

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH - 17  
An African Tragedy

January 16, 1963  
Hotel du Golfe  
Lomé, Togo

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Sylvanus Olympio was murdered three days ago. Since death by violence is an occupational risk in politics, there is little point in lingering over the human aspects of his assassination. But Olympio was killed because of the policies he practiced, so it is worth looking at what he stood for and why he was killed.

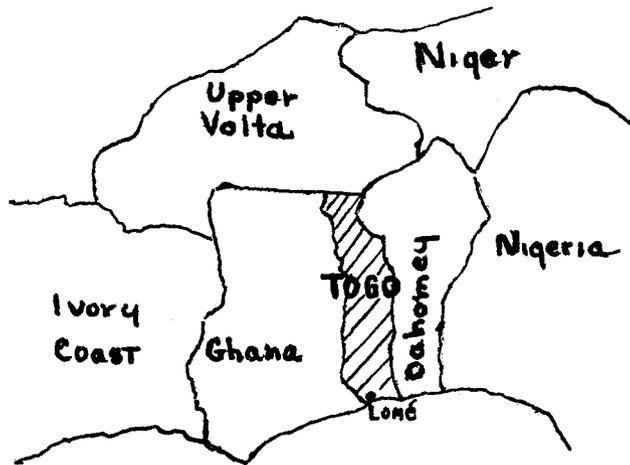
Olympio's domestic and foreign policies, his style of governing, made him a unique figure in the politics of West Africa. Togo is a poor country, and a geographical absurdity (see map on page 2), but it was Olympio's belief that it could and should pay its own way if it was to call itself independent. Austerity is a fashionable word nowadays in West Africa - the Ivory Coast and Ghana have "austerity" budgets that do not, however, interfere with their plans to buy television stations - but Olympio was the only one to practice austerity. He renounced France's subsidy to the Togolese budget; Dahomey, next door, takes the subsidy and is therefore still tied to France's apron strings. Freed of dependence on France, Olympio was able to lessen the grip of the European trading companies and to vary Togo's trade in the interests of lower prices. Prices have remained low and stable (unlike the rest of West Africa) since independence. The Togolese earning the minimum wage, also one of the lowest in West Africa, was better off than most of his counterparts; certainly he was better off than the worker in flashy Abidjan, where inflation is lowering the standard of living. By contrast, the Togolese government official was paid less than the usual West African pattern, and his status was not sweetened with a government-paid villa and servants, car and chauffeur. The opportunities for graft were, by all accounts, both rare and small. A month ago Olympio ordered the civil service to work 45 instead of 40 hours a week, without a raise in pay. The government workers complained that the dock workers, already on 45 hours, received a bonus for their extra time. Olympio agreed that this was unjust - and eliminated the dock workers' bonus. If this makes Olympio sound like Simon Legree, remember that government workers and dock workers in Africa - anyone on a steady salary - are members of a small and privileged class.

In foreign affairs, Olympio paid little attention to matters that did not concern his country, on the principle expressed by the Togolese proverb: "Sweep your own house before telling your neighbor how to take care of his place". He seldom made the inter-African conference circuit and, except for the loose-knit Monrovia group, he avoided Africa's eph-

meral alliances. He did not advise the world powers. Lomé's only newspaper, Togo Presse, followed this rule: Togo first, Africa second, then the rest of the world. Under Olympio, Togo only opened three modest embassies. (Senegal has announced plans to open embassies in Latin America, Mali maintains an ambassador in North Korea.) He took foreign aid, but only for real development projects; he spread out his sources of foreign aid, in order not to be too dependent on any one source, and he did not plunge his country into debts it could not hope to repay.

Realism was the keynote of Sylvanus Olympio. He acted as if his country was poor, which it is, and not as if it would be rich if only the imperialists would go away - a view that is often implicit in African political talk - or as if it were primarily up to foreigners to see to Togo's development. He did not talk about "mobilizing the masses", but he put the elite to work. He did not proclaim "socialism", but under Olympio the gap between the rulers and ruled was less than it is elsewhere in West Africa. The city of Lomé is little marred by the fancy palaces that one sees in other West African capitals, palaces that are at best a waste of money, at worst a self-deluding mirage of progress. Olympio and his ministers lived and worked in modest surroundings. "We put up with it (austerity) because the ministers don't steal. We're all in it together," Adolphe Akakpo-Vizah, editor of Togo Presse, said last week. Olympio's realism is illustrated by his handling of relations with Ghana. Each country has a legitimate grievance, though, since it is Nkrumah who laid claim to Togo, not Olympio who claimed Ghana, I suppose Ghana would have to be called the aggressor. Togo has sheltered Ghanaian refugees who have doubtless been involved in the attempts to kill Nkrumah, and the Togolese who tried to kill Olympio a year ago were based at Ho in eastern Ghana. Togo is by far the weaker country, but it is Ghana that is obsessive about plots in Togo; Togo pays comparatively little attention to Ghana.

