

Ireland, the United Nations and the Congo

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Since the 1970s a new phase in the historiography of Irish foreign policy has developed, moving beyond the focus on Anglo-Irish relations to examine other bilateral diplomatic relationships (with the US and Africa for example), regional and international ties, aid, ethics, gender, and the role of individual diplomats among other issues. Michael Kennedy has contributed through his work on the League of Nations, the Irish Coast Watching Service, military intelligence during the Second World War and the *Documents of Irish Foreign Policy* project. Now (in collaboration with) Art Magennis, he has provided this study of Irish diplomatic and military involvement in the Congo between 1960 and 1964. This meticulously researched and tightly argued work is not just a diplomatic history, but also a military account. Magennis who served with the Irish Defence Force from 1940 to 1979, undertook two tours of duty in the Congo including one tour as second-in-command of the Irish 35th battalion's Armoured Car Group in Elizabethville, Katanga, is well placed to expand upon the Congo crisis and his account is widely used in the work. Indeed this collaboration between the diplomatic historian and the former military officer who witnessed the events first hand is one of the strengths of the work. However, the work goes beyond examining the challenges which the Congo posed for Irish politicians and foreign policy-makers and shows how the UN Mission in the Congo forced an evaluation of the concept of 'peace-keeping' and also of the decision-making processes within the UN and on the ground in the Congo, set against the international context of the Cold War.

But how and why did a small, recently independent, neutral country come to be involved in the Congo crisis? On 30 June 1960 the Congo gained its independence from Belgium. It was a vast country of 700,000 square miles with a population of 13 million Congolese and 100,000 Europeans, mainly Belgian settlers. It had significant mineral wealth of cobalt, copper and uranium, the raw materials of new nuclear and industrial technologies, most of which was located in the south-eastern province of Katanga. The Patrice Lumumba-led government lacked experience, soon collapsed and looked to the Soviet Union for support. President Eisenhower, fearing an escalation of the Cold War, favoured the maintenance of a pro-Western government to prevent the Soviets gaining a foothold in the country. Belgium still had significant political, industrial and commercial interests in the country and ordered its troops to return to the former colony in support of provincial premier, pro-western Moïse Tshombe when he declared Katanga's independence on 11 July 1960. The United Nations intervened through the Organisation des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC) to

uphold independence for the Congo, to enable a Belgian withdrawal and to end Katanga's secession thereby preventing American or Soviet encroachment. Between July 1960 and June 1964, UN troops from 17 nations, including Ireland, were additionally tasked with protecting the UN civilian mission and enabling local forces to re-organise into a coherent army. From the beginning, therefore, ONUC was to act in self-defence. Soon, the pressures and complexity of the conflict revealed the weaknesses in almost all parts of the mission.

The book's arguments are advanced from the beginning as it identifies first, the inexperience of key political, diplomatic and military personnel, second, the lack of coherency within the respective decision-making circles in the UN in New York and in the Congo and between New York and the field of military operations in the Congo and third, that the concept and reality of 'peace-keeping' were still evolving in the Cold War world. Finally, from an Irish perspective, the authors are clear that while the Irish ONUC contingent represented anti-colonial, anti-communist, idealistic Irish foreign policy aims, it was ill-prepared for the allocated military roles.

The opening chapter examines the background to the establishment of ONUC, exposing its inherent problems. Dag Hammarskjöld, UN General Secretary, recognised the global dangers of the Congo situation and while willing to provide UN military and technical advisers and food supplies, he opposed military aid. His personal imprint was evident from when he invoked article 99 of the UN Charter to bring the Congo issue to the Security Council and decided the composition of the mission which began as a technical civilian mission but developed a military role under Hammarskjöld's direct civilian control.

Ireland's inclusion in the UN force might not have been expected given that it was admitted to the United Nations only in 1955. However, Hammarskjöld's impulsive actions meant that non-African states had to be asked to contribute troops. The urgent telegram sent from the UN to Dublin on 14 July 1960 revealed the absence of information and intelligence about the Congo in the Irish Department of External Affairs which was not surprising as it did not have representation in Leopoldville. But External Affairs Minister Frank Aiken supported the request as it would establish Ireland's anti-colonial and anti-communist credentials and realise its aspirations to greater influence in international affairs than befitted its size. Defence officials and military leaders in Dublin saw it as a remedy for the low morale within the ranks of the under-resourced armed forces still struggling to find a purpose in a neutral state. Nonetheless, the enthusiasm of Minister Aiken for the mission was matched by that of the soldiers who volunteered for duty in the Congo.

Subsequent chapters focus on the period July 1960 to December 1961 and detail the logistics or lack thereof, and the military tactics employed, in the main military campaigns. One of these campaigns, which had a widespread and deep impact on the Irish public's mentality, was the ambush at Niamba in November 1960 when nine Irish soldiers were killed. Among the lessons learned from Niamba were that Irish soldiers needed uniforms, transportation and armaments suitable for a tropical climate, quicker deployment of battalions, proper communication equipment, language proficiency and better political intelligence. But more significantly, the authors emphasise that during the first six months, there was 'little real evidence of learning, either strategic or tactical in the Irish defence forces or the Department of Defence.'

Soon the crisis deepened and full scale civil war loomed. On 21 December 1960 the Chief of Staff of the Irish Defence Forces, Major General Seán MacEoin, took command of the UN forces for a crucial 18-month period. The authors are honest in their assessment of his tenure, identifying that his command experience was limited to battalion size, he had no combat proficiency and when he arrived in the Congo his room for manoeuvre was limited by political forces. Among the latter was the arrival of Irish diplomat Conor Cruise O'Brien as the Secretary General's Special Representative, to implement UN Resolution 161. This resolution strengthened ONUC in an attempt to bring Katanga back under the authority of the centralised government in Leopoldville. Hammarskjöld's choice of O'Brien was another flawed decision. He was an experienced diplomat but he had no familiarity with African affairs. He was anti-colonial, but deeply opposed to partition and the devolution of any powers to Katanga.

