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The “Affreux”: French mercenaries, types of violence and systems of domination by extra-African forces (1960-1989)

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The revival of mercenaries is a phenomenon occurring concomitantly with the African decolonization. From 1960 to the end of the Cold War, mercenaries took part in the development of political and armed violence on the African continent. Those men stand out as “The Affreux”, a term referring to the first mercenaries in Katanga (DRC), right from 1960. Among them appeared some French men. The most emblematic of all, Bob Denard, made his career from his experience in Katanga to his stranglehold on the Comoros presidential guard between 1978 and 1989.

This paper is based on public archives but also on the personal documents belonging to the famous French mercenary. Since the end of the 60’s, he has become the leader in the underworld of the French “dogs of war”, by winning recognition right after the Biafra war. Under his command, the French mercenaries are taking a decisive part in this private or paragonovernmental military violence in Africa. They are interesting, first of all, because, thanks to paramilitary actors, we are able to understand the linkages between the numerous actors who contribute to the implementation of an underlying violence of the political life in post-colonial Africa from the 60’s to the end of the Cold War. The paper aims at highlighting their actions and questioning the modalities of implementing violence in which the mercenaries are just instruments during this period. Who are their sleeping partners? By which means can the “Affreux” act? Those questions imply analysing their links and interactions with global private forces (mining industry, arms traffic), with non-African actors trying to impose their influence (France or the US in the cold War context for instance), and also with the African powers themselves.

Mercenaries, violence and private economic interests

The links between mercenaries and business have been proved since the revival of the phenomenon. In Katanga (DCR), and in the background of the recession, the Mining

Union of the Haut-Katanga (MUHK) takes a leading part. According to several sources, Moïse Tshombé, president of the Katanga, received from the MUHK not less than 35 million \$ for organising the secession¹. The company also seems to be related behind the scenes to the events leading to the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, handed to the Katangese by Mobutu. Thus, the Prime Minister of the independent Congo is fiercely opposed to the Belgian interests. Then, the MUHK is blamed by the UN for keeping funding the government in Elizabethville: "As you know it, the MUHK, those two past years, had settled to the local authorities of Katanga its fees and taxes related to its operations in Katanga while it should settle to the central government. As you also know it, the instalments of the company proved to be crucial in allowing the Katanga authorities not only to defy the central authorities, but also to harass and attack the UN²." Thus, the UN makes connexions between the funding of mercenaries fighting against the UN forces and the payments of the mining company. Besides, in the company, staff would be devoted more directly to the "organisation hiring mercenaries for fighting in Katanga³."

Furthermore, the company staff proves to show systematically solidarity with the Katanga cause. This is particularly obvious when the UN forces intervene on the ground. Thus, in Kolwezi, in January 1963, the employees provided the Katanga with phone access, and the European and African population with food and medicaments⁴. After the Rumpunch operation, the company funded the reconstitution of the mercenary troops, according to Bob Denard. Indeed, the men enlisted by Jean Schramme in his Leopard commandos received wages from the MUHK as a result of civil contracts. The MUHK could also be incriminated in the death of the UN General Secretary, Dag Hammarskjold, who intervened in the Katanga crisis⁵. The Company also took part in the military struggle that the Affreux made possible and in the violence symbolised by the deaths of Lumumba and

¹ Letter from U Thant to Paul-Henri Spaak, 1962 August 2nd, Diplomatic Archives of Belgium, carton 18 882/IX..

² UN document -S/5053/add.11/ann.XXVI.

³ Secret report by R. Rothschild in Brussels, 1961 October 10th., Diplomatic Archives of Belgium, carton 18 882/IX.

⁴ « Journal des événements décembre 1962-janvier 1963 par Frédéric Vandewalle au ministre des Affaires étrangères et des Affaires africaines », Diplomatic Archives of Belgium, 18 882/IX.

⁵ Article in the *Guardian*, 2011 August 11th (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/aug/17/dag-hammarskjold-un-secretary-general-crash>) and also Susan Williams, *Who Killed Hammarskjold? The UN, The Cold War, and White Supremacy in Africa*, London, C. Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2011, 256 p.

Hammaraskjold. A few years later, in 1967, the cassiterite mine nearby the headquarters of the mercenaries led by Jean Schramme in the Maniema area was still exploited. Exported by train by a Belgian company, the ore is certainly given a particular overseeing by the “dogs of war”⁶. Moreover, the MUKH still worked with the mercenaries. In 1967, while the mercenaries’ uprising against Mobutu ended up with Bukavu besieged by the ANC, some contacts were established with Bob Denard when his group withdrew to Angola and tried to go up an operation of diversion. One of the experts in files among Denard’s adjuncts works as an intermediary: “Ghys goes to Paris and says he is in touch with Pierre Joly, MUKH President’s brother. Among the Belgian financial circles, some look favourably at Denard after Schramme failed to continue the fight⁷.”