Olympio's regime had its faults: it made little effort toward rural development, and the north of Togo was under-represented in politics and economically underprivileged. But these faults did not cause Olympio's death. He died because he failed to take care of a small group of Togolese. This failure in turn seems to have been due to a flaw in his personality, an arrogance which



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(aided by the classical air of his face and name) gives a tragic cast to Olympio's end.

Togo has, in its population of one and one-half millions, five to six hundred veterans of the French army. These are men who signed up, for the pay, to fight in France's colonial wars, from Indo-China to Madagascar to Algeria. They came from a peaceful society, but in those years - and especially in Algeria - they learned the rewards of violence. When the wars were over, France paid them off and they came back to Togo. They did not find much at home. Togo has plenty of unemployed, and since independence other African countries have driven out the Togolese to make jobs for their own nationals. Some found low-ranking jobs in the Togolese armed forces, others remained unemployed. Olympio did not coddle the military; not long ago he slashed the military budget for 1963. The French Embassy recommended one of the ex-soldiers, Emmanuel Bodjollé (14 years' service) to Olympio for a job. Olympio turned him down. About a year ago the Army staged a semi-mutiny. Over the past year, the veterans repeatedly demanded jobs from Olympio. Olympio turned them down, always on the grounds that there was no money and that Togolese who fought for French pay (while Olympio himself was fighting, in the political arena, against France) had no greater claim on Togo than other unemployed Togolese. Last week the veterans' discontent came to a head. On Wednesday, Olympio dismissed a military delegation. Chef d'Escadron Maitrier, the French commander of the Gendarmerie, advised the soldiers to put their requests in the form of a written petition. Theophile Mally, the Minister of the Interior, warned Olympio that the military were likely to make trouble.

On Saturday, a group of Togolese officers, most of them non-veterans, took the petition to Olympio on behalf of the veterans. Once again he turned them down. For good measure - and here was Olympio's fatal flaw - he called the veterans "mercenaries". (Later the veterans were to express great indignation about this remark. Mercenaries is of course exactly what they were: all the more reason for Olympio not to say it.) Late Saturday afternoon, at a cocktail party celebrating the opening of the French Cultural Center, the Frenchman Maitrier was heard to say: "I told the President it was dangerous to cut the military budget with the soldiers as discontented as they are..."

From now on, the story is by no means certain: the version given here is made up of what seem to be the likelier elements of many conflicting accounts, plus some personal observation.

The officers went back to the military camp, about two miles inland from the center of Lomé, and reported their failure to the veterans. The veterans decided to act, in the way they had learned during their military service. (In retrospect, it seems almost impossible that they did not have help outside their own ranks: but there is no evidence as yet of such help. And the coup seems too well organized

to have been planned at the last minute.) The veterans, led by Emmanuel Bodjollé, sent a "commando" to Olympio's residence. It was then between midnight and one o'clock Sunday morning. This was the scene:

The Olympio home, a two-story house, faces on the coast road a half-dozen blocks east of the business district of Lomé. It is a residential area, and quiet - usually - by that time of night. Across the road is a line of coconut palms, then the beach where the fishermen keep their big dugout canoes, then the ocean. The Olympio home is in a block that also includes the American Embassy. The Olympio yard is separated from the Embassy yard by a wall that is only about two feet high. The entrance to the Olympio home is on the side street nearer to town. The house is perhaps twenty feet from the street, and the wall on the street is no more than three feet high. One block toward town - separated, that is, from Olympio's by a block that includes a two-story house - is the annex of the Hotel du Golfe, which is where we are staying. We got home that night about 12:30 A.M.

