

Don't Return

A Sudanese Court Hears of a Mercenary's Life

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CAIRO, Aug. 16—It is 110 degrees in the former Assembly chamber at Khartoum. The overhead fans only stir the heat. Sleepily, six dark-complexioned officers who constitute the court eye the blond, bullet-headed defendant sitting at his table, guarded by two soldiers with submachine guns.

Such is the setting, as described here in Cairo by those who have witnessed it, for a trial that has aroused more excitement in anticipation than in performance.

It is the trial of Rolf Steiner, the German soldier who insists that he is more a missionary than a mercenary, but the trial has also from the start implicated Israel, Roman Catholic agencies, the Central Intelligence Agency, Uganda and Ethiopia in a 15-year-old guerrilla war in the southern Sudan.

Observers of the trial feel that political considerations such as these will settle Mr. Steiner's fate. The wider implications of the case brought the secretary general of the Organization of African Unity, Diallo Telli, to the opening session two weeks ago.

With Nazi 'Wolf Cubs'

The Sudan straddles the divide in Africa between Islam, to the north, and black Africa, pagan or Christian, to the south. A fitful guerrilla war has been sputtering in the southern Sudan against the north since independence, and some outsiders have apparently taken sides.

Mr. Steiner, who is 41 years old, says that his military career began in 1945 with the Nazi "wolf cubs," a branch of the Volksturm, or home guard, which was made up of members of the Hitler Youth. Two years later, he says, he left a Catholic seminary to join the French Foreign Legion, in which he fought in Indochina, Korea, Algeria and at Suez.

His story, as told to several journalists, becomes a little fuzzy. He has said that he made a trip to the southern Sudan in 1965 to seek means of getting supplies to the rebel areas, but resigned from the Foreign Legion only in 1967.

He had already been to Biafra



United Press International
Rolf Steiner

by that time and, although he indicates that his original mission there was sponsored by the French, he says he turned independent to avoid being involved in what he called dirty business about oil concessions. His exploits as a commander of Biafran troops are well known.

Expelled at last by the Biafrans, Mr. Steiner returned to the southern Sudan, operating from Uganda. He was arrested there last winter and handed over to the Sudanese in a gesture of solidarity from the new Ugandan regime.

Contacts With Agents

Mr. Steiner pleaded guilty to having crossed the Sudanese border illegally, but pleaded not guilty to making war, to recruiting mercenaries, collecting weapons, smuggling and spreading malicious rumors.

Mr. Steiner says he was stirred by the condition of people in the south Sudan. He went to Rome to the Verona Fathers a missionary order that was expelled from the Sudan years before and which was deeply upset about the fate of its converts. They passed him along to Caritas International and to a German Charitable organization, the Society for the Promotion of African Affairs.

The Society acknowledges that it had contacts with Mr.

Steiner but denies that it gave him a mission. Mr. Steiner says that he was sent to work out a route for shipment of relief supplies, and that this led him to consider setting up model farms in rebel territory—which, in turn, led him to military training to enable his charges to defend those farms.

Mr. Steiner does not seem to have been very successful in the Sudan. He concedes that the main force of the rebels was under Joseph Lagu, whom he described as an Israeli protégé. He also described contacts with an alleged agent of the Central Intelligence Agency, a freelance journalist named David Robison, and with British Intelligence. Both agencies at one time or another, were supposed to have helped the rebels by way of Ethiopia and Uganda.

Questions of the Sentence

Prosecution witnesses have testified that they saw Mr. Steiner training southerners at a camp. He, himself, does not deny it, but says contemptuously that if he had wanted to make war, he would have blown up bridges and cut off the south from the north.

Observers say that Mr. Steiner's sentence will be decided not on the case before the court, but on a balance of state interests.

On the one hand, they say, the Sudanese Government is aware of the revulsion aroused by its summary executions of leftists last month and is interested in improving relations with the West. On the other hand, clemency for Mr. Steiner would move some nationalists to say that the regime is kinder to white mercenaries than it is to Sudanese critics.

Accused of Killing Child

KHARTOUM, The Sudan, Aug. 16 (Reuters) — Khadmalla Abdalla, a witness for the prosecution, accused Rolf Steiner today of having killed her 7-month-old child and injured her at a rebel camp in the southern Sudan where she was being detained. She also told the court that while she was in the camp she saw Mr. Steiner and Maj. Gen. Idi Amin, now President of Uganda, conferring with Southern Sudanese rebel leaders.