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## From the Bay of Pigs to Lake Tanganyika: Non-State Armed Actors in the Congo Crisis, 1960-1967

*De la Baie des cochons au Lac Tanganyika : Les acteurs armés non-étatiques dans la crise au Congo, 1960-1967*

**Stephen Rookes**

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# From the Bay of Pigs to Lake Tanganyika: Non-State Armed Actors in the Congo Crisis, 1960-1967

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1. A Voyage to the Congo Crisis
2. Sources and method
3. The Evolution of US Counterinsurgency Operations: China, Guatemala and the Bay of Pigs
4. The Urgency of Intervention in the Congo Crisis
5. The Makasi
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### 1. A Voyage to the Congo Crisis

- 1 Research carried out into the activities of British mercenaries in Angola (1975-1976) was highly influential in determining the choice to examine the use of private armies in warfare. Though unsuccessful in its mission to contain forces of the People's movement for the liberation of Angola (MPLA), the decision to employ a small-scale private army for use as a counterforce in a localised African conflict was considered as viable tool of warfare which dealt with the political and military realities of war. And, whereas subsequent research on the subject suggested there had been some degree of assistance from the CIA on an organisational level, attempts to show that this was the case were inconclusive. The theory that this intelligence service was involved in some way had arisen due to similar intervention in neighbouring Congo just a few years earlier. Although what level of assistance given to the Congolese government and what form it took was not known at that point, research made by Cuban exile historian

Frank Villafaña<sup>1</sup> showed that intervention was not just political but was also military in nature. Focusing on operations carried out *while* groups of anti-Castro Cubans were in the Congo, Villafaña's work failed to point out *why* Cuban exiles had been employed; *how* they managed to find themselves on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean; and the importance of their intervention to counterinsurgency measures.

## 2. Sources and method

- 2 While a wide range of US archival sources were readily available, and while Villafaña's research was invaluable, due to the secret nature of the intervention, documentary evidence that would provide satisfactory answers to my questions was not direct, nor contained in one simple volume of history. Though a chronological framework could be constructed through the use of the US State Department's series on the foreign relations of the United States<sup>2</sup>, these answers could only be found, or inferred, through investigative research. In this respect, the thesis constructs history.
- 3 Social media can be considered as a highly improbable research tool. However, it proved to be precious in that it enabled and facilitated contact with a number of men who had served in the air and naval branches of the CIA's forces in the Congo. Moreover, meetings and interviews with veterans which took place in Miami in October 2015 led to more contacts and leads which required further investigation. Eventually, it turned out that Cuban exile operations in the Congo were part of a larger plan initiated during President Kennedy's mandate to undermine Fidel Castro. Concurrently, acts of sabotage were being carried out against Cuban government installations and, furthermore, they were being carried out by the same group from which the CIA had recruited: the *Movimiento de Recuperacion Revolucionario* (MRR). In turn, both sets of operations were motivated by the desire to seek revenge for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961.

### **3. The Evolution of US Counter-insurgency Operations: China, Guatemala and the Bay of Pigs**

- 4 From the point of view of documentation, these discovers complicated matters. Operations at the Bay of Pigs were inspired by operations against Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, and the overthrow of this Guatemalan leader could not have taken place had it not been for a clandestine structure gradually built up by the CIA over the previous ten years or so, and which had used airborne operations against communist Chinese forces as a foundation. Armed with a documentation which, in theory, allowed for the unravelling of a tightly-wound ball of hearsay, rumours, conflicting versions, and fading memories the next step was to somehow slot events of a twenty-year period into the context of the Congo. Not only, then, did this require an expansion of the chronological timeline, the geographical context of the study also had to be extended in order to understand why intervention in the Congo was seen as so important.

### **4. The Urgency of Intervention in the Congo Crisis**

- 5 If it is impractical to go into great detail, some degree of explanation is necessary to understand US intervention.
- 6 At a very early stage in negotiations surrounding the independence of the Congo, the CIA had identified the newly appointed Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba as having communist sympathies. Pre-independence, Lumumba had relied on the Soviets for assistance in the way of propaganda during elections held in May 1960, and their suspicions appeared to be confirmed when Lumumba called on the USSR to provide military assistance to the Congolese government in August 1960 following the secessions of the provinces of Katanga and the South Kasai. In September 1960, the CIA helped army Chief of staff Mobutu to overthrow Lumumba, and when Lumumba was murdered by Katangan forces in January 1961, the Congo descended into political chaos: 20,000 UN peacekeepers were sent into the

country; a government rivaling another seen as a puppet regime of the Americans was set up in Stanleyville; Katanga strengthened its military forces by recruiting hundreds of mercenaries; and the National Congolese Army (ANC) was incapable of restoring order. The situation worsened after the withdrawal of the UN in 1964 and, by then, another communist-inspired rebellion had started in the Kwilu province and in the east of the Congo. This political instability, the Americans believed was just the type of context which left the Congo open to a Soviet takeover.

