



TUAREG , North Africa

France's Dirty Secret: First Coup d'état and Assassination in Postcolonial Africa

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Edited by : Kirit Ghumman

Introduction

On the morning of 13 January 1963, the president of Togo, Sylvanus Olympio, was assassinated in the first post-independence military coup staged in Africa. The coup began on the night of 12 January, when mutinous soldiers broke into Olympio's house and crowded the first floor (Togo Death at Gate, 1963). With no means of escape, the president was forced to jump out of a window and seek refuge in the US embassy next door (Togo Death at Gate, 1963). Olympio hid inside a vehicle belonging to the embassy, as he could not enter the locked building (Boisbouvier, 2021). Testimony from Gilchrist Olympio, the son of Sylvanus Olympio, revealed that Ambassador Leon Poullada had gone to the embassy in search of the president after being informed by Henri Mayozer that a coup was underway (Boisbouvier, 2021). When Poullada arrived at the embassy, Olympio immediately requested his assistance, and the American advised him to stay hidden inside the vehicle until he returned with the key to open the building (Boisbouvier, 2021). However, frightened about the ongoing situation, Poullada never returned (Boisbouvier, 2021). The rebel soldiers later entered the embassy, found the president, and shot him dead.

Although Olympio's assassination shocked the world, as it marked the first coup d'état in post-colonial Africa, there has yet to be a definitive answer as to who carried out the murder and why (Pigeaud, 2021). Approximately 61 years after the crime, Olympio's family is still seeking to know the truth and have requested official archives from France (Pigeaud, 2021). Nevertheless, the use of plausible deniability has enabled France to remain silent about the issue and denounce any possible implications.

In this essay, I investigate the 1963 military coup in Togo to identify the actor or actors who would have benefited the most from Sylvanus Olympio's assassination, thereby determining who was most likely to carry it out. This essay contends that France and the Togolese military conspired to eliminate Olympio, given that they stood to gain the most from his demise. The president threatened both parties' interests as he pursued 'real' independence from France and sought to achieve this goal by limiting military spending to promote economic growth. This argument will be supported through a four-step analysis: firstly, by theorizing political assassination to comprehend their underlying causes; secondly, by examining Olympio's objectives for Togo during his presidency; thirdly,

by identifying motives of potential suspects; and finally, by reviewing all of the available evidence.

Theorizing political assassinations

Assassination could be defined as the deliberate killing of a political figure for political reasons (Khatchadourian, 1974). Although the act is committed against an individual, the motives for assassinations are political (Khatchadourian, 1974). The murder of a head of state often occurs either to bring about large-scale political change or to prevent such change from occurring (Iqbal & Zorn, 2008). Consequently, according to Andra Serban and colleagues (2018), assassinations should not be viewed as random events; on the contrary, they should be perceived as instrumental behaviour. In the political theory of classical antiquity, assassinations were a means of removing an illegitimate ruler or terminating the rule of a tyrant (Iqbal & Zorn, 2008). However, in modern society, assassinations are generally viewed as unjustifiable acts of political violence, rather than legitimate means of pursuing political reform. (Iqbal & Zorn, 2008). Similar to other acts of political violence—such as coups—assassinations have the effect of destabilizing a society and are detrimental to the sociopolitical system (Iqbal & Zorn,

2008).

Scholars have proposed various theories to explain the causes of political assassinations; one of the common factors among these theories is that assassinations occur because of societal divides (Serban et al., 2018). The Vertical Dyad Linkage Theory highlights this notion, as it states that the same leader can and will act differently towards in-groups and out-groups (Yammarino et al., 2013). As such, leaders will not command universal support, regardless of whether they are elected, appointed, or anointed (Serban et al., 2018). These leadership principles, while often centred on direct or close leader-follower relationships, also apply to indirect or distant leader-follower relationships (Serban et al., 2018). According to Yammarino and colleagues (2013), in extreme cases, some followers—regardless of their relationship to the leader—may develop such intense admiration that it borders on fanaticism, while some non-followers may harbor such deep resentment that it leads to acts as extreme as assassination. This idea is reflected in the case of Togo, where Sylvanus Olympio was perceived as a hero by some Togolese, yet despised enough by others that they conspired to assassinate him.

