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978-0-521-88238-5 - Foreign Intervention in Africa: From the Cold War to the War on Terror

Elizabeth Schmidt

Excerpt

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Introduction

For many outsiders, the word *Africa* conjures up images of a continent in crisis, riddled with war and corruption, imploding from disease and starvation. Africans are regularly blamed for their plight. They are frequently viewed as being intolerant of ethnic and religious differences but accepting of corruption and dictatorship. They are often presumed to be unwilling or unable to govern themselves. This book challenges such popular myths. By examining the historical roots of contemporary problems, the book demonstrates that many of the predicaments that plague the continent today are not solely the result of African decisions but also the consequence of foreign intrusion into African affairs. Focusing on foreign political and military intervention in Africa during the periods of decolonization (1956–75) and the Cold War (1945–91), with reflections on the later periods of state collapse (1991–2001) and the “global war on terror” (2001–10), this book advances four central propositions.¹

First, as colonial systems faltered, imperial and Cold War powers vied to control the decolonization process. While imperial powers hoped to transfer the reins of government to neocolonial regimes that would continue to serve their political and economic interests,

¹ Portions of this book have appeared in my contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War* (2013), ed. Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde, and are reproduced here with the permission of Oxford University Press. The post-Cold War periods are dealt with more extensively in my book, *From State Collapse to the War on Terror: Foreign Intervention in Africa after the Cold War* (Athens: Ohio University Press, in progress).

Cold War powers strove to shape a new international order that instead catered to their interests. Although independence struggles and their aftermath were dominated by local issues, Cold War intervention rendered the conflicts more lethal and the consequences longer lasting. Second, as the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended, African nations were abandoned by their Cold War allies. They were bequeathed a legacy of enormous debt; collapsed states; and, in many cases, deadly competition for the spoils. While indigenous prodemocracy movements challenged warlords and autocrats, foreign actors both helped and hindered their efforts. Neighboring states and regional, continental, and transcontinental organizations supported opposing sides in the war-making and peace-building processes. Third, the global war on terror, like its Cold War antecedent, increased foreign military presence on the African continent and generated new external support for repressive governments. Fourth, throughout the periods under consideration, foreign intervention tended to exacerbate rather than alleviate African conflicts and to harm rather than help indigenous populations. Even international humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts were marred by conflicting interests that sometimes hurt the people they were intended to assist.

In considering these propositions in relation to the case studies that follow, readers should bear in mind several caveats. Although four discrete historical periods have been described, in reality, events do not fit into neat time frames but progress unevenly. Some African states began to collapse even as the Cold War raged – particularly during the economic crises of the 1980s – and in some areas, the war on terror commenced even before the September 2001 attacks on the United States. Just as historical periodization is necessarily imprecise, terminology can be complicated by multiple meanings. The book's title, *Foreign Intervention in Africa*, refers not only to military terrain and the corridors of power but also to the struggle for African hearts and minds. For the purposes of this study, *foreign* refers to alien political powers rather than individuals. Sometimes these powers are external to the continent. In other instances, the term describes the relationship of one African country to another. *Intervention* implies a relationship with an imbalance of power. It is not synonymous with engagement, involvement, or influence, which reveal nothing about the power dynamics of the relationship. Foreign intervention occurs

when a dominant country uses force or pressure to interfere with and exert power over the affairs of a weaker sovereign entity. In many cases, force is employed when political pressure fails. Sometimes intervention can be viewed in a positive light, such as when powerful nations intervene to halt a genocide or to help maintain the peace. More often it has negative connotations, such as when powerful nations intervene to conquer, colonize, overthrow governments, install new ones, or plunder resources.

During the periods of the Cold War and decolonization, the most significant intervention was extracontinental. The United States, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, Cuba, and the former colonial powers embroiled themselves in countless African conflicts. During the period of state collapse, countries outside the African continent continued to implicate themselves in African affairs, often under United Nations (UN) auspices. However, the most consequential foreign intervention during this period was intracontinental. African governments, sometimes assisted by extracontinental powers, supported warlords, dictators, and dissident movements in neighboring countries and fought for control of their neighbors' resources. The African Union and regional bodies regularly intervened to broker, monitor, and enforce peace agreements, their personnel sometimes profiting from the strife. With the onset of the war on terror, extracontinental intervention again became the most salient form. In all cases, external interests altered the dynamics of internal struggles, often escalating local conflicts into larger conflagrations, with devastating effects on African peoples.

