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

Elizabeth Schmidt

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## Foreign Intervention in Africa

*Foreign Intervention in Africa* chronicles the foreign political and military interventions in Africa during the periods of decolonization (1956–75) and the Cold War (1945–91), as well as during the periods of state collapse (1991–2001) and the “global war on terror” (2001–10). In the first two periods, the most significant intervention was extracontinental. The United States, the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and the former colonial powers entangled themselves in countless African conflicts. During the period of state collapse, the most consequential interventions were intracontinental. African governments, sometimes assisted by powers outside the continent, supported warlords, dictators, and dissident movements in neighboring countries and fought for control of their neighbors’ resources. The global war on terror, like the Cold War, increased the foreign military presence on the African continent and generated external support for repressive governments. In each of these cases, external interests altered the dynamics of internal struggles, escalating local conflicts into larger conflagrations, with devastating effects on African peoples.

Elizabeth Schmidt is Professor of History at Loyola University Maryland. She is the author of *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946–1958* (2007), which received the African Politics Conference Group’s 2008 Best Book Award, and *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939–1958* (2005), which received Alpha Sigma Nu’s book award for history in 2008. Her 1992 book, *Peasants, Traders, and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870–1939*, was awarded a special mention in the Alpha Sigma Nu book competition for history, was a finalist for the African Studies Association’s Herskovits Award, and was named by *Choice* an “Outstanding Academic Book for 1994.”

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# Foreign Intervention in Africa

From the Cold War to the War on Terror

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Elizabeth Schmidt

*Loyola University Maryland*

Foreword by William Minter



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Cover photograph: Angolan soldier with Soviet-made AK-47 Kalashnikov submachine  
gun, guarding Soviet-made ground-to-air missiles near Cuito Cuanavale, Angola,  
February 29, 1988 (Pascal Guyot/AFP/Getty Images)

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editors of *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War* (2013), offered constructive comments on my contribution to their volume, which helped me to write a more polished, expanded account in this book. Many thanks to Oxford University Press for allowing me to use excerpts from my contribution to their book in this one.

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## Foreword

Foreign intervention, as this survey by Elizabeth Schmidt makes clear, is no simple concept to define. The reality is no less complex than the definition. Even in the periods of the slave trade and of established colonial rule, the dominant powers from outside the continent had to take account of local realities. African societies defeated on the battlefield and subordinated to economic coercion found ways to resist, adapt to, or manipulate the presence of outside powers.

From 1945 to 1991, most of the period covered by this book, the Cold War between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, dominated world politics. Outsiders often viewed African conflicts as reflecting this global contest. Although superpower competition may have been the dominant factor in European confrontations, in Africa the realities did not fit as easily into a bipolar framework. The colonial powers retained influence and had their own distinct interests as their control over the continent diminished. The Soviet Union led a coherent bloc including most of Eastern Europe. However, other communist powers, including Yugoslavia, Cuba, and China, had their own foreign policies, based on distinct interests in Africa. Most significantly, African nations themselves, along with Asian and Latin American countries, shared an alternate dominant narrative based on anticolonialism and nonalignment between the superpowers. Different nations within Africa, and different political forces within each country, had their own interests, which led them to seek international alliances and sometimes invite external intervention against domestic enemies or neighboring countries.

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No continent-wide account of this complex period could even come close to being “complete.” However, Schmidt’s wide-ranging review of multiple case studies succeeds in paying due attention to nuance without getting bogged down in detailed narratives and academic disputes.<sup>1</sup> In each case, the historical record allows for differences among historians and social scientists in evaluating the scale and character of external intervention and the relative influence by external and internal actors on the outcomes. Assessments of the damage done or the possible positive effects of intervention also vary depending on who is doing the evaluation. Most would probably agree on the horrific negative balance of the slave trade and of colonial rule, particularly when combined with expropriation of land and property by European settlers, and most would probably agree with Schmidt’s considered judgment that in most cases external intervention from 1945 to 2010 brought more harm than benefit. However, sharp disagreements will undoubtedly continue in evaluating particular interventions, past, present, or future.

In my personal opinion, the 1979 overthrow of Idi Amin in Uganda by Tanzanian troops, for example, was more justified than would have been a failure to intervene, although subsequent events made clear that it was hardly a solution to Uganda’s problems. Similarly, in my judgment, the intervention of Cuban troops in Angola in 1975 to counter Central Intelligence Agency and South African intervention, and their role in subsequent years in protecting Angola against attacks by South Africa and the UNITA rebels, was also justified. Moreover, if the international community had not failed to intervene against the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, hundreds of thousands of lives probably could have been saved.