## 5. The Makasi

- 7 In view of the worsening of the situation and that the Congolese government did not possess any aircraft or pilots, in late 1962 the US State Department authorised the CIA to recruit five pilots through one of its front companies in Miami named Intermarine. In order to for the US to deny any involvement, these pilots based at N'Dolo Airfield near Leopoldville were contracted to the Congolese Air Force (FAC). Flying six unarmed T-6 Texans, the role of what has been termed as an “instant air force<sup>3</sup>” was to fly above the capital in a show of strength. Moreover, this is how the FAC became known as the *Makasi*: taken from the Lingala language, the word is used to describe something which possesses strength, power, vitality or resistance. Later, the *Makasi* would adopt the logo of a beer made in Paulis in the Congo.

(Fig. 1)



The Makasi Logo  
(T-28 Trojan Foundation)

- 8 While more Makasi pilots saw service in the Congo in 1963, as the rebellion in the Kwilu grew in size in early 1964, non-combative psychological warfare turned to one of “active combat participation”<sup>4</sup>. Aircraft such as B-26 bombers, T-28 Harvards and H-21 Shawnee helicopters were supplied through the US Military Assistance Programme (MAP). It was not long before US weapons technicians fitted the Makasi’s T-6s with .303-calibre machine guns, 2,500 rounds of ammunitions, rocket tubes and rockets. Although most of the members of the Makasi force were highly experienced, some received further training from Americans working for another CIA front company called Intermountain. In addition, the CIA created Western International Ground Maintenance Organisation (WIGMO). This was a team of technicians whose role it was to maintain the aircraft.

(Fig. 2)



B-26 bomber of the Force Aérienne Congolaise (FAC)

(T-28 Trojan Foundation)

- 9 With rural rebellions also gaining widespread support and making advances into large areas of the Congo by August 1964, the Congolese Air Force (FAC) was bolstered by the arrival of more Cuban exile pilots recruited through the MRR. This recruitment coincided with the return of a mercenary army comprised of thousands whose main objective was to liberate Stanleyville from Simba rebels who had captured the city and were holding over a thousand Europeans hostage. As stated earlier, the air cover provided to ground forces was invaluable. Makasi aircraft cleared the jungles of rebel presence and attacked gun installations at Stanleyville airport so that Belgian paratroops could land without too much hindrance.
- 10 Later, in 1965, after the Makasi saw the arrival of Belgian, South African, British and French pilots, the CIA set up a naval force manned entirely by Cuban exile veterans of the Bay of Pigs, all of whom were members of the MRR. Operating on Lake Tanganyika, its role was to stop weapons coming over the lake from Tanzania, ferry mercenaries into battle zones, and hunt down Che Guevara. He had arrived in the Congo in April 1965 to start his own rebellion.

## 6. Conclusion

- 11     Securing the Congo would not have been possible without *Makasi* forces: they provided air cover; they provided intelligence reports; they provide cover on waterways; and their helicopters carried injured mercenaries out of battle zones. In 1967, they even helped put down a revolt led this time by Belgian and French mercenaries led by Jean Schramme and Bob Denard. That the *Makasi* made such a contribution leads us to wonder whether privately-hired military companies such as this could not be used as an informal instrument of state authority when the need arises. This thesis puts forward the notion that when, indeed, a country's national forces do not possess sufficient training, or do not possess the motivation to defeat a threat to state security, then private military companies (PMCs) should be considered for use. The example of Executive Outcomes in Sierra Leone in the 1990s is another glaring example of how highly-trained professional armies can rapidly deal with an internal menace. Whereas the national army of this country had struggled for years to contain the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a group of just over two hundred former members of the South African Army (SADF) defeated this terrorist organisation in nine days. For this to be possible, this suggests that commonly-held beliefs surrounding the mercenary should be put aside, and the time has come to address the realities of geopolitical contexts such as post-colonial Africa.

