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Review by Matthew G. Stanard, Berry College

Anne-Sophie Gijs tackles two related subjects in this essay. The first is Belgian fears of Communism in the Congo, including the activities to which these fears led and what they reveal about Belgium’s foreign affairs and colonial dealings in the post-World War II period. In a second part, the article shows how an examination of Belgium’s fight against Communism can offer a fresh take on decolonization and the Congo Crisis of 1960-65.

Even though Communism had little traction among Congolese, fears of Communist infiltration into the Belgian Congo greatly influenced colonial policy and its administration, as Gijs demonstrated in her recent work *Le pouvoir de l’absent*. In this article, we see how authorities emphasized the threat of Communism in order to gain allied support for Belgian colonial rule, for example military or financial assistance from the United States. This represented a delicate balancing act for a Belgian administration long resistant to external meddling in their colonial affairs, a stance that dated back to foreign attacks on Leopold II’s Congo regime (1885-1908). In the post-war era, officials explored how they could receive aid from Western allies without surrendering some control over the Congo in exchange. The tactic they settled on was doubling down on the purported threat of Communism.

As Gijs demonstrates, this approach had ramifications in the military, social, economic, and political spheres. Belgians tried to leverage fears of a Soviet attack on the Congo into allied assistance (especially from the U.S.) in the form of funds for military infrastructure investment. In the end no such military aid was forthcoming because the Belgians declined to participate in multi-national agreements impinging on ‘their’ Congo. In the economic realm, the Belgians pursued a paternalistic policy: economic growth, they believed, would forestall Communism’s appeal to Congolese. Here the Belgians were more successful, garnering European Recovery Program aid in the form of loans and subsidies. Politically, Belgians adhered to a strict isolationism,

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persuading allies that any meddling would heighten Communism’s threat: it would be best to allow the Belgians complete control and channel any approaches toward the Congo through them, as trusted intermediaries. In short, Belgium’s efforts to exploit the threat of Communism met with some success. “Communism, therefore, was useful to Belgian foreign policy aims more by its absence than its presence” (274).

In the essay’s second part, Gijs focuses on how post-war Belgian fears of Communism shaped the Congo Crisis. Belgians persisted in relying on the menace of Communism even after Congo achieved independence on 30 June 1960, to gain support from allies for the country’s continued control over Congolese affairs. That they anticipated keeping a free hand in the independent Congo was revealed when the Belgians ordered troops into the former colony almost immediately after independence, ostensibly (and partly in reality) to protect whites from attacks. Belgians also hoped for U.S. and other allied backing of their control in the most profitable region of the (former) colony, Katanga, after it seceded.

After June 1960, Belgium’s well-established approach failed. The U.S. for years had sought to balance its anticolonialism and support for indigenous self-determination on the one hand with the need to buttress Western European allies in the Cold War on the other. Independence in the Congo tipped the balance for good. Hewing close to the Belgian line to block Communist inroads, Americans realized, might achieve the opposite effect: “If the US seemed too close to Belgium, it would lose credibility with the Congolese and the other emerging nations, which might then dare to move closer to the USSR. . . . The Belgians . . . even by invoking the common struggle against communism, could no longer expect their Western allies to be as flexible in their attitudes to Belgian omnipotence in the Congo” (285).

The Congo Crisis became internationalized quickly, as Lise Namikas shows in her recent Battleground Africa, which recasts the Congo Crisis as an international Cold-War conflict.2 Significantly, Gijs puts the role of indigenous political leaders back into the picture. Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, President Joseph Kasavubu, Katanga secessionist leader Moïse Tshombe, Deputy Prime Minister Antoine Gizenga, and Colonel Joseph-Désiré Mobutu: these men, among others, were at the center of events. The fact that these five often took the initiative in a rapidly changing political landscape refutes the idea “that the Congolese, under the thumb of the Belgians and lacking in experience, were only puppets in the hands of external powers, communist or otherwise.” Still, Gijs recognizes that “their mistakes showed that they were still victims of a game whose final moves and consequences were beyond their control” (288). In any case, the longstanding fixation on the specter of Communism now manifested its downsides: it had blinded the Belgians “to real developments . . . For too long they underestimated the power of Congolese nationalism” (289).

There are a couple of confusing points in the article. First, Gijs states that after World War II, “Belgians had to rely on their own resources to defend a colony destined to become more of a target for Moscow than any territory in Europe, largely because of its strategic resources” (277). Yet Eastern Europe remained Moscow’s main ‘target’ throughout the post-war period. After World War II, Russia imposed stifling regimes across Eastern Europe that were oriented toward benefitting the Soviets. Yet these regimes were never completely

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servile, as 1956 in Hungary and 1968 in Prague showed. They therefore always remained the main targets of Soviet control.³

Another unclear point involves Gijs’s statement that Belgium sending soldiers to the Congo in 1960, “continued with the approach [Belgium] had taken since 1953” (283). As noted earlier, within days of the Congo’s independence, Belgium sent in troops, violating the agreement signed between the two countries before the proverbial ink had dried. This prompted Prime Minister Lumumba to sever diplomatic relations between the two countries, plunging the Congo into greater crisis. Some readers might infer from Gijs’s formulation that Belgians had previously sent metropolitan troops to the Congo. To the contrary: the Congo was an exceptional colony in that “The army of the ruling country never set foot in its own empire,” unlike the other colonial powers and their overseas possessions.⁴ Throughout the state-rule era, colonial authorities relied on the Force publique inherited from Leopold II’s Congo, which was more a police force than a military one. Gijs’s argument is rather that that the Belgian government persisted with its longstanding approach, which was acting unilaterally in its (now former) central African domains.

“Fighting the red peril in the Congo” is nonetheless coherent, well-organized, and a pleasure to read. Gijs presents a solid and nuanced argument which contributes to a better understanding both of Belgian foreign “colonial” policy and of the effects that longstanding fears of communism had on the Congo Crisis. The fact that the article is so well-situated in the secondary literature bolsters its persuasiveness. Even more so, the use of primary sources very much underpins the essay’s cogency. Gijs has carried out extensive research in several different archives, namely the Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs (FPSFA, known formerly as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brussels), the archives of major colonial companies at the Archives générales du royaume (AGR, Brussels), the British National Archives (Kew), the French Archives nationales d’outre-mer (Aix-en-Provence), and U.S. State and Defense departments archives and CIA documents at the U.S. National Archives (NARA, College Park, Maryland). This makes for a persuasive analysis of the significance of Belgian fears of Communism and its colony, and a more sophisticated picture of the Congo Crisis.

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