The mining interests and the white workforce who remained after the decolonization in order to work in those companies allowed to fuel financially the political violence provoked by the secessions. Weapons are then the main instrument of the mercenaries. In the case of the secession in Biafra in 1967, the arm traffickers carry weight. Pierre L. offers to supply Biafran President, Colonel Ojukwu, with an aviation, a navy, and mercenaries, mentioning the famous names of the time: Jack Mallock, Michel de Clary, Roger Faulques, John Peeters (fMike Hoare’s former adjunct in RDC) and Bob Denard⁸. Since June 1967, the deliveries went on. In October, when Denard tried to sell his team to Ojukwu, he had Pierre Joly (for) as a partner. Guy Cardinal, who negotiated the contract with the Biafrans, wrote to his boss: “Try to get in touch with Pierre according to the orders. Pierre is out of Portugal, left for Paris (...) Pierre told me that the money hasn’t been put into Robert Denard account⁹.” In the stakes of the contract they try to get but also in the aim of assuring the provisions they sold, the mercenaries are looking for partners in those inevitable intermediaries.

⁶ Account of Henri Clement (2013, July 23th in Paris).

⁷ *Compte rendu de mission du 23 octobre 1967*, Bob Denard’s private papers, file 74.

⁸ Pierre Lunel, *Bob Denard. Le roi de fortune*, Paris, Editions n°1, 1991, p 234, 396 et suivantes. Pierre L. can’t be identified.

⁹ Letter from Guy Cardinal, 1967 October 30th, Bob Denard’s private papers, file 74.

Those private interests, which also had a part in the violation of the embargo on South Africa in the 80's thanks to the Comoros GP, are however only intermediaries and/ or extra forces for funding dramatically onerous operations. Money and weapons come from other sources more significant and more long-lasting, the non African state actors.

Mercenaries, violence and geopolitics of postcolonial Africa in the Cold War

From the beginning, French mercenaries are connected to secret services. The "Affreux" are very convenient tools to exercise a shape of political violence against States which Paris wants to submit to its influence. Secretary in the African Affairs of the French President, Jacques Foccart aims to strengthen the French backyard in Africa. The French influence in the former Belgian Congo is made possible by the secession of Katanga. Bob Denard became increasingly powerful between 1964 and 1967 at the expense of the Belgian advisers. So Captain Bottu writes to the King of Belgium in 1965: " The command is still Belgian ; that is of paramount importance for our country. But I know that, after his departure (of Colonel Lamouline), a power struggle will happen in which French people, who do everything to eliminate Belgian people in certain headquarters positions and which you have certainly heard about, will go out victorious. The same French people who took the place of any Belgian people in Katanga, stand out again¹⁰". In the seventies, the mercenaries destabilized much more the African politics as they were now overthrowing regimes by commandos actions : Comoros in 1975 and 1978, Benin in 1977 (even if it failed), or plans against Libya in 1971. In each of these cases, the French secret services were informed, at least, and gave a "yellow light". If they aren't the one sleeping partner, they are party to the logistics of the operations of the mercenaries.

So the French geostrategy in Africa requires this destabilization of certain States. Paris is ready to let the war violence grow to enlarge its backyard. The political violence involving mercenaries is also part of the Cold War as mercenaries receive missions and support according to the logic of West-East confrontation. The CIA is present in Congo in the sixties (with the WIGM, private aircraft company which support mercenaries fighters with anti-Castro pilots). But

¹⁰ Letter from Captain Bottu to the king of Belgium, 1965 July 1st, Bob Denard's private papers, file 78).

we are more able to see the Cold War context in the seventies. The mission of Denard's group in Angola in 1976 was obtained through the SDECE but with US funds (about 450 000 dollars)¹¹. As part of the operation *AI Feature* approved by the President, the CIA initially in 1975 had a budget of \$ 14 million to help the party of Jonas Savimbi. The ideologic fight and the civil wars in seventies are thus particularly intense.

Mercenaries, violence and state building.

Given the private interests, the French geostrategic motivations in Africa, or the Cold War context, mercenaries are an aggravating factor of the political instability that young States born from decolonization are facing. They can count on African relay of France (Gabon, Ivory Coast or Morocco) and the Western world (Rhodesia or South Africa) and are narrowly linked to the prolongation of infranational, religious, or interethnic violence: struggles between Balubas and other ethnic groups encouraged by the Belgians in Katanga, between Katangese and central power in DRC, in civil war in Angola or between Blacks and Whites in Rhodesia.

Built at the beginning with military circles hostile to the decolonization in Algeria, and then renewed with circles close to the initial crucible, the French mercenaries benefit from counter-insurrectional know-how used in Indochina and later in Algeria. Since the Congolese experience in the 60's, combat techniques have been in line with those practiced in Algeria. In Congo, the mercenaries try to reduce Simba resistance and burn villages to the ground during the course of their progression toward Kisangani. This atmosphere of violence wears down relationships, including between them. The mercenary vocabulary is used as an outlet for the volunteers' spleen. Everyone shouts at each other with some "Two bullets in your face" or "two buckshot in yours", when they don't shout "To the river", referring to the capital executions in which the corps are engulfed in the dark waters, and that are practiced both by the mercenaries and their adversaries¹². During the 1970's, this

¹¹ John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies: a CIA Story*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1978, 285 p. It's confirmed by "Budget pour l'utilisation de conseillers techniques avec prime de risques pour une période de 6 mois 20 hommes", Bob Denard's private papers, file 29.