Three other points should be borne in mind. First, governments are not sentient beings with desires, will, and the capacity to act. Yet the need for shorthand sometimes leads to the personification of political structures and the occasional reference to governments as actors. Second, governments are not monolithic. There is often dissension within and between branches of government. Policies are contested, and outcomes are the product of struggle. The good intentions of some quarters may be thwarted by the realpolitik of another. Humanitarian rationales may be genuine – or used to mask broader strategic and economic interests. Third, foreign intervention cannot occur without internal collaboration. To effect change in African countries, foreign governments must form alliances with indigenous actors who benefit from the relationship, whatever the cost to the rest of the population.

Historical Background: Situating the Book

Although this book begins with the Cold War, the history of foreign involvement with Africa has deep roots. Africans have engaged with peoples from other continents for thousands of years. Much of this interaction cannot be termed intervention, and much of it was mutually beneficial. The development of commercial and cultural exchanges is a case in point. Nearly 2,000 years before the common era, Egypt participated in a trade and communications network that embraced the Persian Plateau, the Indus Valley, and lands as far away as China. By 800 BCE, Phoenician trade routes spanned from Egypt to Morocco, and by the first century of the common era, Africans on the Indian Ocean coast had developed commercial links with the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, and India, establishing a trading complex that eventually extended to China and Indonesia. North Africans were an integral part of the Greek and Roman worlds, where goods, ideas, and cultural practices traveled in all directions and brought many shared benefits. World religions also spread into Africa, transforming the African religious landscape and assuming new forms as they absorbed indigenous beliefs and practices. During the first three centuries of the common era, Judaism expanded into Ethiopia, while Christianity spread into Egypt, Ethiopia, and across North Africa to the Maghreb. In the seventh and eighth centuries, Islam began to take root in North Africa, whereas in later centuries, Muslim merchants extended its reach along the East African coast, into the Sudan and the Horn of Africa, and across the Sahara Desert into West Africa.

Unlike commercial and cultural exchange, other forms of foreign contact clearly involved dispossession and the loss of sovereignty. These unequal relationships can properly be characterized as intervention. Centuries before the common era, Egypt was forcibly incorporated first into the Persian and then into the Greek Empires. By the first century BCE, all of North Africa had been absorbed into the Roman Empire, following the defeat of indigenous rivals. Arab conquests began in the seventh century of the common era. By the middle of the sixteenth century, Turkish conquests had rendered the Ottoman Empire the dominant power in North Africa. During the same period, Ottomans and Portuguese vied for control of East African port cities and the lucrative Indian Ocean trade, bolstering their respective positions by forming alliances with indigenous political forces.

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Externally driven slave trades, like conquest, can be considered foreign intervention. They, too, were dependent on African collaborators for success. Beginning in the seventh century CE, Arab-dominated trading networks exported millions of Africans from the northern and eastern parts of the continent to the Arabian Peninsula, Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean islands, and India. Other nexuses transported West Africans across the Sahara Desert to North Africa and the Mediterranean. Arab-led slave trades lasted through the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, the European- and Euro-American-dominated trans-Atlantic slave trade, which spanned the mid-fifteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, forced more than ten million Africans into slavery in the New World. Millions more died in slave raiding wars, in transit to and inside coastal holding stations, and during the treacherous Middle Passage.

The distinction between foreign involvement and intervention can be blurred. Economic interactions have sometimes precipitated foreign intervention. As the trans-Atlantic slave trade waned in the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution took off in Western Europe and North America, stimulating a new interest in Africa. Industrial and commercial concerns from the Northern Hemisphere targeted the continent for its rich natural resources and potential markets. While African producers and merchants prospered from the new “legitimate” trade, indigenous strongmen also took advantage of the increased opportunities for wealth and power, which were enhanced by the influx of modern European weapons. Competition among Africans for control of lucrative trade routes resulted in war and instability in many parts of the continent, while heightened demand for labor to produce cash crops generated new forms of indigenous servitude. As European powers vied with one another for control of African resources, government officials worried that informal spheres of influence could no longer protect their countries’ economic interests. The Berlin Conference was convened in 1884–85 to stave off the threat of an intra-European war. Without a single African present, representatives of European political and commercial interests mapped out plans to establish “effective occupation” and formal colonial administration throughout the continent, claiming for their countries a share of what Belgian King Leopold II called “this magnificent African cake.”²

² Quoted in Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 58.

