

The War in the Congo: Mutiny, Secession, and Foreign Intervention

Hell On Earth: Understanding the Congo, Part 2

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Military Mutiny

It must first be noted that in the Congo, the military had only whites in command positions, and there were only “three African sergeant-majors in an army of 24,000 soldiers and non-commissioned officers, 542 officers, and 566 junior officers.” Due to limited education, few Congolese officers had the proper experience to lead the military and thus the European officers needed to be retained. Even nationalist Patrice Lumumba: “felt the need for continuity in the army – that is to say, for the retention of European officers” and stated as such to the Congo Executive College two months before the Congo became independent.

Specifically, he stated that the military must stay “exactly as it is – with its officer class, its junior officers, its traditions, its discipline, its unique hierarchy and above all its morale unshaken.”[1]

With the average soldiers realizing they would remain in the same situation of obedience, rather than having opportunities for advancement, they rose up in a rage, seeking not only increased authority but also an increase in pay. The mutiny began at the Thysville military base and quickly spread across the country. Once the mutiny had started, “stories of atrocities against whites surfaced in newspapers around the globe” and due to the fact that mainly Belgians were fleeing the Congo, the Belgian government brought in troops to restore order,[2] even though Lumumba had denied a request from the Belgians to do so. This violated the friendship treaty between the two nations which stated that Belgian troops “may be used on Congolese national territory only upon the specific request of the Government of the Republic of the Congo, in particular, on the specific request of the Congolese Minister of Defense.”[3] It was around this time that the situation became even more unstable with the secession of the Katanga region.

Katanga Secession

As has been noted beforehand, the Katanga was quite an important part of real estate in the Congo due its large mineral wealth. Yet, there were much greater problems than just natural wealth at play.

Economically speaking, while the Katanga region did have a large amount of mineral wealth, the capital was held in the hands of one company: the Union Miniere du Haut Katanga (translated as Mining Union of Upper Katanga, UMHK). Having immense economic resources that are controlled by one company would have serious political implications both generally and especially for secession; namely, that Belgian aid was needed as the region was so dependent on Belgian technicians and investments.[4] Some sectors of the Katangan

population viewed the province as “the cow that the other territories never tired of milking.”[5]

The economic status of the province played into the ethnic tensions of the population. Industrialization of the Congo was mainly within the southern region of the province where the three major mining centers were located, creating a rather large amount of irregular regional development. This was reflected in the uneven distribution “of social overhead capital-commercial centers, communication facilities, schools, hospitals, etc.” [6] This uneven development created ethnic tensions as the UMHK received much of its labor from neighboring Kaisai province. For example, the Luba of Kaisai, even though they were ethnically related to the Luba people of the Katanga, formed their own unique culture and this presence of ‘aliens’ helped to make both groups more conscious of their differences.

Besides the ethnic tensions between Congolese, another factor was the presence of Belgian settlers who had their own agenda. The interests of the settlers lined up with those of the economic elite as the settlers formed the Special Committee of Katanga,

“whose principal function was to promote, in every possible way, the development of an agricultural colony. To serve this purpose, a [Frontier Syndicate of Katanga] had been set up in 1920, thanks to the financial backing of the UMHK, [the Congo Company for Trade and Industry] and several other large-scale capitalist enterprises.”

In addition to this, besides the corporate interests, the settlers themselves had personal political and economic interests as they desired the special administrative status with a Vice Governor General, which acted as a representative of the Belgian monarchy. Economically, they felt “the proportion of public expenditures devoted to the Katanga appeared minute when compared with the over-all contribution of its taxpayers to colonial revenues.” [7] Thus, through a combination of ethnic tensions and economic interests, when the province finally decided to secede, it was “supported by a Belgian mining company and was backed by Belgian troops almost from the very beginning.” [8] Moïse Tshombé, a pro-Western anti-communist, was elected to lead the breakaway province and Katanga officially seceded on July 11, 1960. It was due to this secession and the Belgian intervention to the military mutiny that Patrice Lumumba appealed to the UN to intervene.

UN Intervention

Both Premier Patrice Lumumba and President Kasavubu went to the UN Security Council to plead their case for military intervention, with the goal of “[protecting] the national territory of the Congo against the present external aggression which is a threat to world peace.” They accused “the Belgian Government of having carefully prepared the secession of the Katanga with a view of maintaining”[9] a hold on the Congo. The Council voted in favor of intervention, with only three abstentions from China, France, and the United Kingdom out of concern for Belgian interests.

From there, “contingents of a United Nations Force, provided by a number of countries including Asian and African States began to arrive in the Congo” and “United Nations civilian experts were rushed to the Congo to help ensure the continued operations of essential public services.” [10] The UN force would remain in the country for the next three years. Interestingly enough, both the USSR and the US agreed with the intervention, likely due to their respective interests in the Congo.

