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French and Belgians mercenaries in the Congo and in the Angolan civil war, revealing the recompositions of international relations in postcolonial Africa in the 1960s

While the world conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century imposed the image of war fought by national armies, of the legitimate exercise of violence by regal forces, observers were struck by the reappearance of mercenaries in the conflicts in the Congo between 1960 and 1967, then in the Nigerian civil war until 1970. In the end, from the Katangese secession to the military rout in Biafra, some French and Belgian mercenaries spent almost a decade fighting on African soil: they were not just contractors passing through military affairs, but central players. Although there were other nationalities among the mercenaries in these two countries, notably for geopolitical reasons South Africans and Rhodesians, Belgians and French were the main contingents, at least in the Congo. The link with their role as colonial powers in the region until 1960 must obviously be taken into account. These mercenaries played a key role in the development of the internal conflicts in Congo and Nigeria, not only because of the length of their involvement but also because of their privileged position in the general staffs (Katanga and then Congo - Denard was made a colonel in the Congolese National Army - and in Biafra). The national armies, which had just been created and were proving too fragile, were unable to fight the secessionist movements. On the other hand, mercenaries came to the fore: they became known as the 'Ugly Ones' in the collective imagination from this period onwards. Nevertheless, their actions are only made possible by the facilities they are given to work and by state support, and not all their actions are negative. We therefore need to look again at the ways in which mercenaries have re-emerged in the Congo and Biafra and to better understand the responsibilities of the

various players in this phenomenon. I will first look at how what I call the ‘mercenary system’ is gradually being organised between Europe and Africa, and then at their actual place on the ground.

I° The emergence of a ‘mercenary system’

Local players and post-colonial private interests initiating secession

In a nutshell, this article describes the collusion between the Belgian financial interests of the ‘Union minière du Haut-Katanga’ (UMHK) and the secessionist president Moïse Tshombé, who had himself been a businessman before entering politics and who knew he could count on the immense financial resources of the UMHK¹. The mining union needed to weaken Prime Minister Lumumba, who was known to be hostile to Belgian interests in Congo-Léopoldville. This collusion and the UMHK's financial resources soon made it possible to recruit military expertise to defend secessionist Katanga, in particular managers capable of providing tactical supervision or using slightly sophisticated weapons (mortars, for example). In Katanga, private interests were essentially Belgian. While the Katangan gendarmerie - the local security forces - numbered only 350 men in July 1960, its transformation into the Katanga defence army brought it to a strength of around 11,000, including more than 600 white men. More than two thirds were Belgian and French. This was at least the same proportion as in 1967 around Schramme in Bukavu or crossing the border between Angola and Katanga with Denard in September 1967, at the end of this long sequence of internal wars in the Congo. Most of the Belgian and French cadres came to the recruitment centres in Paris and Brussels, to which I will return later. Gradually, through word of mouth, particularly in French circles that were still in favour of

¹ Letter from General Secretary Thant to Belgian Prime minister Paul-Henri Spaak le 2 août 1962, document ONU-S/5053/add.11/ann.XXVI.

maintaining French Algeria, some of them, like Bob Denard, presented themselves directly in Katanga.

On the other hand, the Civil Nigerian war shows that the system of dialogue between secessionist chiefs (Colonel Ojukwu), private interests and mercenaries has been perfected. I will leave aside the question of oil (linked to the French state for SAFRAP) to look at the negotiations between Denard and Ojukwu when the conflict had just broken out. The discussions between Denard's representative and Colonel Ojukwu, which began in the autumn of 1967, show how important it was for Colonel Ojukwu to be able to supply arms (particularly large-calibre weapons) and equipment to supplement the mercenaries². Bob Denard's dossier is based on a partnership with an arms dealer, Pierre Laureys, and a logistics transport operator, the American Hank Wharton. From the mercenary's point of view, the main requirement is for financial guarantees from his potential client. The Frenchman wanted assurances that the account opened in Switzerland prior to the deployment would be funded to the tune of 900,000 dollars (equivalent to 6 months' wages for his men). The affair was unsuccessful, but it showed that the Congolese experience had enabled a mercenary leader, Denard, to get to know arms dealers (in this case Laureys) and logisticians (in this case Wharton).

Presented under the name of Groupe d'Assistance Technique Indépendant (GATI) (Independent Technical Assistance Group), Denard's offer is well placed in the perspective of technical assistance comparable to that between two states. Ojukwu insisted that he was 'like a sick person being offered various doctors'. He replied to Denard's delegate that 'GATI would be one of these doctors. He

² *Compte rendu de mission du 23 octobre 1967*, archives privées Bob Denard, carton 74.

would like a rapid response'³. So there were several offers made to Biafra. In reality, this structuring was facilitated by the action of the major states indirectly involved in these internal conflicts.