Colonial powers contributed to the increased likelihood of political assassinations in African countries by creating societal divisions through their ‘divide-and-rule’ strategy (Morrock, 1973). This approach involves utilizing ethnic, cultural, tribal, or religious differences within colonial populations as tools to foster instability and conflict, thereby making the region easier to dominate and control (Morrock, 1973). Politicizing differences was a fundamental tactic of ‘divide-and-rule’, as it ensured that divisions continued into the post-colonial era (Morrock, 1973). This strategy was implemented in various ways, with one notable method being the open support of tribalist political parties by colonial powers (Morrock, 1973). For example, in the case of Togo, France openly supported Gnassingbé Eyadéma by providing emergency military assistance when requested, despite Eyadéma enacting corrupt policies that favoured his own ethnic group (Dobbs, 1986). Conversely, Olympio was assassinated because of his Pan-Africanist ideals, which aimed to unify African people. Nevertheless, to fully understand the motives behind Olympio’s murder, it is crucial to analyze his background.

Who was Sylvanus Olympio, and what did he do for Togo?

Sylvanus Olympio’s legacy extends far beyond his role as Togo’s first president; he is regarded as a leader who fought for Togo’s freedom from French colonial rule. Raised in a wealthy family, Olympio attended prestigious schools in England and France, where he pursued studies in economics and international law (Spanos, 2023). Being a bright and ambitious young man, Olympio sought to use his education to make a difference in Togo (Spanos, 2023). Between 1927 and 1930, he worked as a lawyer in London and then returned to West Africa to start a career in business economics with a company in Lagos, Nigeria (Sylvanus Olympio, 2019). Olympio climbed up the ranks and eventually became the Director General of the United Africa Company (Sylvanus Olympio, 2019).

Despite his successful career in business economics, Olympio felt unsettled because Togo had recently been ceded to France, and it was common knowledge that the French colonial administration intended to exploit the land and its people (Spanos, 2023). Olympio’s firsthand observations of French policies aiming to keep the country in a state of dependency fue-

led his desire for change (Spanos, 2023). As a result of his growing political convictions, Olympio left his corporate career in the early 1940s and joined the Comité pour l'Unité Togolaise (CUT), a political party engaged in the struggle for Togo's self-rule (Sylvanus Olympio, 2019). About a decade later, Olympio became the prime minister of Togo after his party emerged victorious in the French Togoland parliamentary election of 1958 (Sylvanus Olympio, 2019). Upon assuming the role of prime minister, Olympio declared a clear mandate to refuse the limited autonomy attributed by France in 1956, advocating instead for a fuller measure of self-government (Skinner, 2015). His efforts proved fruitful, as Togo formally gained independence on 27 April 1960, leading to Olympio's inauguration as the country's first president in 1961 (Skinner, 2015).

As President, Olympio's primary objective was to secure Togo's economic future to ensure the country would no longer depend on the French colonial administration (Skinner, 2015). Drawing on his expertise in economics, he implemented policies aimed at fostering economic growth and independence. For example, Olympio argued that maintaining a large military for Togo's small population would

only increase the country's reliance on French colonial rule (Skinner, 2019). As a result, he chose to have a modest armed force of 250 men to limit governmental expenditure and, therefore, decrease the country's dependence on France (Skinner, 2019). Another policy Olympio pursued to break Togo's economic chains and move closer to true independence was the removal of the CFA Franc from Togo, which was a currency imposed on French colonies (Spanos, 2023). Yet, just two days before Togo was scheduled to withdraw from the CFA Franc, Olympio was assassinated. This event has led scholars to speculate that France's anger at Olympio's intention to take Togo out of the Franc zone was the primary factor in his assassination (Skinner, 2015).

