

A Review of: “For God and the CIA – Cuban Exile Forces in the Congo and Beyond, 1959-1967” by Stephen Rookes¹

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“*For God and the CIA*” published by Helion is the 52nd volume of a series that guides its readers through various episodes of the war-torn African history. Being subtitled “*Cuban exile forces in the Congo and beyond*” already gives an idea that this time, it is going to be something extra, a significantly less-discussed topic from the history of the African continent.

The author, Dr. Stephen Edward Rookes is originally from Exeter (UK), Dr. Rookes is a French writer and academic who earned his PhD from the University of Toulouse Jean-Jaurès, France. He specialises in the history of Cuban exiles and takes a particular interest in the CIA's covert operations in Central America and in Africa. The fact that Rookes is not American, but European, turns out to be a very positive circumstance when reading the volume, since this way the study is more reflexive and reflects more on the mistakes and double standards of the decision makers in Washington.

Regarding the content, the book starts with a very brief introduction to the world of US intelligence and underground operations to provide background knowledge for the readers about how covert operations started both domestically and abroad. The author then cites Truman's promise “*to support free peoples who [were] resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures*”, meaning to pave the way for open and secret operations abroad. Soon after, the CIA was authorized “*to perform such additional services of common concern*” and to “*perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence*”, referring – of course – to covert and clandestine operations. Rookes then continues to offer an actual example, a case study in the chapter “*How to overthrow a foreign leader: Guatemala, 1954*”. However, this chapter just like the previous one is only for the purpose to have a better understanding of the big picture, to see where and how the Congolese mission had its roots. “*From Guatemala to Cuba, 1961*” is the title of the next chapter where readers are given even more insight about programs and operations such as ‘Operation 40’, ‘Brigade 2506’ or ‘CIA Station codenamed JM/WAVE’. The chapter sheds light on some less-known details of the anecdotal saying that the CIA was busily working on taking Fidel Castro out of picture. By introducing the Guatemalan example of how the Arbenz government was overthrown, readers get the closer feeling of how covert operations became popular for the US government.

¹ Rookes, Stephen, *For God and the CIA – Cuban exile forces in the Congo and beyond, 1959-1967*. Africa at War Series. Volume 52. Helion & Company Limited, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-913336-24-0. pp. 80.

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After this long but rewarding introduction of the background, we finally reach the actual topic of the book in the chapter *“From the Caribbean to the Congo”*. The section starts with Rookes writing about how Washington has drawn its own “map” of strategic minerals and resources entirely or partially from outside the US, where the Congo plays an important role (interesting enough, we also learn that two-thirds of the uranium used in the bombs that hit Hiroshima and Nagasaki came from the Congo). The rest of the chapter deals with the fact that “Africa’s Castro”, Patrice Lumumba, Congolese independence leader and the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was getting closer to socialism, which raised fears in Washington, not to mention the Domino Theory in Africa.

The next two chapters guide us into the details of the actual operations from Alpha to Omega. *“The tools of Counterinsurgency”* talks about why Cuban exiles were picked for the mission, how the Grupo Voluntario Cubano, aka. ‘Makasi’ (meaning something with power, vigour and vitality in Lingala language) were organized, trained and equipped, with interesting background information about how the airplanes – FA-662, T-6, B-26K, T-28C, FG-292, C-46 etc. – were gathered from all parts of the world, often with names and nicknames of the pilots and their airplanes. In the well-illustrated section, the author even guides us through the changes of paintings and insignia used on the aircrafts, followed by the Makasi Commando Unit, with its members and their biographical information. In contrast, the *“Cubans versus Cubans in the Congo”* chapter deals more with Cubans on the other side: sharing exciting details about Guevara’s trips for achieving his goal, the formation of a “Tricontinental Alliance”; the Cuban radio communications to various African countries and within certain African countries; or the reason why Guevara’s deep-rooted hatred of “Yankee imperialism” offered a perfect opportunity in the Congo; and interesting insights about the challenges of fighting alongside with the Congolese troops, secretly.

The second part of the chapter deals with the Cuban Exile Naval Force on Lake Tanganyika and how an unfortunate event of CIA-financed armed boats attacking a Spanish cargo ship instead of a Cuban merchant vessel in the Caribbean led to the termination of the project. This event redirected it towards the African continent and Lake Tanganyika, where a figure familiar from the Cuban revolution was heavily involved, making it easier for the CIA to recruit Cubans for Operation White Giant. Even smaller but important logistical details appear on the pages such as how previous knowledge from the Great War helped two 50-foot Swift boats reach the inside of Central Africa from the Caribbean.

Reading the book, we learn that even though both sides were mentally and ideologically “well-armed”, they were not on the same level when talking about resources, planning and equipment. On one side stood the Cuban exiles, who saw the operation in Africa as an opportunity where they do not only fight for the Congo but also against Communism and their archenemy, ‘Che’ Guevara, in a way avenging the failed Bay of Pigs operation. While on the other, the Cuban revolutionaries led by Guevarra fighting for Communism and against Western dependency and imperialism. This unbalanced situation doomed the Cuban revolutionary endeavour in Central Africa resulting in Guevarra admitting defeat in a letter to

Cuba on 14 November 1965, “*indispensable that [the boats carrying supplies] come today: we are starving and encircled*”. In six days, he would leave the Congo returning to Latin America.

The closing chapter, “*Mobutu, the Mercenary Revolt and the Makasi*” gives details about the future of the CIA operation: the technical equipment and the aircrew of the Makasi Air Force being transferred to under direct Congolese control. Though aircrafts stayed and served Mobutu, the destinies of Cuban pilots and other personnel were more complex: many joined the regular US forces and fought in Vietnam, some joined the CIA and got involved in various operations in Nicaragua or Angola or “*wherever Fidel Castro attempted to spread his ideology*”, making their legacy a long-lasting one.

The 80-page publication offers finely detailed insights to a fairly short but very interesting episode of the history of the Congo where Cuban forces were present on both of the warring sides. Pieces of information are collected from various sources including never published, newly declassified documents, government archives, and personal testimonies gained from 15 interviews with participants. The book contains a list of the abbreviations used and four pages of appendices, such as the names of the more than 100 Cuban individuals who served in the operation’s “air force, ground forces and the naval force”. In the back of the book, readers can find the long list of the resources used.

The written information is enhanced by a very generous set of illustrations made up of more than 100 original pictures both colour and black & white, including never published personal photos of the author and participants of the mission, as well as facsimiles and maps.

Besides the depth and the detailedness, the uniqueness of the book is the fact that it uses documents and information largely unknown to not just the general public but to historians and military historians as well. The book is a real must-read for all those who are interested in either Latin American history or African history or even US history where in an episode, non-US, but Cuban citizens were fighting for an American ideology and for the CIA on the African continent.

The volume can also be observed as the continuation of Africa@War’s previous volume, ‘*Ripe of Rebellion – Political and military insurgency in the Congo, 1946-1964*’.