Former colonial powers enabled the quick deployment of mercenaries acting

In the case of Biafra, the Foccart networks now established on the continent played a key role in providing support - including mercenaries and arms dealers - to Biafra. Relations were even established before the official announcement of secession. In Libreville, Omar Bongo's political adviser to Foccart, Philippe Letteron, set up a puppet company, SOGEXI⁴. Equipped with a few old DC3s, it was the 'regular courier' to Biafra⁵. Philippe Letteron became Ojukwu's political adviser, representing the 'short circuit' between the secessionist leader and Foccart. A Centre for the Documentation and History of Biafra was set up in Paris, entrusted to the secessionists and used in particular to recruit mercenaries. On Foccart's orders, Faulques regrouped his men 'who were unaware that Faulques was working for Foccart' in Lisbon, a friendly country in the logic of maintaining neo-colonial anti-communist control in Africa⁶. In this way, we can see a rapprochement between General de Gaulle's France and Salazar's regime on African issues. The Portuguese islands (Sao Tomé, for example) were a hub for logistics between France and Biafra. Support for Biafra also manifested itself in the supply of arms from South Africa, picked up by mercenaries (the *Cabo Verde* ship) in Namibia and transported by sea to Port-Harcourt⁷.

³ *Compte rendu de mission du 23 octobre 1967* où Guy Cardinal rapporte à Denard son entrevue avec le colonel Ojukwu et des intermédiaires pour tenter d'obtenir un contrat pour le GATI, archives privées Bob Denard, carton 74.

⁴ AN, Fonds Letteron, 90 AJ 76-79.

⁵ CAPTAIN ARMAND, *Biafra vaincra*, p 137.

⁶ Typed document and entitled « Informations confidentielles à utiliser sans mention de la source » written on the January 30th 1968, Archives privées Bob Denard, carton 74.

⁷ Log of the ship *Cabo Verde*, archives privées Bob Denard.

This was a refinement of the methods used in Katanga, where Jacques Foccart, on behalf of France and the Belgians, had placed men in Tshombé's entourage (see, for example, the career of Jacques Duchemin, a 28-year-old 'journalist' who became a military adviser and then Katanga's Minister of Information). I won't go into the former senior officers who made up Tshombé's first general staff (but I can come back to this in the questions). In Paris and Brussels, 'Katangan cultural centres' were the models for those in Biafra later on. These were the recruitment centres mentioned earlier, but national military institutions were systematically involved. In Paris, military doctors gave check-ups to mercenary candidates. In Brussels, Michel de Hasque testifies to the incentives given to conscripts from certain units at the end of their military service: 'There were about thirty of us paras-commandos [conscripts who had done their service in Belgium]; the chiefs had told us about the possibility of going to the Congo. We all went together'⁸. Angola's role in the movement of people was already clear. Denard's attempt in 1967 to relieve the mercenaries assigned to Bukavu was only possible because he had moved to Angola with the approval of the Portuguese authorities, where he regrouped his men⁹.

II° An immediate perception of their role far from the current pejorative image of mercenaries

In fact, because they constitute a pledge given by France or Belgium to African partners, Belgian and French mercenaries cannot be reduced to agents of destabilisation. They are vehicles for the transfer of skills and can also help to restore sovereignty and protect populations: in fact, everything depends on the

⁸ Interview in Grayan with Michel de Hasque le 14 octobre 2012.

⁹ Opération Lucifer (see typed document probably written by Georges Seren-Rosso archives privées Bob Denard, carton 68).

use to which they are put. They are primarily instruments of indirect action in international relations.

Rising military needs, between high-level expert knowledge and field managers

While recruitment for Katanga was initially based on a twofold rationale, there were two main reasons for this. The first was to have access to very high-level skills in planning and operational management, i.e. staff skills (.....) or very specific skills (aircraft pilots such as the Belgian Roger Bracco or the Frenchman Roland Raucoules). The second, which corresponded to the technical assistance (200 men) provided by Belgium and the acceleration of recruitment in 1961 for Katanga, was of a more tactical nature: company commanders, with a weaker politico-military dimension, which explains the use of other nationalities. This remained true throughout the Congolese period, which explains, for example, why South Africans/Rhodesians were relegated to the background and why Denard was appointed to the rank of colonel in mixed units under Mobutu from 1966 onwards.

The same logic applies in Nigeria. Tactical expertise is found in both camps. The politico-military dimension, with France as the main covert supporter of Biafra masked by the more open involvement of Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire, is now well known through a whole series of studies. It is scrutinised by the major players, notably the CIA: 'Militarily, Biafra is almost entirely dependent on a clandestine night airlift mainly from Libreville and Abidjan for arms and munitions'¹⁰. While the Christian Jean Mauriceau-Beaupré, so close to Foccart, was no stranger to the development of Vatican support for Biafra, the mercenaries deployed on the ground were not under the orders of a man who

¹⁰ CIA, *Special Memorandum. Nigerai : How the Civil War may End*, 2 February 1969. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00967A000800030007-4.pdf> consulted on April 4th 2024.

had made something of himself (Denard) but of a former French army colonel, Faulques. His seconds (Picaut d'Assignies, Heltzen, etc.) had the same profile and left Africa afterwards. With General de Gaulle's withdrawal from support for Biafra and their boss's withdrawal from the field, mercenary work made no sense to them¹¹. The Belgians were rehired, but in a hierarchical chain dominated by the French.