The Motives of the Military

Instead of hastily attributing Olympio's assassination to the French, it is essential to investigate all potential actors who may have had a motive to kill the president in order to determine the most logical suspect. Approximately a week following Olympio's murder, West Africa magazine published an article suggesting that Togolese soldiers were responsible for the president's death (Skinner, 2015). The magazine argued that Olympio's murder was not an as-

sassination and instead happened in the heat of the moment (Skinner, 2015). The proposed narrative was that the coup occurred due to discontent over pay and unemployment, among ex-servicemen, which ultimately resulted in the ‘unplanned’ death of President Olympio (Skinner, 2015). The premise of this argument was supported by Sergeant Etienne (Gnassingbé) Eyadéma, stating to have personally shot Olympio after he tried to escape (Landrey, 2003). Later, US embassy records revealed that Eyadéma’s statement was false, as Vice Consul Richard Storch saw Olympio standing near the US embassy gate accompanied by rebel soldiers from whom he was not attempting to escape (Skinner, 2015). Furthermore, medical reports confirmed that Olympio had been bayoneted and shot, a combination of wounds that strongly suggest deliberate intent (Skinner, 2015). Consequently, articles that described Olympio’s death as an ‘accident’ were called into question and eventually discredited (Skinner, 2015).

Even though the media’s explanation of Olympio’s ‘accidental’ murder was debunked, many still hold the belief that the military was responsible. Some scholars have argued that the assassination was motivated by the soldiers’ impatience in waiting for their pensions from France

and their frustration over unemployment, exacerbated by Olympio’s refusal to integrate them into the Togolese military (Skinner, 2015). In addition to financial hardship, the ex-servicemen’s anger was fueled by the stigmas they faced for their involvement in suppressing anti-colonial movements in other parts of Africa (Skinner, 2015). For these reasons, West Africans believed that the ex-servicemen were responsible as they had both the means and motives to act against Olympio (Skinner, 2015). Nevertheless, while West African correspondents favoured this non-ideological military narrative, not all were convinced that soldiers acted independently (Kitchen, 1963). For example, President Sékou Touré of Guinea appealed to the UN for a more thorough investigation of the assassination, as he believed it was a plot planned by exterior actors (Kitchen, 1963).

The Motives of the French Colonial Power

Several decades after Olympio’s assassination, François-Xavier Verschave (1998) presented evidence linking military interests and ambitions in Togo to a broader pattern of French neo-colonial intervention across Africa, as well as to Jacques Foccart — a French businessman and

politician best known as a chief adviser to French presidents on African affairs. Verschave's (1998) investigation into Foccart's connection between Paris and Lomé revealed that both the French ambassador, Henri Mazoyer, and the security adviser, Georges Maïtrier, were selected as part of a broader strategy aimed at monitoring and containing Olympio's efforts to steer Togo on a 'too independent' course. Worried about losing control over Togo, Mayozzer and Maïtrier opted to replace Olympio with Grunitzky, viewing him as a more moderate leader aligned with French interests (Verschave, 1998). Therefore, the French men had the motive to conspire with Eyadéma and the Togolese soldiers in the assassination of Olympio, as the president was increasingly viewed as a threat to colonial interests (Skinner, 2015). While the soldiers may have perceived the assassination as aligning with their personal interests, they were, in fact, being manipulated by Mayozzer and Maïtrier to further French geopolitical objectives. (Skinner, 2015).