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The scramble for Africa was unleashed with a new wave of foreign intervention. By the first decades of the twentieth century, most of the continent had been conquered, colonized, and placed under European control. France, Britain, Belgium, Portugal, Germany, Italy, and Spain had established regimes to extract African wealth – especially rubber, cotton, minerals, and oils – and to force Africans to provide the labor and taxes necessary to keep the system afloat. Once again, African responses were varied. Indigenous political leaders whose powers were threatened, and peoples whose land, labor, and livestock were alienated, generally resisted the imposition of European authority. Those jockeying for position or those who had been oppressed or marginalized by indigenous rulers or rivals sometimes sought alliances with the new rulers. Responses varied across time and space. Any given individual might resist, acquiesce, accommodate, or collaborate depending on the circumstance.

Focus of the Book

The balance of forces began to change during World War II, sparking the postwar period of decolonization, which encompassed the middle decades of the twentieth century. Wartime exactions had resulted in increased hardships for African populations, as they were forced to provide labor, resources, and soldiers to support the European war effort. Propaganda promoting democracy and self-determination, the experiences of African military conscripts, and economic distress led to widespread resistance after the war. For many European powers, the political and economic costs of colonial rule increasingly seemed to outweigh the benefits. As the “wind of change” blew across the continent during the postwar period, African nations in growing numbers achieved political independence.³ Although most attained independence in the 1960s, others remained under European rule until the mid-1970s. Majority rule was not instituted in the settler-dominated territories of Southern Africa until the 1980s and 1990s. With varying degrees of success, the former imperial powers attempted to

³ In 1960, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan famously announced that “the wind of change is blowing through this continent, and, whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.” Quoted in Frank Myers, “Harold Macmillan’s ‘Winds of Change’ Speech: A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Policy Change,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 565.

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control the decolonization process, just as they had asserted their authority over African political and economic processes during the colonial period.

As colonialism collapsed, the contemporaneous Cold War brought a new surge of foreign intervention to the continent. The Cold War was characterized by political competition, economic rivalry, and military friction between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as their respective allies. Although direct military confrontation between the two superpowers did not erupt, the Cold War period was punctuated by proxy wars in the developing world, where internal actors were supported by external powers. Just as the periods of decolonization and the Cold War overlapped, so, too, did the major participants. The major extracontinental players in the decolonization process were the colonial powers, in particular, France, Britain, Belgium, and Portugal. During the Cold War these countries were allied with the United States through their membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The settler regimes in Southern Africa (South Africa and Rhodesia) played the Cold War card in an attempt to protect their quasi-colonial systems of white privilege. The United States, which hoped to replace the imperial powers as the dominant external force in Africa, bridged the decolonization and Cold War processes. Wavering between its European allies and moderate African nationalists, the United States strove to keep both radical nationalism and communism at bay. The Soviet Union and other communist countries sided unabashedly with African liberation movements, although they differed over strategy and choice of partners. Eastern Bloc nations like Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), which played critical roles as weapons suppliers, followed the Soviet line. Cuba, which was deemed by the West to be no more than a Soviet proxy, often took an independent course. Yugoslavia, though communist, rejected Soviet hegemony, as did the People's Republic of China after the 1960s Sino-Soviet split. Standing apart from both imperial and Cold War powers, Israel followed its own agenda, aligning with the former colonial powers to attack Egypt during the 1956 Suez War, supporting newly independent nations with military and economic aid in the early 1960s and establishing close ties to apartheid South Africa as Israel became increasingly isolated after the June 1967 Six-Day War.

Other countries and international bodies refused to take sides in the East-West struggle yet played critical roles in the decolonization

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process. The Non-Aligned Movement, composed primarily of developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, supported the emancipatory program of African colonies, and some member nations gave material support to African liberation movements. The Organization of African Unity (OAU), composed of independent African states, promoted national liberation in territories still under colonial or white-minority rule, providing liberation movements with military, economic, and diplomatic support. The Nordic countries and international bodies such as the UN and the World Council of Churches offered humanitarian and other nonmilitary aid to the Southern African liberation movements, helping to tip the balance toward independence and majority rule.

All of these outside powers became embroiled in the internal affairs of numerous African countries in the decades following World War II. Although domestic and regional conflicts and national liberation struggles centered on local issues, they were played out in the context of the Cold War. External interests altered the dynamics of internal struggles as Cold War tensions were superimposed on local ones. Small-scale conflicts escalated into full-scale wars armed and financed by opposing sides in the geopolitical struggle. The result was widespread destruction and instability, with consequences that continue to plague the continent today.