The shooting started an hour later, at about 1:30 A.M. It continued, intermittently, till dawn came at 6 A.M. Somewhere around 2:30 A.M. we heard two short bursts of machinegun fire. Because of the intervening house, we could not see the Olympio home, and it was too dark to see what was happening on the street, except in front of the annex and for a block or two toward town. Cars passed occasionally. One was a military truck; a jeep heading toward the residence was fired on. The only telephone in the annex was in a locked room; the watchman told us that the soldiers were chasing a would-be assassin down the beach. After a long silence, we heard a final burst of shots at dawn, and shortly after a soundtruck went by telling people to stay indoors. Just after dawn, the people from the American Embassy - alerted during the night by the French Ambassador - found Olympio's body in the Embassy garden. He was dressed in shorts and a teeshirt. He had been shot, two or three times in the abdomen and groin, and there were bloodstains where he had tried to climb the wall.

When people went out on Sunday morning, they found Lomé quiet and firmly in the hands of the veterans. Dressed in odds and ends of leftover uniforms, carrying arms they had been given during the night, they slouched in front of public buildings or drove around town in jeeps. The Togolese ran at times when the soldiers appeared, but by and large the veterans behaved well: there was no more shooting, and we heard no reports of looting.

Foreigners gathered to exchange what news and rumors were available. Five ministers were under arrest. They had come to the Olympio residence during the night in response to telephone calls announcing a special cabinet meeting. Three other ministers, including the Minister of the Interior, Theophile Mally, were in hiding. A single minister, Dr. Gerson Kpotsra of Public Health, was neither arrested nor

in hiding; his role, if any, is still unknown. Radio Lomé remained silent throughout the morning.

Speculation centered on the tiny country's two neighbors. Ghana is only a mile to the west of Lomé, and Dahomey - where there are French troops - is 35 miles to the east. Everyone watched the two roads. If, as then seemed likely, the assassination had been mounted from Ghana, the Togolese refugees there would be coming back to take over. (From a balcony on the Ghana road, a diplomat pointed out a returning refugee walking down the road; his suitcase was on a cart pushed by a laborer. We met the "refugee" the next day. He was an American Negro, a teacher in the Peace Corps, trying to make his way back to his job in Nigeria.) From the other border, there were rumors that Dahomey - presumably with the tacit approval of France - was sending troops to prevent a Ghanaian takeover. At 12:15, Radio Lomé broke its silence. A Togolese teacher - just freed from jail, where he had been interned as an opponent of Olympio - announced that the "President" of the movement that staged the coup was Antoine Méatchi, the leader of the Togolese exiles in Ghana. Soon after that the Dahomey radio broadcast a report that the Dahomeyan government was taking "measures to protect the people of the sister republic". This sounded like intervention, but the Dahomeyan troops stopped at the border. (Called off by de Gaulle, unwilling to get involved in another messy African adventure?)

Instead of troops, both Dahomey and Ghana sent emissaries to explore the vacuum left by Olympio's death. Heavily guarded cars shuttled back and forth on the road to Ghana; a black Mercedes with Dahomeyan plates appeared at the Hotel du Benin, where there was much activity - the veterans took over the third floor - and then went out to the military camp. It soon became evident that the assassins did not know what they wanted to do next, but that they were not inclined to turn over the power they had won to either of the neighboring countries. Though Méatchi himself came over from Ghana that afternoon, the broadcast announcing his "presidency" was never repeated. Instead, Radio Lomé broadcast a neutral report simply stating that the Dahomeyan emissaries were in town and advising everyone to keep calm.

That evening the assassins finally appeared on the radio in the person of Emmanuel Bodjollé, who said he was head of a nine-member "Military Insurrectional Committee". In heavily military tones, Bodjollé said Olympio had been killed "for resisting the will of the committee" and ordered the Togolese people to "submit to my orders - any disobedience will be punished with the greatest severity". He listed miscellaneous complaints against the Olympio regime: unemployment, no pay raises "in either the public or private sector", not enough participation in African conferences, and - peculiarly - "Togolese ambassadors did not even get precise instructions from the government". The radio also ordered a curfew from 8 P.M. to 6 A.M. and the closing of stores the following day.