Togolese historian Têtêvi Godwin Tété-Adjalo (2002) expanded on Verschave's analysis by arguing that the French motive behind Olympio's murder stemmed from his efforts to decrease dependence on France's

economic influence. These efforts positioned Togo towards economic independence, which ran counter to French interests (Tété-Adjalo, 2002). Had Olympio lived long enough to succeed, his example would further threaten the very basis of French involvement with its former African colonies (Tété-Adjalo, 2002). While these factors motivated France, according to Tété-Adjalo (2002), Olympio's public declaration of his intention to withdraw Togo from the CFA Franc served as the final straw, further driving France to eliminate the president. France recognized that without its African colonies, its economy would suffer, and the country would gradually lose international relevance (Sylla, 2020). France used the CFA Franc as a colonial mechanism that would allow them to retain power and control over its former colonies (Sylla, 2020). Fears emerged that Togo's withdrawal from the CFA franc would establish a precedent, potentially initiating a ripple effect across the region as other countries considered similar moves. Thus, France may have felt compelled to take action, leveraging opportunistic actors and the tools available at the time — namely, the rebel armed forces — to prevent this outcome.

The Motives of Ghana

Former Nigerian minister Jaja Wachuku opposed arguments of French involvement and instead insisted that Kwame Nkrumah, president of Ghana, was responsible for Olympio's death (Skinner, 2015). This proposition was deemed plausible for three reasons. Firstly, Nkrumah had publicly and repeatedly stated that Togo's future lay not in independent nationhood but in a political and economic union with Ghana (Welch, 1966). Nkrumah saw a Ghana-Togo union as an opportunity to demonstrate his devotion to the cause of African Unity (Skinner, 2015). Secondly, there was an increased tension between Togo and Ghana because Olympio's party declared itself committed to reopening the Ghana-Togo border question (Skinner, 2015). The CUT had denounced the process by which the future of British Togoland had been decided and argued that the disputed territory should be reunited with Togo (Skinner, 2015). Nkrumah opposed this idea, as Ghana's economy hinged on the generation of power from a hydroelectric dam on the river Volta; thus, the government could not afford to lose control of the territory (Skinner, 2015). Finally, Nkrumah accused Olympio of harbouring dangerous political exiles and assisting them in plotting against

the Ghanaian government (Skinner, 2015). For instance, the Ghanaian government accused the Togolese government of conspiring in the assassination attempt of Nkrumah at Kulungugu in 1962 (Skinner, 2015). While Nkrumah's involvement in the coup cannot be completely ruled out, West Africans have not taken seriously the possibility of the president's involvement in the assassination of Olympio (Skinner, 2015). One of the primary reasons is that there is no logical connection between Nkrumah's agenda and the outcomes in Togo post-Olympio's death (Skinner, 2015). Moreover, even if Nkrumah had a motive to act against Olympio, there was no apparent reason for him to favor Grunitzky as a replacement (Skinner, 2015).. If there was any actor who wished to see Grunitzky restored to power in the events that followed in 1963, it was the French, not Nkrumah (Skinner, 2015). A more logical explanation is that the French disliked Olympio and favoured Grunitzky; consequently, when soldiers' dissatisfaction provided them with an opportunity to reorganize matters more in line with their interests, they seized it and benefited from it thereafter (Skinner, 2015). While Ghana's possible involvement cannot be entirely ruled out, it remains crucial to review the available evidence surrounding the

assassination to determine the most probable hypothesis.

The evidence

Although definitive proof of France's involvement in Olympio's assassination remains elusive, the accumulation of circumstantial evidence and striking coincidences raises compelling questions and points to possible French involvement. One such coincidence is the timing of Olympio's murder. In this case, there are only two facts that stand with absolute certainty: first, the assault on the Togolese president's residence began at 11:00 pm on January 12; and second, Olympio was assassinated the next day at 7:15 am, right outside the gates of the US embassy, after being forcibly removed by Togolese soldiers (Boisbouvier, 2021). The timing of Olympio's death raises questions, as he was assassinated two days before he was scheduled to meet with the Bank of France to sign Togo's withdrawal from the Franc zone (Lome, 2019). Although the timing of the incident does not directly implicate France, it certainly raises doubts, since France stood to benefit from Togo remaining in the Franc zone.