Some of these interventions resembled past imperial practices, with more powerful nations attempting to exploit Africa and its riches for their own ends. Former colonial powers and the United States tended to support regimes that opposed communism and left colonial economic relationships intact – even when they were corrupt or repressive. Western patronage was often based on the willingness of local actors to serve as Cold War allies and regional policemen, providing military bases for Western use and thwarting radical movements among their neighbors. With fewer means at its disposal and less intrinsic interest in the continent, the Soviet Union generally increased its presence in response to escalated Western involvement. It supported movements and regimes that declared themselves in favor of scientific socialism and a Soviet-style model of development – regardless of their internal practices – as well as radical nationalist regimes that were shunned by the West. Although deemed by the United States to be following the Soviet lead, Cuba often took an independent route, not always to the liking of its Soviet ally. China favored African political parties, movements, and regimes that opposed Soviet influence and ideology.

Their mutual opposition to the Soviet Union sometimes resulted in awkward alliances among China, the United States, and apartheid South Africa.

Although this book focuses on foreign political and military intervention in Africa, the problems that plague Africa today cannot be properly understood if the impact of foreign intrusion into African economies is ignored. Unequal exchange between African commodity producers and industrialized countries is a legacy of the colonial era that has contributed to the deep impoverishment of African populations. The inequality inherent in these economic relationships persisted after political independence in a system that has been characterized as neocolonialism. In the words of Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, neocolonial states had "all the outward trappings of international sovereignty," while their economies and political programs were "directed from outside."⁴ Entrenched economic inequalities were exacerbated by the steep rise in oil prices in the early 1970s and the worldwide collapse in commodity prices at the end of that decade. As exporters of primary products and importers of manufactured goods, African nations suffered severe balance of trade deficits, which were compounded by inflated military budgets, corruption, and economic mismanagement. With few alternatives available, many governments turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and Western governments and commercial banks for assistance.

Foreign aid came with strings attached. Motivated by free market ideologies that were intended to bolster global capitalism, Western-dominated international financial institutions imposed draconian stabilization and structural adjustment programs on African nations as a condition for foreign loans. Private banks generally required the IMF's seal of approval before granting loans of their own. Development agencies attached to Western governments and international nongovernmental organizations dependent on government funds refused assistance to projects that did not conform to free market or "neoliberal" norms. All of these institutions required the implementation of economic development models in which African populations had no say. In what was broadly referred to as the Washington Consensus, in reference to the home of the IMF, the World Bank, and the

⁴ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1966), ix.

U.S. government, these neoliberal programs curbed government involvement in the economy, ending subsidies, price controls, and tariffs; undermining health and educational services; and destroying social safety nets. Mandated currency devaluations resulted in spiraling inflation and shortages of imported goods. Stipulated privatization programs resulted in widespread layoffs, rising unemployment, and an upsurge in crony capitalism. These measures had devastating effects on the most vulnerable members of society. Moreover, because the structural adjustment programs were imposed from above – and thus were inherently undemocratic – the balance of power was tipped in favor of governments with the coercive means to impose unpopular measures. Foreign intervention in African economies not only resulted in increased economic hardship for many but also stimulated the installation of politically repressive regimes.

The wave of neoliberal economic interventions that began in the late 1970s, like their neocolonial antecedents, constituted a fundamental denial of African sovereignty. More than a decade earlier, Nkrumah had described neocolonialism as “the worst form of imperialism. For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress.” He had warned that “a State in the grip of neo-colonialism is not master of its own destiny.”⁵ Such characterizations were equally true of the neoliberal policies imposed by Western-dominated international financial institutions, governments, and agencies in a later period and the African states that implemented them.

Massive foreign debts incurred by African governments in the 1970s and 1980s continued to take their toll in the early decades of the twenty-first century. In many cases, the borrowed money was consumed by corrupt leaders, spent on extravagant showcase projects or on military rather than economic development. Nonetheless, successor governments were forced to service the debts with scarce foreign currency, exhausting export earnings, foreign aid, and new foreign loans. Debt servicing to foreign governments, banks, and international financial institutions continued to consume a large portion of African government revenues, which could not be allocated to essential services, let alone economic development. Although foreign intervention into African economies is not a central focus of this book, it is the critical backdrop to the crises of the 1980s and 1990s, which

⁵ Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism*, x, xi