All such judgments admittedly depend on incomplete evidence and hypothetical reasoning about the options not chosen, as well as on value judgments of both observers and participants. What should be clearly rejected, however, are simplistic accounts that reduce events to a simple story of dueling outside interventions or a clear dichotomy between external and internal causes of conflict. The postcolonial wars in Angola and Mozambique, for example, which I analyzed in *Apartheid’s Contras*, were neither simply civil wars nor conflicts among proxies of the United States, Soviet Union, Cuba, and South Africa.

<sup>1</sup> Full disclosure: I served as a consultant on this book project, reviewing drafts, discussing the topics, and raising difficult-to-answer questions with the author.

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Instead, internal, global, and regional conflicts intersected in complex patterns, which shifted over time. Moreover, as many scholars have demonstrated with more finely grained analyses, in each country these wars featured local realities with their own distinctive features.

For the policy analyst or social justice activist trying to make sense of and support or oppose today's interventions, factual information is almost always incomplete, and the motives of those involved are mixed. There are no simple formulas. Supporting (or opposing) an intervention simply because the United States, the African Union, or the United Nations supports it, for example, would be a recipe for ignoring the realities of particular cases and the contradictions within the policies of these states and institutions themselves. The concept of a purely humanitarian intervention simply to aid innocent civilians, with no political or military implications, is an illusion. An intervention with a limited mandate, such as to protect corridors for relief supplies, may or may not be justified in a particular case. Yet it will have political consequences; it will weaken some forces and strengthen others. So, of course, will unilateral or multilateral interventions designed to combat terrorism, reverse a coup against an elected government, or "protect civilians" against human rights abuses by a repressive regime or a rebel movement. However, ruling out all interventions ignores the fact that inaction also affects the outcome of any conflict, by deferring *de facto* to the most powerful and ruthless forces on the ground. The balance of forces between governments and rebel movements, whatever their ideological orientation or extent of abuses against civilians, is affected by their structural links to the outside world, including political and economic as well as military ties. Finally, the failure of diplomatic action, which should be the first resort, may also lead to enormous human costs.

There is no alternative to making fallible judgments about particular cases. The human suffering from some conflicts does indeed "cry out" for intervention. Yet the consequences of actual interventions can appall even those who called for the interventions in the first place. It would be easier if there were some formula to tell us which interventions would alleviate human suffering and increase the possibility that people would get a chance for a fresh start and which interventions should be opposed because of ulterior motives or the high probability of making things worse. If, as I believe, such reliable formulas do not exist, it is better to recognize that, and then get on with sorting out our messy and inevitably inconclusive collective judgments on specific

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cases. As a corollary, we must recognize the likelihood of ongoing disagreements among humanitarians, progressives, and people of goodwill. If “dialogue” is needed among internal parties to a conflict, it is equally essential among outsiders, including not only representatives of states and multilateral agencies but also national and international civil society.

In the context of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the danger of too much intervention or bungled intervention seems more likely than the danger of no intervention at all. The impetus to intervene is coming not only from outside governments, most notably that of the United States, in response to real or imagined terrorist threats. It is also coming from African governments and rebel movements, which are increasingly turning to African regional organizations; the United Nations; and bilateral suppliers of arms, training, and security personnel (both public and private). Increased multilateral involvement in conflicts both within and across borders is no doubt inevitable. However, the outcomes are as uncertain as ever. The consequences are far too great for the decisions to be made by governments behind closed doors, without transparency and input from a wider range of voices, particularly those most affected.

Today, in comparison to much of the period covered in this book, modern communications technologies allow for more transparent decisions, more consultation, and better checks on the ulterior motives of parties to a conflict and of those who volunteer to be peacemakers. Whether this opportunity leads to better decision making depends, first, on the decision makers themselves. It also depends on the capacity of media and scholars to provide deeper analysis that rejects simplistic solutions and on local and international civil society to sustain the pressure for genuine human security.

