

Introduction

[The Congo] is the place where the American Ambassador found an alligator in his garage, where two more (alligators, not ambassadors) swam into the Congo-flooded generating plant at Stanleyville, where yet a fourth is believed to have eaten the West German Ambassador in November (he was wading near the bank with a tow-rope; nothing of him was seen again but his panama hat).¹

Writing in 1962, *The Economist* deemed the Congo the world's leading surrealist country, a place where, upon independence from Belgium on 30 June 1960, logic and reason quickly gave way to chaos and anarchy. Despite the orientalist undertones in this view, the Congo was catapulted into the international consciousness as the scene of conflict and confusion when a civil and constitutional crisis erupted just a week after the independence ceremony. The conflict amplified a constellation of internal rivalries, dubious and competing claims of provincial sovereignty, implicit and explicit outside intervention into Congolese politics, competition over natural resources and a corrupt political system which continues to hinder the development of the country today.

The breakdown of law and order began when the Congolese army, the Force Publique, mutinied against their Belgian officers, leading to violence and chaos on the streets of the capital Léopoldville (now Kinshasa). In response, the Belgians sent paratroopers into their former colony to protect the remaining European community and their economic interests, an act that was widely interpreted by the Congolese people as a signal that Belgium would try to regain control of the country. The newly elected Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and President Joseph Kasavubu appealed to the United Nations (UN) to intervene in order to defend the sovereignty of the Congo from what they perceived as an aggressive act of Belgian imperialism.

Upon receiving the request, the UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld immediately set about arranging a meeting of the Security Council to consider the problem. Hammarskjöld viewed the unfolding crisis in the Congo as an important moment in the ongoing process of global decolonisation and, therefore, an event which required a swift and unprecedented response from the UN. From the creation of ground-breaking

peacekeeping mandates to the formation of specific groups such as the Special Committee on Decolonisation (the Committee of 24) and the instrumentalisation of others such as United Nations Fourth Committee (Special Political and Decolonisation Committee), the myriad challenges of the Congo crisis quickly served to condition the ways in which the UN henceforth approached the challenges associated with decolonisation. This book reinterprets the role of the organisation in this conflict by presenting a multidimensional view of how the UN operated in response to the crisis. As the United States (US) and Britain were directly involved with formulating UN Congo policy, through an examination of the Anglo-American relationship, the book analyses how the crisis became positioned as a lightning rod in the interaction of decolonisation with the Cold War, and wider relations between North and South.

By scrutinising the ways in which the various dimensions of the UN came into play in Anglo-American considerations of how to respond to the Congo crisis, the book investigates how and why the Congo question reverberated in the wider ideological discussions about how decolonisation should evolve and what the role of the UN would be in managing this process. The UN itself became a contested battleground for different ideas and visions of world order as the newly independent African and Asian states sought to redress the inequalities rendered by colonialism and the US and Britain tried to maintain the status quo ante. Hammarskjöld, until his untimely death in September 1961, and his successor, the Burmese diplomat U Thant, tried to reconcile these two contrasting views and, thereby, carve out a more activist role for the UN in global politics.

The UN enjoyed an unprecedented and unique moment of influence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, due to the advent of many African and Asian nations to the world stage as they gained independence from colonial rule. A former Swedish diplomat with a cosmopolitan worldview, Hammarskjöld fostered a particular vision of the UN as an activist and interventionist organisation which should prevent the spread of the Cold War to the newly independent African and Asian nations, by providing them with a safe haven which would guarantee their sovereignty. This was a view shared by Thant, who continued to foster this vision of the role of the UN when he took over as Secretary-General in October 1961. For their part, newly independent countries seized upon this initiative. In 1960 alone, seventeen former African colonies joined the growing membership ranks of the UN, consolidating the influence of the Afro-Asian bloc in the General Assembly. Their numerical majority and self-declared 'neutral' or 'non-aligned' status diluted the traditional power base of the Western bloc and gave them a position from which they sought to rapidly advance the agenda for decolonisation. The altered power structure within the organisation soon manifested itself in the political support the Secretariat gave to the Afro-Asians; the actions of the peacekeeping and civil missions in the Congo and the wider relationship between the UN, the US and Britain.