## NOTES

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- 1 F. Villafañá, *Cold War in the Congo: The Confrontation of Cuban Military Forces, 1960-1967* (Taylor & Francis, 2009).
- 2 N. D. Howland, D. C. Humphrey, and H. D. Schwar (eds.) *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol. XXIII, Congo, 1960-1968* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2013).
- 3 "How CIA Put 'Instant Air Force' Into Congo", *New York Times*, 26 April 1966.
- 4 "Report Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency", *Status Report on CIA Assistance to the Congolese Air Force*, Washington, 5 May 1964, FRUS, Congo,



1964-1968, Document 168.

## RÉSUMÉS

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### English

Whereas the military dynamics of the Congo Crisis have received a significant amount of scholarly attention, the role played by groups of anti-Castro Cubans has tended to be somewhat ignored, or is not known. However, were it not for air and naval forces composed almost entirely of these exiles the effort to mount successful counterinsurgency operations in the Congo would, no doubt, have been impossible. All the while, the presence of the exile forces had to remain undetected: their sponsor – the Central Intelligence Agency – could not risk exacerbating already strained Cold War tensions, and a domestic context in which military intervention in an African country could endanger race relations. Nevertheless, due to its economic and strategic importance to the US of the time, it was crucial to ensure that the Congo did not fall under Soviet influence. With these considerations, the aim of this thesis was, therefore, to trace the conception of CIA covert operations back to its roots in order to discover what mechanisms were set up so that operations in the Congo could be implemented.

The voyage of discovery starts in the 1940s – the decade in which the USA found itself obliged to create intelligence services capable of countering emerging Soviet threats – before moving on to an examination of clandestine operations in Guatemala, and in Cuba. The highly complex political, tribal and ethnic manoeuvres then coming under study, the focus of the thesis returns to Cuban exile forces and their contribution to counterinsurgency operations as a whole. Respecting the instrumentalist and realist theories of International Relations, this thesis raises the question of whether the use of private armies should not be considered as a viable option for the state when its own national armies are ill-equipped to manage conflict. This is particularly so in a geopolitical context which has seen an increase in the number of internal and external threats posed by Islamic terrorist groups in Africa, i.e. Boko Haram.

### Français

Alors que la dynamique militaire de la crise congolaise a fait l'objet d'une attention considérable de la part des spécialistes, le rôle joué par les groupes d'anti-Castristes cubains a eu tendance à être quelque peu ignoré, ou est inconnu. Cependant, sans des forces aériennes et navales composées presque entièrement de ces exilés, il aurait sans doute été impossible d'organiser avec succès des opérations anti-insurrectionnelles au Congo. Pendant ce temps, la présence des forces en exil ne devait pas être détectée : leur commanditaire – la *Central Intelligence Agency* – ne pouvait risquer d'exacerber les tensions déjà tendues de la guerre froide, et un contexte interne dans lequel une intervention militaire dans un pays africain pourrait mettre en

danger les relations raciales. Néanmoins, en raison de son importance économique et stratégique pour les États-Unis de l'époque, il était crucial de veiller à ce que le Congo ne tombe pas sous l'influence soviétique. Avec ces considérations, le but de cette thèse était donc de retracer la conception des opérations secrètes de la CIA jusqu'à ses racines afin de découvrir quels mécanismes ont été mis en place pour que les opérations au Congo puissent être mises en œuvre.

Le voyage de découverte commence dans les années 1940 – décennie au cours de laquelle les États-Unis se sont trouvés dans l'obligation de créer des services de renseignement capables de contrer les menaces soviétiques émergentes – avant de passer à un examen des opérations clandestines au Guatemala et à Cuba. Les manœuvres politiques, tribales et ethniques très complexes alors à l'étude, l'objet de la thèse revient sur les forces cubaines en exil et leur contribution aux opérations anti-insurrectionnelles dans leur ensemble. Dans le respect des théories instrumentales et réalistes des relations internationales, cette thèse soulève la question de savoir si le recours à des armées privées ne devrait pas être considéré comme une option viable pour l'État lorsque ses propres armées nationales sont mal équipées pour gérer un conflit. C'est particulièrement vrai dans un contexte géopolitique qui a connu une augmentation du nombre de menaces internes et externes posées par les groupes terroristes islamiques en Afrique, à savoir Boko Haram.

## AUTEUR

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