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Victory with Ease: Covert Action in Zaire

During the 1960's, Zaire was one of the focal points of the United States during the Cold War. Zaire's newly-elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, was deemed by the Eisenhower administration as "an African Castro" and "a Soviet instrument" (CM, 61). Even after Lumumba's death, turmoil from the Katanga rebellion was viewed as an opportunity for Soviet influence in Zaire. After Katanga was reintegrated, Zaire "settled into corrupt, oppressive, pro-American stability" (CM, 62). Another revolt spread with a force that Zaire's inept military could not contain. The Simbas, a group of rebels "whose vague ideology was couched in Marxist jargon," caused the ANC to collapse (CM, 63). U.S. officials argued that Zaire could face a Communist takeover and the end of its pro-American stance. Although the U.S. did not want to send its own troops to Zaire, it felt compelled to take action. Of course, this situation meant that the United States would undertake covert action. In this operation, there were some marginal obstacles for the Western powers. The rebels gained some support from neighboring African countries, Communist powers, and Cuba. However, the Western powers won the conflict with minimal effort. Four factors made victory in Zaire easy for the U.S. and its allies: white mercenaries and Cuban exile pilots were used to fulfill the dirty work, Soviet and Chinese involvement was minimal, African support of the Simbas in Zaire was suppressed by the U.S., and the Cubans were not able to effectively train and coordinate the rebels.

The burden of the Zairian situation did not weigh heavy on the U.S. and Belgium because they relied on white mercenaries and Cuban exile pilots to suppress the rebels. The deployment of American troops to Zaire was not Washington's preferred option. Before the use of mercenaries was a consideration, the U.S. urged Belgium to take primary responsibility for its former colony by sending troops to clean up the situation. However, Belgium was not willing to put boots on the ground (CM, 66-67). Zaire still needed some form of military assistance against the Simbas. Zaire's military, the ANC, was "incapable of carrying out serious operations without some form of backing by mercenaries (CM, 127)." As a result, the United States opted to use a white mercenary brigade to stop the rebels. The employment of mercenaries benefitted the U.S. and Belgium. The "burden of responsibility" would be on the shoulders of the GOC, and overt involvement of the U.S. and Belgium would be reduced (CM, 70). Although there were some European mercenaries involved, most of the mercenaries were from South Africa and Rhodesia (CM, 70). The air force consisted of Cuban exile pilots that were green-card holders, not U.S. citizens (CM, 63). The Western powers could enjoy covert action with a substantial armed force. The offensive started with 3,000 soldiers and 350 mercenaries, which were supported by the CIA flotilla and air force (CM, 137). The United States and Belgium did not have to supply substantial military aid. Also, the United States could downplay its involvement in Zaire.

The involvement of the Soviet Union and China in the Zairian situation was ineffective in hampering the Western powers. While the Stanleyville raid sparked Soviet interest in Zaire, it did not provoke the Soviet Union to become heavily engaged in the conflict. The Soviet Union and China began sending weapons to the rebels, but there was one crucial problem with their aid. The Simbas did not know how to use the weapons (CM, 75). A Western military advisor assured the *New York Times*:

We're not worried too much about the rebels getting smalls arms and ammunition. We're not even worried about their getting heavier equipment, like mortars and bazookas, which they don't know how to handle any better than the Congolese [Zairean] army (CM,75-76).

The rebels did not fare well with military equipment, especially against experienced mercenaries. Despite the fact that the Soviet Union and China sent aid, the effectiveness of their support was limited. Eventually, their support became nonexistent. In the summer of 1965, the CIA set up a naval patrol on Lake Tanganyika, which was "the rebels' last remaining link with the external world (CM, 134)." The lake separated Zaire and Tanzania, and across it was the route in which Soviet and Chinese arms were shipped to the Simbas. Once the Navy installed eight heavily armed patrol boats and several vessels in Tanganyika, the major supply route was cut off (CM, 134).

