴ More important, at least to the international community, were the massacres and atrocities that the

Simba fighters carried out against Congolese government officials. They had captured several Westerners and held them hostage in Stanleyville.³⁵

The ANC was virtually useless in resisting the rebels. A well-armed force of 1500 ANC soldiers ran from a band of forty Simbas. Sometimes ANC



Figure 1 *Belgian paras loading up for Stanleyville from Kamina airfield.* Picture is of the Belgian paratroopers preparing for a hostage rescue op. U.S. Air Force photo, c. 1965.

units would simply go over *en masse* to the insurgents. Only one commander, a Colonel Mulamba, proved effective when he led the successful defense of Bukavu.³⁶

In the midst of this chaos, UN forces left on 30 June 1964. That same day, with no little irony, President Kasa-Vubu recalled Tshombe and appointed him Prime Minister with the specific purpose of ending the Simba Revolt.³⁷ One of Tshombe's first acts was to call on mercenary leaders he knew from the Katanga Secession to form new units to fight the rebellion. These leaders included Michael "Mad Mike" Hoare and Bob Denard.³⁸ Jean "Black Jack" Schramme and some

eight thousand former Katangese *gendarmes* crossed back from Angola into Katanga and nominally joined the ANC as “commandoes.”³⁹

The Western powers seeing the Communists behind the latest troubles in Congo responded quickly. The Belgians sent regular military personnel to train and lead the ANC. They also provided weapons and logistical support. The CIA rapidly formed an “instant” air force manned by mercenary Cuban-exile pilots. This air force soon had some T-6 fighters, six T-28 fighters, six H-21 helicopters, and ten C-47 transports.⁴⁰

The situation was desperate and Tshombe ordered the mercenaries into action prematurely. A waterborne attack on Albertville was a predictable failure. With this defeat and the total chaos in the efforts to train, equip, and house the first wave of mercenaries, most recruits returned home.⁴¹

In August 1964, the Belgian government dispatched Colonel Frederic Vandewalle (Van der Walle) to the Congo. On his arrival, Vandewalle held a meeting with Tshombe, at which the Colonel told the Prime Minister that he would tolerate no political interference with military operations. Further, Vandewalle asked for and received authority to work directly with the Belgian logistics units, the CIA’s air force, and the mercenaries.⁴²

With the Belgian Colonel’s support, Hoare soon organized a training base. He recruited a force of about three hundred men into a unit called 5 Commando. The Belgians provided 5 Commando with weapons, ammo, trucks and uniforms. After a few weeks of training, Hoare’s unit went into combat.⁴³ This hodgepodge of regular military, mercenary, and spy agency sponsored units proved surprisingly effective against the Simbas. In just two months, they had all but crushed the revolt.⁴⁴ However, the mercenaries cannot take credit for the final nail in the coffin of the Simbas; Operation *Dragon Rouge* (Red Dragon), the airborne attack on Stanleyville by Belgian Para-Commandos, lifted by American Air Force C-130s, accomplished that end.⁴⁵

However, the effective conclusion of the revolt was not the effective termination of mercenary operation in the Congo, nor was it the effective end of Communist involvement. In April 1965, Che Guevera arrived in the Congo, crossing from Tanzania into the Fizi-Baraka pocket, the last redoubt of the Simbas.⁴⁶ The Cubans were too late to affect the outcome of the fight and by October, Hoare’s 5 Commando and the CIA’s air force had routed them and their Simba allies. Even though Hoare later admitted that it was his toughest fight.⁴⁷ On 25 November 1964,

General Mobutu deposed Kasa-Vubu and took direct control of the government.⁴⁸ The month before, he had relieved Tshombe of his position as Prime Minister and sent him again into exile.⁴⁹

Some mercenary units went into garrison and some were disarmed and demobilized. In June 1966, rumors that Tshombe was returning to take power caused some Katangese *gendarmes* to rise in support. At least one white-led mercenary unit supported this revolt. They brutally put down this first mercenary revolt.⁵⁰ A year later, another mercenaries' revolt took place, again in favor of Tshombe. This one ended almost as badly for the mercenaries as had the first. A resurgent ANC defeated them and forced them out of the country, ironically with the CIA's Cuban-exile pilots flying air sorties. This was the last sad action of mercenaries in Congo in the 1960s.⁵¹