Foreign Interests

On a regional level, the US and Soviet Union both viewed Africa as important. “The question of independence for the colonies was championed by the USSR,” while the US and its allies developed ways to “either delay the granting of independence and/or to involve the newly independent countries in their [the West’s] global anti-communist crusade.” Demands for freedom by colonized populations were viewed as “communist-inspired movements, thus implicitly suggesting that the colonized peoples preferred to remain colonized.”[11]

The focus on independence allowed for the Soviets to gain a foothold in Africa as it could be seen as wanting equality and independence for oppressed peoples around the globe. The Soviets viewed the liberation movements sweeping Africa and Asia as “damaging to the West and therefore beneficial to World Communism-if it could be properly exploited.”[12] Thus, their goal in Africa was to aid the expansion of Communism. When Lumumba turned to the Soviet Union in August 1960 for aid to battle the Katanga secession after the UN refused to intervene [13], he was immediately seen as a ‘Communist sympathizer’ or ‘useful fool’ for the Soviets in the eyes of the West, though it aided the Soviets in expanding their influence and building a reputation as supporting independence for oppressed peoples. While this would come back to haunt him, for the Soviets it worked quite well to boost their credibility in the eyes of countries fighting colonialism.

The United States had a number of interests in the Congo. From the very start, the West had been hostile to Lumumba, seeing him as ‘over-nationalistic’ and an ‘unreliable ally in the East-West conflict.’ When he accepted aid from the Soviet Union, this view only intensified. The US had a number of economic interests in the region as well, with there being a number of high-level connections to corporations, the US State Department, and other organizations.

For example, the Liberian-American Mineral Company was led by “Bo Gustav Hammarskjöld, brother of the U.N. Secretary General,” and “Under-Secretary of State George Ball, who was directly in charge of making U.S. policy in the Congo,”[14] and was a former member of Fowler Hamilton’s law firm, which represented the International African American Corporation, a UN mineral syndicate in the Congo. The aforementioned Mining Union of Upper Katanga had stock held by “American companies like Lazard Freres, the New York investment house;” and “Allan A. Ryan, an American, [who] was director of the Belgium-American Banking Corporation” held 25% of the shares in Mining Union and “the Rockefeller Brothers [held] less than 1% of [Mining Union] shares.”[15] While Howard Kersher, a newspaper reporter, did not find a smoking gun linking these people to the problems in the Congo, it was quite obvious that they all had financial interest in the region and thus a stake in what was going on with regards to the Katanga secession.

From a geostrategic perspective, the Congo was important to the US for its potential influence on its neighbors – Cameroon, Gabon, the Central African Republic, and Sudan. US officials were worried that if a pro-Communist government came to power, it could set the tone that other African nations would follow and, on a larger level, aid the Soviet Union in spreading Communist ideology. The Congo was valuable from a military perspective in that a key front in WW3 would be the Middle East; and assumptions were made that Soviets would attempt to block routes to that theater; that “Soviet generals and planners would understand the importance of the Mediterranean Sea, the Suez Canal and even the waters surrounding the coasts of South Africa” to overall US strategy; and that “any Soviet attack would make security of these routes integral to its plan.”[16]

Overall, the US “detested Lumumba and [was] determined to overthrow him, and this became the principal objective of US policy during the first six months of the Congo Crisis.”[17] CIA Director Allen Dulles warned of a “communist takeover of the Congo with disastrous consequences ... for the interests of the free world” and “authorized a crash-program fund of up to \$100,000 to replace the existing government of Patrice Lumumba with a ‘pro-western group.’”[18] While the superpowers did have their respective interests in the Congo, the situation would intensify with the secession of South Kasai.

South Kasai

The South Kasai region, like the Katanga, was rich with mineral wealth, mainly diamonds. Until the mid-1970s, it produced one-third of global output of industrial diamonds. Though mineral wealth was important due to the economics of the Congo, it was mainly ideological differences and ethnic conflict that caused the secession.

Ideologically, the secession was led by Albert Kalonji, a man who had been a prominent figure in the Congolese National Movement party, but later split from Lumumba to help form a more moderate wing of the nationalist party which came to be known as MNC-Kalonji. Like the Abako political party, the Kalonji wing of the MNC preferred a centralized system in favor of autonomous provinces based on ethnic lines.