The UN context highlighted the incongruity in American and British Congo policies and, as the crisis unfolded, served to change their assessment of the organisation and its role in managing the decolonisation process in Africa. For the first time, this book identifies three dimensions of the UN: a public forum or stage on which

representatives of Britain and the US tried with limited success to formulate joint positions on aspects of the UN Congo policy; a socialisation space in which the actors negotiated their strategies with other countries; and as an actor in its own right in the Congo with the peacekeeping operation and civil support mission. This perception of the UN differs from other accounts, such as those which focus mostly on the peacekeeping operation,² or those that explicitly examine the role of the Secretary-General.³ Rather, my book takes an expansive view of the UN across these three levels, looking at how they interacted to create and execute UN policy in the Congo and highlighting the agency the organisation had in shaping the outcome of the crisis.

First, the public nature of discussion and debate at the UN became critical for Britain and the US. This was particularly prevalent as the crisis escalated through 1961 and public debates revealed the differences in American and British Congo policies. This lack of unity, which soon undercut the whole Western bloc, was damaging to the overall position of both countries at the UN given the reinvigoration of the General Assembly due to the aforementioned rise of the Afro-Asian bloc. Combined with different responses to the activism of the UN in the Congo, the heated context of colonial debates led by the Afro-Asians and the desire to thwart the spread of Soviet influence with new member-states, the UN environment had a particular constellation which served to condition American and British policies towards the Congo.

For Britain, international prestige and the fear of rebellion and instability from the Congo spreading east to neighbouring British colonies led to concerted efforts to keep the Congo off the UN agenda and impose a moratorium on public debates. The US was primarily concerned with preserving the solidarity of the Western bloc and therefore initially adopted a largely passive position. As the crisis escalated, in practice this had the effect of drawing criticism from the Afro-Asian bloc, especially when the Congo debate spilled over into discussions on other colonial questions. Over time, attempts to keep the disparity between American and British Congo policies out of public view failed, most notably when the US supported UN military action in the Congo in December 1962 against British objections. The public debates also exposed the negative impact of the legacy of British colonialism on relations with African countries and revealed the diminishing influence Britain had on colonial issues.

Second, in light of the broader context of the Cold War, Hammarskjöld and Thant carved out an innovative role for the UN in launching the largest peacekeeping mission up to that date: Operation des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC). The initial activism of the organisation in the mandates for the mission proved problematic for the Western powers when UN Congo policy ran contrary to their objectives. For Britain, ONUC's activities, and in particular the military campaign against the breakaway province Katanga, threatened economic interests and strategic concerns in Central Africa. The US, however, supported military action to end the secession in order to ensure that Congolese uranium in the province, which had been used to create the first atomic bomb in 1945, would not fall into Soviet or Communist hands. As the peacekeeping mission became gradually mired in political and financial turmoil, the campaign against Katanga escalated tensions with the Soviet Union and set America and Britain at odds over the question of the use of force by UN troops.

Third, this book conceives of the corridors and meeting rooms of the UN as a socialising space in which American and British statesmen and women were increasingly required to interact with representatives from newly independent African and Asian countries who dominated discussions on the Congo and linked them to wider debates on colonial questions. These dialogues frequently involved criticism of British decolonisation policies and tested the veracity of American anti-colonial sentiments, creating further tensions in the Anglo-American relationship. As a result of their often fruitless efforts to reach agreement on how to steer UN Congo policy, especially during the early years of the crisis, it emerged that America and Britain had different perceptions of the utility of the UN.

Positioning the UN as a lens through which to examine American and British policies, it is apparent that the Congo became a microcosm of wider interacting global tensions, and a crisis which shaped the broader contours of the relationship between the West and the emergent Afro-Asian world. During this period, British officials increasingly regarded the UN as an organisation that obstructed and upended their plans for decolonisation in Africa as colonial debates exposed the negative impact of Britain's imperial legacy. As the British position in the General Assembly became marginalised, there was little that representatives could do but try to encourage moderation and stall UN efforts to monitor the process of transforming the former British Empire into the Commonwealth. The cacophonous critiques of African and Asian leaders, combined with the UN campaign in the Congo, which proceeded in direct contrast to British objectives, exasperated officials. Just a year into the crisis in 1961 Lord Robert Salisbury, former Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, complained: 'What an *awful* body the UN have become!!'⁴