During the Congo Crisis, there developed four patterns that led to the use of mercenaries. First was the need for military quality over quantity; they used mercenaries when they had unique, specialized, and professional skills not otherwise available to a party in a conflict.⁵² In Katanga, mercenaries had piloting and other military skills that Tshombe could not otherwise obtain.⁵³ Further, Tshombe could depend on the loyalty of "his" mercenaries against both his internal and external foes.⁵⁴ The second pattern was the complimentary relationship between mass demobilizations of military professionals from one former warzone making them available to move into a new zone of conflict. This second pattern also fed the pattern of quality over quantity.⁵⁵ During the Katangan Secession, it was not an accident that many of the original mercenaries were former French Legionaries fresh from Algeria, or even former British Royal Air Force (RAF) pilots.⁵⁶ During the Simba Revolt, many of the mercenary leaders were World War II veterans. The Irishman, Hoare, was a veteran of the British Army in India; one of his officers had won the Iron Cross fighting with the *Waffen SS* in Russia and Bob Denard, leader of 6 Commando, served with the French colonial forces in Indo-China and Morocco.⁵⁷ Thirdly, mercenaries thrived in areas of weak state power, in states unable to use their military to control their territory.⁵⁸ The Katanga Secession was a double proof of this model, with the weak central government and the ineffectual ANC unable to prevent the crisis or put an end to it. Tshombe had to import mercenaries to secure his own territory against secondary insurgencies.⁵⁹ The response to the Simba Revolt reinforced this third pattern with the feeble central government having to rely on mercenary units to

maintain territorial integrity.⁶⁰

Also, within the construct of this third pattern was the wedge for one part of neocolonialism, as well as UN interventionism and Cold War conflict. Belgium, the former colonial power in the Congo, deliberately left the Congo feeble and fractured.⁶¹ Further, the Belgians seemed determined to maintain neocolonial power through inequitable treaty arrangements, extraterritorial basing rights, and unfair business arrangements.⁶² There is little doubt that Belgian business interests took advantage of the weak national power to incite Tshombe to declare Katangan independence.⁶³

The powerless central government faced with multiple crises asked for UN intervention. They called in the UN to militarily strengthen the central government and maintain territorial integrity since the government was too weak to accomplish these goals on its own. This set up the conflict between the UN and the mercenaries, since the UN was acting as a *defacto* agent of the central power in an internal dispute and the mercenaries were supporting the separatists' interest in Katanga.⁶⁴

Even if the Chinese, Soviets, and Cubans did not instigate the Simba Revolt, they took advantage of the weakness of the Congo's central government by supporting it.⁶⁵ However, it should be noted, the revolt only really flared up and began to achieve real success after the departure of the UN and the resultant further weakening of the central government's armed forces. Involvement of the Communist Bloc drove a Western response. While it was politically impossible for American ground forces to intervene, nothing stopped the CIA from instead supplying planes and pilots. It is notable that the pilots were anti-Castro Cubans who flew for ideological, not monetary, reasons.⁶⁶ Even more significant were the numbers of the ground force mercenaries that saw this war as an anti-Communist crusade.⁶⁷

The final pattern was the interrelation between business and mercenaries.⁶⁸ First, the mercenaries followed a business model, with contracts for services, which included clauses related to pay for dangerous "work," options of contract renewal, and insurance.⁶⁹ While pay did not solely motivate mercenaries in the Congo, they certainly received compensation for their services. However, this pay was not overly generous.⁷⁰ Few, if any, of the mercenaries managed to make and hold on to enough money to become financially "comfortable" after their contracts were up.⁷¹ The mercenaries often supplemented their pay with outright

theft and looting. For example, during the Simba Revolt, looting was epidemic, with one mercenary bragging that he commandeered a C-130 transport plane to haul away his plunder. Two other mercenaries found and cracked a private safe, stealing \$65,000.⁷²

The interrelation between business and mercenaries represented the second part of neocolonialism, whereby large companies attempted to remain the premier economic power in the former colony. In this case, the corporations either directly paid for mercenaries or supported governments that hired mercenaries such as *Union Minière* did in Katanga.⁷³ The sudden reappearance of large-scale mercenarism was the direct result of decolonization and neocolonialism. In former colonies that were in some way prepared for independence and the imperial power was determined to avoid the worse parts of neocolonialism, such as the British in India, mercenaries did not make an appearance. Only where the imperial nation refused to prepare the colonized nation and planned to maintain their power through the worst constructs of neocolonialism, do mercenaries appear, usually at the behest of the former colonizers. Further, by keeping the newly independent nation weak and fractured, the imperial power invited disorder and the unwelcomed intervention of the United Nations to deal with the chaos. As in the case of the Congo Crisis, the situation required the UN to deal with the imported mercenary forces as well. This same anarchy invited the Communists to take similar advantage and advance their political agenda. The Communists' involvement caused further Western intervention to counter it. In this later case, in the Congo, the Western nations then used the mercenaries to stop the Communists.

Mercenarism is a political and military phenomenon, which arises when circumstances create a frail political and economic situation, ripe with possibilities for exploitation. The decolonization of the Congo in the 1960s created just such a rich environment for abuse and the newly liberated peoples suffered the consequences.

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