By mid-1961, though Hammarskjöld was still opposing the use of force by ONUC, he permitted O'Brien, Mahmoud Khiari, the Tunisian diplomat overseeing UN civilian operations in the Congo and Sture Llinner, ONUC commanding officer, greater authority to end secession. This shift in policy, along with other intelligence, was not made known to the newly arrived Irish 35th Battalion including Captain Art Magennis, and would affect their 'operability'. August 1961 saw the creation of a Congolese national government led by moderate Cyrille Adoula but a negotiated settlement remained out of reach. Adoula did not have the support of Katanganese deputies and he promised to 'break Katanga if they didn't come to heel'. Tshombe indicated he was willing to negotiate but not about Katanga's sovereignty. He did, however, eventually agree to the ONUC operation, 'Rumpunch', which caught a number of Belgian mercenaries.

Irish troops featured prominently in 'Rumpunch' and despite some failings, earned plaudits from the respective UN military and civilian leaders. But it was the notorious 'Operation Morthor' in Elisabethville, Katanga's capital city, and the subsequent cover-up that would define the crisis. O'Brien's account of his time in the Congo, *To Katanga and Back*, published in 1962, has formed the basis of many interpretations of these latter events. But the archival research here clearly confirms that O'Brien's account was 'disingenuous' particularly when he implied that Khiari directed events that led to 'Morthor'. On 3 September 1961 O'Brien informed Khiari that 'we want to finish it once and for all with "Katanga Independent" and it seems to us useless to beat about the bush. It is in Elisabethville ... that we will end the secession'. Elisabethville would be the 'coup-de-grace [sic.]'. Moreover, the authors provide excellent archival evidence to deal with a key question of the extent of Hammarskjöld's role in the decision to embark on 'Operation Morthor'. They are clear that Hammarskjöld knew much of the details in advance of the operation but he expected a repeat of 'Rumpunch', secondly, it suited him for the impression to be abroad that it was the 'man on the spot', O'Brien, who was misinterpreting UN instructions thereby allowing him to deny responsibility if things went wrong.

'Operation Morthor' was supposed to last two hours maximum but it lasted from 13–21 September and marked the point when a peace-keeping mission turned into a war between the UN and Katanga. In four chapters, the dominant, sanitised, narrative of events is corrected primarily through the use of the UN's own archive. 'Operation Morthor' failed because of an underestimation of resistance from Moïse Tshombe's Katanganese government and armed forces and poor military and tactical planning by the UN military leaders including the departure of the Irish 35th Battalion's A Company to Jadotville in the north-west thereby weakening the Elisabethville force. The latter move also made the 35th vulnerable once 'Morthor' began. The graphic reconstruction of the military operations particularly the actions of the Indian soldiers in the assault on Radio Katanga when prisoners were killed was described by Trooper Mick Boyce, an Irish ONUC radio operator, as 'pure murder' and shocked the Irish soldiers. Boyce's other comments that ONUC was 'supposed to be a peacekeeping mission ... you would think that we were at war with another nation ... when everything goes' was apposite. ONUC was ill-prepared for the military conflicts encountered and soon politics intervened. International criticism specifically from the British and Americans, mounted and calls for an end to the mission intensified, forcing Hammarskjöld to distance himself from 'Operation Morthor' and move to end it. However, his unexpected death in a plane crash on 17 September 1961, failed attempts at a ceasefire and O'Brien's resignation left the Katanganese government in control of their region at the end of 'Morthor'. Military stalemate ensued but the UN gained the upper-hand while Tshombe's weakened. With the Kennedy administration now behind U Thant's policy in Katanga, a strengthened ONUC launched 'Operation Unokat' in December 1961 and gained control of Elisabethville. On 21 December 1961 Tshombe signed the Kitona agreement and renounced Katanga's secession and, despite further fighting in December 1962, the end was in sight.

More might have been added about the failure of Irish governments to retrieve the body of 18-year-old Trooper Pat Mullins who was ambushed in Elisabethville on 15 September 1961. His remains were not recovered but a campaign spearheaded by his family, Magennis and other veterans finally led to the erection of a memorial in 2011. Also, it would have been interesting if the conclusion could have addressed the impact of the Congo mission on Irish foreign policy, specifically the contemporaneous application for

membership of the European Economic Community at a time when Paul Henri Spaak, Belgian foreign minister, was an influential figure in the EEC. Similarly further might have been added to provide examples of the lessons learnt from the Congo for later UN peace-keeping missions. But perhaps these elucidations would have been at the expense of important contextual detail.

From beginning to end, the Congo mission was a litany of mistakes. Against the background of decolonisation, the hopes that ONUC could protect the newly independent Congo soon disappeared due to 'realpolitik and international intrigue'. The experienced, neutral diplomat Hammarskjöld is proven to be calculating, over-confident in his abilities and never fully appreciative of the conditions in the Congo. The UN civilian and military team in the Congo were never in control of their briefs and all underestimated the Katangese forces. Soon the UN overstretched itself and peacekeeping turned into warfare. Ireland's multifaceted involvement – providing soldiers, civilian and military leadership – also transformed from a challenge into a crisis for the Dublin government. This work picks through each layer of the engagement and is honest and fair in the apportioning of blame – of which there is much to go around.

The authors are happy to accept this review as a fair and balanced account.

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