In contrast, the US regarded the UN as an increasingly useful instrument with which to shape a liberal order across the decolonised world. As State Department officials became concerned about the erosion of America's traditional support base in the General Assembly, policies towards the UN were revised and revitalised. At the centre of this strategy was an attempt to thwart the spread of Communist influence in newly independent countries by sponsoring modernisation programmes designed to create liberal democracies and building relations with African and Asian leaders while downplaying their criticism of the colonial record of America's European allies. The nature of negotiation at the UN proved to be quite taxing in this regard as American representatives often found themselves caught between the campaigners for decolonisation on one side and the resilient capitalist networks of European colonialism on the other. The Congo crisis combined these challenges, destroying the delicate reciprocity that had previously existed whereby Britain supported American Cold War objectives at the UN, and the US abstained in votes on colonial questions. Although the earlier conflict over the Suez Canal in Egypt in 1956 had already exposed how American and British internationalism could differ in the context of decolonisation, this book argues that the contested nature of the UN mission in the Congo led to the crisis becoming a fundamental turning point of the decolonisation process.⁵

The key question that this book considers is how the decolonisation dimensions of the crisis reverberated in wider debates on colonial issues, damaging relations between

the Anglo-American powers and the Afro-Asian world.⁶ The conflict in the Congo erupted in the milieu of ongoing wars of independence in Algeria from 1954 to 1962 and Angola from 1961 to 1974. In the background, the campaign against apartheid and the question of the status of South-West Africa (now Namibia) dominated discussions in the Trusteeship Council and General Assembly since 1947, creating an atmosphere of distrust and disillusionment as Afro-Asian statesmen and freedom fighters tested the limits of sovereignty. Scholarship from Jeffrey James Byrne, Matthew Connolly and Ryan Irwin, among others, has focused on examining how anti-colonial nationalism interacted with the Cold War, presenting a Third World view of the two major processes of post-war international relations.⁷ By examining 'South-South' connections, this book for the first time positions the Congo crisis as an important moment of African and Asian solidarity, drawing out Afro-Asian perspectives of, and reactions to, Western policies towards the Congo. Crucially, it highlights the agency of African and Asian actors in shaping UN Congo policy, and their efforts to resist the hegemonic influence of America and Britain over the Congo by utilising their authority in the UN. Attempts to direct the UN mission led to the creation of permanent mechanisms and structures within the UN system, through which they used the Congo as a paradigm to determine the course and the pace of decolonisation. Therefore, this book reconsiders both the importance of the Congo crisis as an episode of decolonisation and the role of the UN therein, differentiating it from existing literature on the crisis, which is dominated by the Cold War perspective, but also from literature on decolonisation.⁸ It argues that the crisis should be considered as a moment that consolidated the impact of decolonisation as not just a process that transformed the world of empires into nation-states, but one which elucidated a wider Third World critique of neo-colonialism and imperial internationalism.

Central to this argument is my analysis of the role of the UN, and how the Congo mission increased the organisation's mandate in monitoring the process of decolonisation, due to the involvement of African and Asian members. Their development of the UN system and the activism of the Secretariat diversified what decolonisation represented from questions of self-determination and sovereignty, into a wave of political, social and economic changes which challenged the inequality inherent in relations between North and South. The UN and its predecessor, the League of Nations, have lately received revived attention from historians working to reassess the role of global institutions in shaping such wider patterns of relations. Many of these efforts have arisen in the wake of historian Mark Mazower's work, which traces the evolution of global governance and the growth of the UN over time. Others, such as Susan Pedersen, Patricia Clavin and Paul Kennedy, have fortified this emerging field with excellent multi-archival studies that connect the history of these institutions with the wider development of ideologies, ideas and normative practices.⁹ Emerging scholars have followed in this vein, producing fascinating individual histories of specific aspects of institutions, policies and processes.¹⁰ Thanks to the work of Glenda Sluga and Sunil Amrith, the history of our global institutions has evolved steadily both as a way to chart the evolution of different internationalisms but also in viewing the UN as a lens which reveals the dynamics of states and peoples.¹¹ This book contributes to the field

by analysing the role of the UN in the Congo as a way of highlighting different visions of world order as it transformed the way decolonisation was henceforth managed by challenging the policies of America and Britain.

This book also moves beyond existing literature on the crisis, which casts the Congo as a proxy struggle for power during the Cold War. While the Cold War dimensions have been expertly outlined by Madeline Kalb, Lise Namikas and Stephen R. Weissman, this book argues that American Cold War strategy was often at odds with British and Belgian efforts to maintain colonial networks of power and control of the region's vast natural resources.¹² John Kent and David N. Gibbs have long maintained that the Congo crisis reached global dimensions precisely because of the competition over strategic materials between European capitalists and American business interests.¹³ This element of the crisis brought up questions of state-building and development politics which further exposed differences between America and Britain.¹⁴ The Foreign Office tried repeatedly to maintain control over economic interests by implicitly resisting the UN operation, which led to British Congo policy being interpreted as neo-colonialist. In a different way, the US also came to be viewed as a neo-colonialist power as the State Department sought, in an increasingly explicit manner, to use the UN mission to modernise the Congo in the image of the West in order to prevent Soviet infiltration of Central Africa.¹⁵ Cold War concerns certainly securitised the economic dimensions of the crisis, therefore, but the characterisation of the Congo exclusively as a Cold War struggle tends to flatten the distinction between the intersecting levels of the crisis in which the dynamic agency of the UN and Third World actors comes into focus.