Monday morning brought little news. Over the radio, the military announced that they had "no political ideology" and made the usual promise of installing a civilian government that would hold the usual "free elections". Bodjollé, a bit too much of a sergeant, was replaced as military spokesman by Lieutenant Kofi Kongo, an attractive soft-spoken graduate of St. Cyr who is 24 years old. The bargaining went on, and by the afternoon it became clear that the Dahomeyans were winning out. The Dahomeyans' Mercedes was seen around town, but the representative of Nkrumah's Office of African Affairs, which handles Ghana's political interventions and training of refugees, had apparently gone home. Foreign journalists began to trickle in. At the suggestion of the French Ambassador, Western embassies flew their flags at half-mast. Asked why the French officers did not act to save Olympio during the long hours before he was killed, the French Ambassador said the officers could not make their troops obey and that Maitrier, the senior officer, was held at gunpoint by his gendarmes.

At 4P.M. Monday, the radio announced that the military had asked Nicholas Grunitzky - the Dahomeyan candidate - to form a "provisional government". Grunitzky, who happens to be Olympio's brother-in-law, was France's puppet Prime Minister before independence. He was defeated by Olympio in U.N.-supervised elections in 1958, and was again defeated in the 1961 elections. His name, incidentally, comes from his German-Polish father (Germany ruled Togo before World War I); his mother was African. Grunitzky put together a government in which most of the ministries were held by himself and Méatchi. Grunitzky was probably chosen in part because of his credit rating in Paris: the new government will have to find money fast to take care of the veterans' demands. When Grunitzky returned from Dahomey, where he had been living in voluntary exile, he made the impression of an amiable nonentity. Among his first remarks were the politician's eternal complaint: "There are very few jobs and many candidates".

On Tuesday morning Sylvanus Olympio's body was buried in the village of Agoé, in Dahomey, where he was born. The body had been kept in the American Embassy for a few hours on Sunday, then turned over to the family later in the day. He was buried in a Togolese flag with an honor guard of Dahomeyan soldiers.

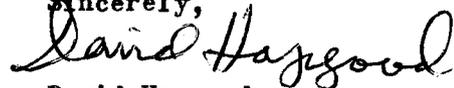
On Tuesday afternoon the soldiers staged a press conference for the foreign journalists. Its main purpose was to put forth their claim that Olympio's killing was accidental. "We are not assassins," Lieutenant Kongo said again and again. (It is interesting that this claim was not made for domestic consumption, but for the foreign press.) Kongo gave this version of the killing: Olympio started shooting at the soldiers who had simply come to arrest him; he fled into the garden, was captured, disarmed and told to dress; he went upstairs, dressed, and, again armed (how?), fled toward the Embassy and was shot to prevent his escape. In part, Kongo was clearly lying. Olympio was not dressed, the body was found in shorts and teeshirt. No arm was found near the body,

and it seems unlikely that Olympio could have gotten hold of a gun at that stage. And, at the time he was killed, Olympio was still within the block surrounded by the soldiers: he could not escape. He appeared to have been shot, from the front, at almost pointblank range. And Kongo's story does not fit easily with the pattern of gunfire that we heard. Yet it may well be that the veterans did not intend from the beginning to kill Olympio. It would have been entirely in character for Olympio to have fought to the end rather than to save his life by surrendering to men he despised.

Having said many times that the veterans were not "assassins", Kongo went to complain about foreign countries that did not believe them. Other African countries issued the usual presidential statements disapproving of the assassination of presidents. But Sekou Touré, to his credit, went much further in his denunciation: he even announced three days of national mourning in Guinea. Kongo said the military could not accept representatives from Guinea "unless Touré changes his attitude". After all, he said, the veterans were "revolutionaries". What, someone asked, was the purpose of this revolution? Kongo reflected for a moment and then came out with what is by now a conditioned reflex in African politics. "I would say," he said, "that it is a revolution in the direction of African unity."

Whatever happens now, it seems certain that the good Sylvanus Olympio did was interred with his bones. The new government will have to find money, not only for the veterans, but for the government employes and perhaps for a palace or two. Presumably it will raise the money by making Togo what Olympio did not want Togo to be: another African client-state. France seems the likeliest patron, but if the French are not interested, perhaps someone else will be. (A hanger-on of the military group suggested to me that the United States might perhaps like to "offer aid that would be disinterested...") Within Togo, real power of course rests with the armed veterans. What happened here, preceded a month ago by the military settlement of the crisis in Senegal, makes it look as if West Africa is following the sorry precedent set by Latin America.

Sincerely,



David Hapgood