With regards to ethnicity, the secession “can be traced to the territorial expansion of the Baluba beyond southern Kasai to the Lulua area in the late-nineteenth century, which created animosities between the Baluba and the Lulua.”[19] This territorial expansion of Baluba peoples due to lack of cultivable land saw the Baluba move permanently into the region and attain most of the clerical colonial jobs. “The fear of domination by the Baluba prompted the creation of the Association of Lulua-Frères in 1951 by a Lulua chief, Sylvain Mangole Kalamba.” [20] Tensions eventually reached a crisis when “the local administration proposed to resettle Baluba farmers from Lulua land (an economically booming center province) back to their impoverished homeland in southern Kasai.” [21] Kalonji exploited these ethnic tensions for political gain and declared secession of South Kasai.

The Rise of Mobutu

While the country was wracked with political turmoil, it provided the perfect atmosphere for a coup. On September 6, 1960, President Kasavubu dismissed Lumumba and appointed Joseph Ileo as the new Premier. However, his reign was not to last as the Army Chief of Staff, Joseph Mobutu, would soon take power in a coup with foreign help.

Mobutu already had ties with the CIA that dated back to “his role in the pre-independence negotiations in Brussels where he both reported to the Belgian Sûreté and made his first contacts with Lawrence Devlin,”[22] the CIA station chief in the Congo. These ties only grew during the Congo Crisis when the US and other Western powers funded Mobutu, who, in turn “distributed large amounts of money to the officers and men under his command; through this arrangement he was able to establish bonds of loyalty among his soldiers.” It also didn’t hurt that his unit “was virtually the only really functioning element of the Congolese National Army.”[23] The US aided Mobutu’s rise to power as, has previously been mentioned, they viewed Lumumba as a Communist sympathizer and needed to get rid of him in order to ensure that the Soviets would not gain a sphere of influence in Africa.

The first time Mobutu took power was regarding a constitutional dispute. Kasavubu had

dismissed Lumumba. Both the US and the UN had influence on this action. Andrew W. Cordier, a UN official, and Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN Secretary-General, “coordinated their activities with the State Department” overall and Cordier for September 6, “arranged for UN troops to close the airport - to preclude any airlift of loyal troops to the capital by Lumumba” and then “ordered UN forces to close the radio station as well, which prevented Lumumba from broadcasting an appeal for support.” [24] This encouraged Kasavubu to act against Lumumba; however, his plan was stifled when Lumumba received a full vote of confidence from the Congolese Parliament, whereas Kasavubu’s appointment, Joseph Ileo, did not.

Due to this situation, the US became even more focused on getting Mobutu into power and advocating for a military coup. On September 14, Mobutu removed Lumumba from office, dissolved Parliament, and quickly “turned the government over to a College of Commissioners composed of the few college graduates the country possessed.”[25] He placed Lumumba under house arrest. Lumumba was soon freed by loyal Congolese troops only to be captured again and placed under house arrest with a UN guard.

Upon hearing that Lumumba had been placed under house arrest, Vice Prime Minister Antoine Gizenga set up a rival government in the eastern city of Stanleyville with the help of pro-Lumumba forces. On December 12, 1960, Gizenga declared the nation of Stanleyville, with its capital of Oriental City, to be the only legitimate government of the Congo.

Gizenga quickly turned to the Soviet Union for aid. In a telegram, he asked the Soviets to “immediately, without delay, help us in military equipment and foodstuffs’ in order to repel the invasion of Mobutu’s troops ‘who unleashed the civil war against soldiers and units loyal to the legitimate government.” [26] Considering that they had attempted to aid the Lumumba government and failed, the Soviets took their time in replying to Gizenga. When they did respond, they sent \$500,000 in aid. However, due to the blockade on Stanleyville, they could not transport aid directly to the fledgling government, and as a result of infighting among the USSR and its regional allies, little else was done.

There were now four competing governments in the Congo: Joseph Mobutu and Joseph Kasavubu in Léopoldville, supported by Western governments, Antoine Gizenga in Stanleyville, Albert Kalonji in South Kasai, and Moïse Tshombé in Katanga.

The Assassination of Patrice Lumumba

As has been previously mentioned, the West had never been particularly fond of Lumumba, especially after he sought aid from the Soviet Union. His assassination came as a surprise to many, but it had already been planned from the very beginning as the US government was determined to get him out of the picture, as were the Belgians.

On November 27, 1960, Lumumba left UN custody to make a break for Stanleyville and join his supporters there. However, he was captured by Mobutu’s forces only days later and imprisoned. In early January 1961, forces loyal to Lumumba invaded “northern Katanga to support a revolt of Baluba tribesmen against the Tshombé government.” Due to ‘security’ reasons, “the CIA and Mobutu decided to transfer Lumumba from Léopoldville to Katanga,” [27] where he and two aides were subsequently killed.