¹² Pierre Chassin, *Baroud pour une vie*, Paris, Picollec, 2001, 241 p.

counter-insurrectional struggle becomes systematic, especially in Rhodesia. A mercenary testifies in 1978: " I wasn't really keen on those operations. Fighting in the bush is one thing. To beat someone up with your feet or your stick, simply to have them gone from their hut, is another. The so-called terrorists were put back in the hands of the Special Branch, who had to make them talk. The end justified the means. Electric dynamo, burning feet, and so on¹³."

In the service of the African regimes, the "dogs of war" are also crucial instruments of non-democratic states and of the political violence they provoked. Comoros are a good example. After facilitating Ali Soilih's takeover in 1975 by driving Ahmed Abdallah in Anjouan out of his function, the mercenaries allow (unwillingly) the installation of an autocratic socialist regime. In 1978, Bob Denard overthrows the same Ali Soilih, who is then executed in unclear circumstances. In 1989, Ahmed Abdallah's death was not clarified. In the 70's already, several Gabonese dissidents were missing, and those disappearances had been imputed to the mercenaries. If Denard's men were probably not responsible for them, they have certainly been led by the Gabonese GP who hired former mercenaries.

Ahmed Abdallah seizes power in Comoros again thanks to the "Affreux". The implementation of the Presidential Guard explains the authoritarian drift of the new regime because it's the guarantor for its continuity. From 1982 opposition parties are dissolved and only the "blue party" of the president remains. The GP widens then its skills in the counter-intelligence and in the supervision of the political opposition; that's particularly true in France with the GP's office of Paris. Mercenaries are so important that attempts to destabilize the regime are systematically organized in order to hit the Europeans of the GP (in 1985 and in 1987). In these most successful attempts, especially in 1985, there is a real question raised about the violent repression and extra-legal practices. According to the journalist Pierre Péan, " Twenty or thirty GP soldiers were arrested. Of these, some have been submitted to torture, 3-5 GP would be dead or dying¹⁴." In 1987, the representative of the Comoros Democratic Front (FDC) in Paris protest against arrests deemed arbitrary,

¹³ « La confession d'un chien de guerre », *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 1978 July 3th.

¹⁴ Pierre Péan, *Affaires africaines*, Paris, Fayard, 1983, 340 p.

violence against detained militants, whose number is estimated at close to one hundred¹⁵. Journalists write about bodies cut in pieces and thrown in plastic bags or even found in tanks, even if the GP lets families come and see the people arrested in their cell and thus allows them to make sure they are safe¹⁶.

The participation of mercenaries, in particular French, in police, political or military recurrent violence drives to the construction of international legislation for regulation. From this point of view, the mercenary action leads to an international debate and to the regulation of political and military violence. After the fall of the mercenaries to Bukavu in 1967, the UN General Assembly voted for the resolution 2465 which decrees that the use of mercenaries against liberation movements national fighting for the independence of colonized territories is criminal¹⁷. The condemnation of mercenaries is strong and at the same time, remains in the symbolic realm. The attempt to overthrow Kerekou in Benin gave rise to new advances at the level of the OAU and at the world level (Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions of 1977). From then, France must keep its distance from the GP's men : the new socialist government tried in 1981 but it quickly gave up. Finally Paris put an end to the mercenary system in 1989 whereas the UNO published its text against the use of the mercenaries.

To conclude, we are able to observe how the use of mercenaries has changed since 1989. While the French mercenary system organized in the eighties in the Comoros works in agreement and with South African funds, its disappearance and political transition taking place in Pretoria led to the use of local mercenaries rather than European (*Executives Outcomes*). It doesn't preclude initially violence by mercenaries. Besides, there are always the same global forces (mining industry in particular). It will be necessary to wait for the national legislations (South African then also French) to see the military role of the mercenaries go down in infranational wars in Africa. As at the time of the Frenchmen of Bob

¹⁵ Letter from the representative of the FDC to the ambassador of Comoros in Paris, 1985 March 28th, Bob Denard's private papers, file 44.

¹⁶ Letter from Lieutenant Suresnes in Paris to Bob Denard, Bob Denard's private papers, file 44.

¹⁷ General Assembly Resolution 2465, 23 UN GAOR Supplément (N°18), Document ONU A/7218 (1968).

Denard, political violence is especially built on the system of the presidential guards. The expertise of the mercenaries in anti-subversive fighting and their tactical know-how allow very authoritarian regimes to remain by more or less coercive ways. However, the recent period differs from the Cold War during which these breaches of the democratic spirit were tolerated by the major Western countries (USA, France,...) on behalf of the fight against communism. The end of it logically coincides with the fall of the French "Affreux".

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