Another factor limited the involvement of China and the Soviet Union in Zaire. Cuba did not confront either Communist power for approval to send guerrillas to Zaire. In fact, the Soviet Union did not know what Cuba had planned until Che Guevara and some of the column left for Dar-es-Salaam (CM, 92). It's possible that Soviet coordination with Cuba in Zaire could have promoted a better outcome for the Simbas. However, the United States and Belgium did not have to deal with that complication. Overall, the Soviet Union and China did not invest a lot of effort into the Zairian situation. As a result, the United States enjoyed less pressure while pursuing its interests in Zaire.

African nations that supported the rebels in Zaire eventually caved into American pressure, thus making the goals of the U.S. easier to achieve. Before the Stanleyville raid, African support for the Simbas was "mainly moral and concealed (CM, 75)." However, the Stanleyville raid "provoked an uproar in Africa and many public pledges to help the Simbas (CM, 75)." The governments of Algeria, Egypt, the Sudan, Guinea, Ghana, the Congo, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi were furious at the appointment of Tshombe, a conspirator in the murder of Lumumba, to the premiership of Zaire and the arrival of white mercenaries. Determined to defeat Tshombe, the African governments provided money or weapons to the Simbas or allowed aid to pass through their territory (CM, 133). Regardless of the anger African governments felt, their support for the Simbas eventually came to an end. As the historian Piero Gleijeses notes:

"Pragmatism, however, soon muted their rage. With the exception of the Congo, all these governments relied on U.S. economic aid (or, in the case of Burundi, Belgian) - a fact that U.S. officials did not let them forget (CM, 133)."

The African nations realized that their aid to the Simbas would hurt their economic relationship with America. After the economic pressure, most of the nations adopted a "more pro-Western stance" while other nations were militarily intimidated into discontinuing aid to the rebels (CM, 134-135). The most prominent ally of the Simbas and the Cuban guerrillas was Tanzania, and more force was required for it to discontinue its support. As mentioned earlier, the CIA's naval patrol in Lake Tanganyika cut off Tanzanian aid to the rebels. The patrol also made it dangerous for the rebels to cross the lake, and it was later used for offensive support against Fizi-Baraka (CM, 134-135). After Tshombe was removed from the premiership in Zaire, the African governments, including Tanzania, were more compliant to accepting the mercenaries' victory. At the following OAU summit, the governments pledged that subversion against a member state would not be tolerated. It was understood that the pledge was directed towards the Simbas' activity in Zaire (CM, 140). Despite the fact that the Africa governments were angry with the Zairian situation, the U.S. had enough leverage to close off almost all aid to the rebels. One support system remained, but it provided little assistance.

The Cubans could not effectively train the Simbas to fight the mercenary forces. Led by Che Guevara, Cuban guerrillas were sent to Zaire to assist the Simbas in their struggle. Upon arrival in Zaire, however, Che was discouraged with the rebels. He had been told there were thousands of well-armed Simbas that were eager to fight. Instead, there were roughly 1,000 to 1,500 widely dispersed rebels that had no clue how to maintain their modern weapons. The Simbas were a disorganized military force that lacked a unifying command (CM, 111). The Simbas also demonstrated cowardice against the mercenaries. The Cubans first battle alongside the Simbas ended terribly. As soon as the battle began, the Simbas fled in panic. Consequently, four Cubans and approximately twenty Simbas were killed (CM, 116). The Cubans did not have the time or the authority to improve the Simbas' organization. Training was sporadic, involving only the rebels who wanted to be trained and occurring only at their convenience. Consequently, the mercenaries and the CIA planes overwhelmed the Simbas (137). The Western powers assembled a formidable armed force against an incapable and unexperienced enemy. This factor made the victory even more painless.

The victory in Zaire was not difficult for the U.S. and its allies. A mercenary force took care of the fighting, Soviet and Chinese involvement was negligible, African supporters of the Simbas easily yielded to U.S. pressure, and the Cubans could not effectively train the Simbas. Despite the fact that Cuba had a strong interest in backing the Zairian rebels, its' presence in the conflict was barely detected by the United States. Che himself was surprised at how long it took the CIA to discover that the Cubans were there (CM, 135). An Intelligence Memorandum even failed to mention Cuban activity, citing that rebels were being trained by a small number of Chinese Communists instead (CM, 136). Perhaps this lack of knowledge, or even concern, further demonstrated how easy the operation was for the Western powers.

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