US plans to eliminate Lumumba went as high as the President himself. On August 25, 1960, a subcommittee of the National Security Council known as the Special Group met. Thomas

Parrott, the secretary of the Group, began the meeting by outlining the CIA operations that had been taken by 'mounting an anti- Lumumba campaign in the Congo,' and the meeting ended with the group "not necessarily ruling out any particular kind of activity which might contribute to getting rid of Lumumba." [28] The very next month, CIA Station Officer Victor Hedgman received a cable from Bronson Tweedy, the Deputy Director of the CIA, in which "he advised [Hedgman], or [his] instructions were, to eliminate Lumumba," specifying the orders came from the President himself. [29]

While a Senate report found there was "no evidentiary basis for concluding that the CIA conspired in this plan or was connected to the events in Katanga that resulted in Lumumba's death," some doubt still remains. The CIA did have a plan to poison Lumumba and possessed "advanced knowledge of the central government's plan to transport Lumumba into the hands of his bitterest enemies, where he was likely to be killed." [30] The US government, at the very least, played a significant role in Lumumba's assassination.

The Belgians also had wanted to kill Lumumba and were somewhat involved with his assassination. Specifically, they were involved in "weapon deliveries; supporting the arrest of Lumumba; action 58316, (the outline of which is unclear but within which an attack on Lumumba could be relevant); and the kidnapping of Lumumba." [31] They also had information that the leader's life was in danger due to being in the Katanga, but did not take any action to protect him. In fact, when Lumumba was executed, it was in the presence of "a Belgian police commissioner and three Belgian officers who were under the authority, leadership and supervision of the Katangan authorities." [32]

With Lumumba dead, it was only a matter of time before the Congo would be reunited under the rule of Mobutu.

The Fall of the Revolution

During late 1960 and early 1961, it became obvious to Western powers that "the provisional government of Kasavubu would not last without reconciliation with Katanga, and the U.S. pressed for a federated Congo government which would include Katanga." [33] Thus, the US encouraged the UN Security Council to pass a resolution demanding an end to the Katanga secession. This was passed in the form of UNSC Resolution 161, which stated in part that the UN should "take immediately all appropriate measures to prevent the occurrence of civil war in the Congo." [34]

However, this was undermined by Belgium and other involved American interests, whom did not want the secession to end. These interests formed an organization called 'The Committee to Aid Katanga Freedom Fighters,' which allowed Tshombe to "build an army that could resist the UN, financed by Belgium." This armed group had reactionary forces within it from a number of places, including "the United States (Cuban exiles), Britain, France (ex-Foreign Legionnaires), West Germany (ex-SS men), South Africa (fascists), Rhodesia-and, of course, Belgium." [35]

In February 1961, Kasavubu put an end to the Mobutu reign and appointed Joseph Ileo and Cyrille Adoula heads of the new government, with Kasavubu remaining as president. The very next month, Gizenga attempted to make peace with the Congo, but was arrested by Kasavubu and imprisoned, while Tshombe was forced into exile. Three years later, in 1964, the UN left the Congo, and Tshombe returned. During his leave of absence, Tshombe "conferred in Brussels with Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak and the U.S. Ambassador," [36]

which allowed him to return to the Congo and replace Adoula as Prime Minister. Yet, this government did not last. Mobutu gained power in November 1965, once again with the aid of the CIA.

The US government grew weary of the competition between Tshombe and Kasavubu, both of whom hoped to rule the Congo after the civil war ended. This concern heightened when Kasavubu “sought ‘an opening to the left’ by dismissing Tshombe and appointing a government ready to consider not only the dismissal of mercenaries, but also the recognition of Communist China and improved relations with left-nationalist African states.” [37] In response, the CIA backed Mobutu to ensure that no leftist groups gained power.

In addition to constant tinkering from foreign interests, there was also internal politicking. The coup itself was a collective decision by senior officers of the Congolese military. They ultimately backed Mobutu and “believed the army was above partisan politics and demanded increased fighting power of the army.”[38] In order to satisfy the military, Mobutu increased the size of the military and enhanced its prestige. This, as time would tell, only opened the door for more internal struggles down the line.

Notes

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[7] Lemarchand, pg 409

[8] M. Rafiqul Islam, “Secessionist Self-Determination: Some Lessons from Katanga, Biafra, and Bangladesh,” *Journal of Peace Research* 22:3 (1985), pg 213

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[22] Götz Bechtolsheimer "Breakfast with Mobutu: Congo, the United States and the Cold War, 1964-1981," PhD Diss., The London School of Economics and Political Science (2012), pg 64

[23] Gibbs, pg 220

[24] Gibbs, pg 221

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[29] Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders, pgs 24, 26

[30] Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders, pg 48

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Lumumba and on the Possible Involvement of Belgian Politicians , Report of the Commission of Inquiry

<http://www.dekamer.be/commissions/LMB/indexN.html> , pg 6

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