It was the same with weapons. A Free French pilot and companion of the Liberation, the aforementioned Laureys supplied his first aircraft to Biafra in June 1967¹². He became part of the system designed on the basis of trust between former members of the Free French Forces, through interpersonal relations with Foccart and Messmer.

Mercenaries at the side of Mobutu's Congolese state: saviours of the population in the service of state sovereignty ?

Thus, the construction of the French and/or Belgian mercenary system reflects a neo-colonial policy desired by Paris and Brussels. It was clear in Katanga, and it was no doubt also clear to Paris in Biafra. Nonetheless, the Cold War dimension is growing stronger between the two. From this point of view, the use of Belgian and French mercenaries between 1964 and 1967 was in response to the pro-Communist maquis (Che Guevara's brief stay) in eastern Congo. In this case, the mercenaries were in the service of an officially recognised state (unlike in Katanga and Biafra) and were therefore helping to re-establish the central state's sovereignty over its territory. They fight in accordance with their anti-communist conscience (which is widely shared). After the astonishment of public opinion at their appearance on the African military scene at the time of

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Bat et Pascal Geneste, « Jean Mauriceau-Beaupré : de Fontaine à Mathurin, JMB au service du Général », *Relations internationales*, vol. 142, no. 2, 2010, pp. 87-100.

¹² <http://www.ordredelaliberation.fr/fr/les-compagnons/552/pierre-laureys> consulted on May 19th 2024.

Katanga, they received a great deal of media coverage. Contrary to today's highly negative image of mercenaries, they were fairly well perceived in the media during this period. The main issue was the link between the restoration of central power in the provinces of eastern Congo and the liberation of the people living there, particularly Belgian nationals. The episode of the liberation of the nuns, among other hostages, in Buta at the beginning of June 1965 was covered by the Belgian press, both written and audiovisual, and earned Denard's 1er Choc and the other troops present a great deal of popularity in the months that followed.

For Biafra, the system was perfected with the aim of preparing public opinion for possible recognition and official support from France for Biafra. Colonel Maurice Robert played a major role in organising the media discourse to seduce French public opinion: 'What not everyone knows is that the term "genocide" applied to the Biafra affair was coined by the services. We wanted a shock word to raise public awareness. We could have used massacre or crushing, but genocide seemed to us to be more 'telling'. We gave the press precise information about the Biafran losses and made sure that they quickly picked up the expression 'genocide'. Le Monde was the first, and the others followed. French newspapers familiarised the French with the idea of genocide, which was also conveyed by the 'information bulletin of the Biafran delegation' based in Paris (and partly financed by secret funds). In this context, the European cadres of the Biafran forces were also positively perceived. Photographers emphasised their solidarity with their troops and their support for their white leaders (the famous photo of Karl Coucke dead and carried by his men).

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This is why the period of French and Belgian mercenarism, from Katanga to Biafra, was so different from what was to follow. The incomprehension at their

dismissal by Mobutu, with the tacit approval of Paris and Brussels, in 1967 provoked the mercenary revolt of 1967 against the Congolese head of state. It left these men, presented in their home country a few months earlier as saviours, bitter. This bitterness is linked in particular to the end of naivety about their use by states. At a grassroots level, this is reflected in a form of mistrust of mercenary leaders and the inflation of a discourse on the 'free soldiers' that they are. In the case of a leader like Denard, not sent directly by Paris or Brussels but subsequently endorsed by the secret services and politicians because of his growing importance on the ground, the desire to develop his own autonomy (GATI in Biafra, the 'white sultan' of the Comoros later). In reality, the military weight of these men can only be understood within this system, which was perfected according to circumstances in Katanga, in the service of the State of Congo and then in Biafra. This system relied on a series of private players, including logisticians (aviators in particular) and arms dealers. Its relative success (the failure of the ANC and then, for a time, of UN troops in Katanga, and the regaining of control of Eastern Congo) can only be understood in the context of support for post-colonial policies, and secondarily for the Cold War (following the example of CIA support in Eastern Congo between 1964 and 1967). Between 1960 and 1967, French military influence increased and Belgium took a back seat (including in Congo-Léopoldville). Although it may not have been the Elysée Palace's initial intention, or it may have been formulated in this way, France was becoming credible in this area of West and Central Africa as a gendarme against communism. From this point of view, contacts were being made on the ground with South Africa and Rhodesia.