Another piece of evidence linking France to the murder of Olympio is the numerous testimonies stating

that the rebel soldiers were in contact with Mazoyer on the day of the coup. After breaking into the house, the assailant shot at Dina Olympio, his wife, and the servants to pressure them into revealing the president's location (Boisbouvier, 2021). However, Dina and the servants did not know Sylvanus Olympio's whereabouts, as he had just escaped through a window (Boisbouvier, 2021). According to their testimony, after failing to retrieve the president's location, the soldiers called Mazoyer to inform him that Olympio was not home (Skinner, 2015). This testimony corroborates the accounts provided by Ambassador Poullada's daughter, Sofia, who stated that Mazoyer contacted her father on the night of the assassination to inform him about the ongoing coup (Boisbouvier, 2021). Sofia also mentioned that Mazoyer had requested that Ambassador Poullada go to the embassy to search for the president (Boisbouvier, 2021). Sofia's testimony raises a valuable question: How did Mazoyer—not present at the location—learn about the ongoing coup, which he then informed Poullada about? The only two plausible explanations are that Mazoyer either had prior knowledge of the coup because he was involved in orchestrating it or that the soldiers contacted him on the day of. Regardless of whether he planned

the assassination or not, there is no doubt that he was aware of the situation before it completely unfolded, and thus could be considered an accessory before the fact.

One final important question to consider that seems to implicate not only France but the United States, is: Who told the assailants where Olympio was hiding, and why did the soldiers wait so long before entering the United States embassy? Earlier in this paper, it was mentioned that Gilchrist Olympio's testimony affirmed that Ambassador Poullada had communicated with Sylvanus Olympio at the embassy, advising him to remain hidden inside the vehicle while he retrieved the key to the building (Boisbouvier, 2021). According to Sofia, her father did not open the embassy building because he was worried that the soldiers waiting in front of the gates would ransack the premises (Boisbouvier, 2021). Poullada instead returned to his residence and informed his counterpart, Mazoyer, that Olympio was hiding inside the embassy (Boisbouvier, 2021).

At 11:30 pm, when the president took refuge in the American embassy, the soldiers refrained from entering the diplomatic compound (Boisbouvier, 2021). However, seven hours later, after the telephone exchange between

Poullada and Mazoyer, the assailants did not hesitate to enter the embassy to forcibly remove the president and kill him (Boisbouvier, 2021). Once more, there are two plausible explanations for this scenario: either the soldiers entered the building out of impatience and disregard for consequences, or they were authorized to enter by a higher authority, potentially French actors, especially considering that the soldiers only entered after Poullada called Mazoyer to confirm that Olympio was on the premises. Although the latter explanation may sound more logical, the current evidence cannot prove that Mazoyer was the one calling the shots. Nonetheless, the evidence does suggest that France was involved in the coup that resulted in the death of Sylvanus Olympio.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after investigating the coup d'état in Togo, it becomes evident that France and the Togolese military were the most probable culprits behind the assassination of President Olympio. France's refusal to release official archives to Olympio's family, denying them the opportunity for closure, indicates that they may have information about the events that they are reluctant to disclose to the public. However, due

to plausible deniability, it is unlikely that conclusive evidence will ever surface, to prove France or other external actors' involvement in Olympio's death. Consequently, akin to numerous instances of political assassination in Africa, the perpetrators will never be held accountable for their actions. Sylvanus Olympio's assassination had a profound impact not only on Togo but also on the broader African continent. It set the stage for an authoritarian regime to take control of Togo, resulting in a period of political instability and repression. Moreover, his death served as a trigger for a wave of political assassinations across Africa, highlighting the fragility of newly independent states and the challenges they faced in establishing stable governments. Though his life was taken before his vision could be realized, Olympio's unwavering fight for Togo's true independence ensures he will be remembered not just as a fallen leader, but as a symbol of resistance and hope for the entire continent.

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