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Review by Malte Riemann, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst

Klaas Voß’s article examines the use and usefulness of mercenaries in U.S. covert-operations during the Cold War. His detailed historical analysis, which draws extensively on previously unexamined archival material, effectively shows that the “doctrine of plausible deniability” lies at the heart of the allure that mercenaries had for intelligence services and U.S. policymakers during the period that his article investigates. Mercenaries were a useful tool in covert operations that needed a degree of ‘plausible deniability’ because they “did not require written orders or much of a paper trail at all, could be controlled without a proper chain of command or a rigid bureaucratic hierarchy, and, most significantly, were not US government personnel and frequently not even US citizens” (41). In order to analyse the genesis and evolution of U.S.-backed mercenary interventions, Voß advances his argument through an analysis of four case studies: Congo, Angola, Rhodesia, and Nicaragua.

In his first case study, Voß shows that the origins of the use of mercenaries in U.S. covert interventions lie in the “surprisingly effective intervention in the Congo in 1964/65” (42). Congo, at the time, had been shaken by the Simba Rebellion that was led by the followers of Congo’s former president Patrice Lumumba who had been ousted from power in 1961 and subsequently been killed. U.S. officials feared that the supposedly pro-Communist rebels would gain the upper hand in the Congo and that the effects of this would make the African continent succumb to Soviet influence. As such Voß shows: “The State Department had no room for doubts: ‘As goes the Congo, so goes the rest of Africa’” (42). Initially, the U.S. had sent military advisors, but it could not expand its mission as the events in the Congo were overshadowed by the escalation of the Vietnam War. As such, the U.S., in a joint venture with the Belgians, raised a force of 1,000 European and South African mercenaries to support the western-leaning Congolese Prime Minister Moise Tshombe in his fight against the Simbas. The defeat of the Simbas by a mere 1,000 mercenaries left a lasting impression on U.S. officials and served as a point of reference and source of inspiration for future covert interventions. Hence, the belief took hold that mercenaries were a fruitful policy tool to curtail the spread of communism, expand American influence abroad, and support Washington’s allies, all without direct and official U.S. involvement.
It therefore came as no surprise that ten years later, when Angola slid into civil war, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger likened the unfolding situation in Angola to that of the Congo. It was thought that the successful use of mercenaries in the Congo could be replicated in Angola, and the CIA began hiring French, Portuguese, and British mercenaries. The operation ended in a fiasco, with the Marxist revolutionary government of Angola putting 13 of these mercenaries (ten British and three Americans) on trial, and executing four of them. Although the mercenaries made no military or political gains in Angola, Voß shows that “by the mid-1970s mercenary recruitment seems to have become a default option in the CIA’s playbook for covert interventions” (46). Its approach to using mercenaries in covert intervention changed, however. Too much direct CIA involvement in both the recruitment and financing of the mercenaries was identified as having led to the failure of the Angola intervention. The CIA therefore moved away from a micro-management approach towards what Voß calls “laissez-faire interventions” (47). Examples for this new paradigm are the U.S.-backed mercenary operations in Rhodesia, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Although all differed in scope and outcome, Voß shows that these interventions were not unconnected solitary events, but that there was a conscious strategy behind it. Compared with any form of official U.S. military involvement, mercenaries allowed the U.S. to conduct covert operations with the ability to deny any formal U.S. involvement, while at the same time minimizing the potential for any form of domestic backlash if things went awry.

The main strength of Voß’s article is its historical depth based on an impressive array of empirical evidence across a variety of cases. Literature on mercenaries frequently lacks this depth by drawing too extensively on the seminal work by Anthony Mockler, which, as Voß rightly points out, is without references and more a work of investigative journalism than a piece of original and rigorous historical research. Furthermore, Voß’s analysis of the unintended side effects of mercenary use in covert interventions during the Cold War highlights an often overlooked dimension. The article shows how the support and sponsoring of “mercenary activities abroad promoted the emergence of a mercenary subculture internationally and within the United States” (40). The mercenary scene set up its own magazines, bars, hotels and clubs, travel and recruitment agencies, mercenary schools and training camps, as well as associations for both active and retired mercenaries. This subculture proved to be a double-edged sword, as Voß explains: “While the CIA and other US governmental agencies successfully tapped into the domestic mercenary movement to intervene in Southern Africa and Latin America … [d]omestic paramilitary organisations and individual freelancers proved to be difficult to control, turned into renegades or whistleblowers, caused legal trouble, fuelled tensions with Congress and public resentment” (40). Nevertheless, for U.S. policy makers the gains of using mercenaries far outweighed the potential repercussion that could emanate from their use.

What remains missing in Voß’s analysis is an appreciation of the broader political developments that go beyond the ideological fault lines of the Cold War. For example, Voß links the emergence of a laissez-faire approach to interventions to the ‘lessons learned’ from the failure in Angola. This singular causality, however,

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does not take into account the importance of wider political developments on both the national as well as international level. For example, it would have strengthened Voß’s argument to consider the impact of neoliberal principles on U.S. policy making at that time and how the *laissez-faire* approach to interventions was influenced by these principles. Also, Voß largely ignores the effects of changes in the broader legal and normative framework on the use of mercenaries in covert interventions. For example, the Luanda Trials caused increasing international legal concern on the use of mercenaries in interventions leading to the adoption of United Nations Resolution 36/103 on the “Inadmissibility of Intervention and Interference in the Internal Affairs of States,” which specifically deplored the use of mercenaries in such acts of aggression. As such, the American *laissez-faire* approach to mercenary interventions might also have been influenced by this international legal dimension.

Overall, Voß expands our understanding of mercenary interventions during the Cold War and the institutional decision-making processes behind it, and it is hoped that the material that he gathered will entice further high-quality research much like “*Plausibly Deniable.*”

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