William Minter

Washington, D.C., June 20, 2012



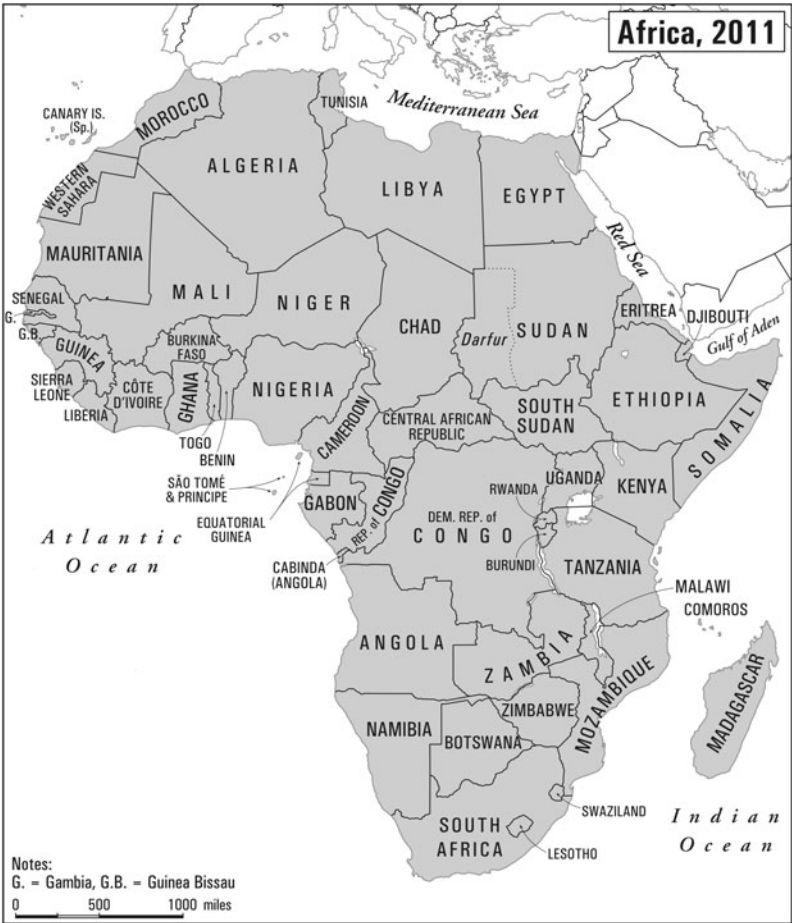
Abbreviations

AFDL	Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire
AFRICOM	U.S. Africa Command
ANC	African National Congress (South Africa)
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
CFA	African Financial Community
CGT	General Confederation of Labor (France)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CJTF-HOA	Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa
CONCP	Conference of Nationalist Organizations of the Portuguese Colonies
CONSAS	Constellation of Southern African States
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EACTI	East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative
ECOMOG	Economic Community Monitoring Group (Liberia)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean People’s Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian Popular Revolutionary Democratic Front
EUCOM	U.S. European Command
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FLN	National Liberation Front (Algeria)
FNLA	National Front for the Liberation of Angola
FRELIMO	Front for the Liberation of Mozambique
FROLINAT	Front for the National Liberation of Chad
GUNT	Transitional Government of National Unity (Chad)
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MDRM	Democratic Movement for Malagasy Restoration (Madagascar)
MNC	Congolese National Movement
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola

NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OEF-TS	Operation Enduring Freedom–Trans Sahara
PAIGC	African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde
PCF	French Communist Party
PSI	Pan-Sahel Initiative
RDA	African Democratic Rally
RENAMO	Mozambique National Resistance
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
RUF	Revolutionary United Front (Sierra Leone)
SACP	South African Communist Party
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADCC	Southern African Development Coordination Conference
SADF	South African Defence Force
SDECE	External Documentation and Counterespionage Service (France)
SPLM	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement
SWANU	South West Africa National Union (Namibia)
SWAPO	South West Africa People’s Organization (Namibia)
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front (Ethiopia)
TSCTI	Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative
TSCTP	Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence (Rhodesia)
ULIMO	United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy
UN	United Nations
UNITA	National Union for the Total Independence of Angola
UNITAF	United Task Force (Somalia)
UNOSOM	UN Operation in Somalia
UPC	Union of the Peoples of Cameroon
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USPACOM	U.S. Pacific Command
WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People’s Union



**MAP 0.1.** Africa, 1947. (Map by Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis.)



**MAP 0.2.** Africa, 2011. (Map by Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis.)