Finally, although this book does not focus explicitly on the role of the Congolese actors, it adds to the existing field by evaluating their interaction with the UN and, at times, with the Afro-Asian bloc.¹⁶ In the selection of actors for this book I chose not to include Belgium, given the wide array of literature which already exists on Belgium and the Congo.¹⁷ From time to time, Belgian politicians do appear in the narrative, particularly at moments when Britain and the US sought to coordinate their Congo policies. Similarly, although the role of the Soviet Union is recorded at certain junctures, this book contributes only in a tangential manner to the work of scholars such as Sergey Mazov and Alessandro Iandolo who focus more explicitly on Soviet policies towards the Congo.¹⁸

The next six chapters, arranged chronologically, follow the way the Congo crisis unfolded at the UN in New York, and in the field missions in Léopoldville and Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi), the provincial capital of Katanga. The first chapter establishes why, in 1960, the outbreak of the Congo crisis and its successive internationalisation through UN intervention was an important question for Anglo-American relations. It provides an outline of what the crisis itself was and the format of the UN response. The chapter sketches the broader context of Anglo-American relations, as well as establishing the nature of the partnership, as it existed between President Dwight D. Eisenhower and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, and afterwards with President John F. Kennedy. The chapter lays out American and British relations with the UN and looks at how the two countries responded to the decision to intervene in the Congo.

The second chapter highlights the changing nature of the UN from 1960 to 1961. It focuses on the emergence of a new US policy in New York, identified as the first

decisive moment that the US tried to steer the course of UN policy in the Congo. It highlights the opposing views of Britain, framing the implementation of the Afro-Asian resolution of February 1961 as the first example of the infighting that was to characterise their relationship over the Congo.

Building on the fissure that emerged over the February Resolution, the third chapter focuses more explicitly on the role of ONUC and explains why military incursions into Katanga in September, and again in December of 1961, proved damaging to the Anglo-American relationship. It is revealed that there was a break in the efforts to formulate a joint Congo policy due to the British refusal to sanction further military action against the breakaway province.

The fourth chapter focuses on the invigoration of the Secretariat as it is shown how Hammarskjöld, and later his successor U Thant, adapted the UN policy in the Congo towards the demands of the Afro-Asian bloc. This chapter presents some of the wider debates which were at play during the Congo crisis, highlighting the role of African and Asian states at the UN and repositioning their importance in the crisis as a whole.

Continuing in this vein, the fifth chapter examines how the US continued to trans-pose itself at the UN by increasing its efforts to court members of the Afro-Asian bloc in a bid to circumvent their influence with the Secretary-General and pilot UN Congo policy more decisively. This chapter argues that the final round of UN military action, codenamed Operation UNOKAT, sealed the rift in positions between Britain and the US.

The final chapter examines efforts, particularly by the US, to construct a Western-friendly regime in the Congo up to and following the withdrawal of the UN force in 1964. It looks at the airlift of European hostages out of the city of Stanleyville in 1964 as an episode which highlights imperialist approaches towards the potential spread of Communist influence in Africa.

By framing the Congo crisis as a key turning point in the process of decolonisation, this book highlights the agency of the UN and the Afro-Asian bloc in accelerating the anti-colonial campaign and attempting to reshape the relationship between North and South. The UN environment served to condition American and British policies towards the Congo, challenging the conduct of imperial internationalism and recasting the image of the organisation as a nexus for engagement with the Third World.

Notes

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 - 4 The Monday Club was a lobby group within the Conservative Party created in January 1961 in order to protect British interests and white minority regimes during the process of decolonisation. National Archives, London (hereafter NAL), FO 371/155107, Letter from Chairman of the Monday Club Robert ‘Bobbety’ Salisbury, to British Foreign Secretary Lord Home, 26 November 1961. Emphasis in the original. For further see A. O’Malley, ‘“What an awful body the UN have become!!” Anglo-American UN relations during the Congo crisis, February–December 1961’, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 13:4 (2016), 26–46.
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