

BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth Schmidt. *Foreign Intervention in Africa after the Cold War: Sovereignty, Responsibility and the War on Terror.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018. xxiv + 462 pp. Photographs. Maps. Glossary. Suggested Readings. Index. \$36.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0896803213.

Elizabeth Schmidt's critical review of foreign political and military intervention in the African continent, *Foreign Intervention in Africa after the Cold War: Sovereignty, Responsibility and the War on Terror*, is a must read. In using the designation "foreign," the author is referring to actors who intervene in the affairs of a specific sovereign state who are not formally part of that state. This includes other states within and beyond the continent, multilateral organizations, and a variety of non-state actors such as rebel, irridentist, and mercenary groups and terrorist/extremist organizations/movements. While her focus is on political and military intervention, Schmidt describes and explains these actions through the complementary lenses of history and critical political economy.

Put simply, post-Cold War intervention in the continent represents both continuity and change. Indeed, the story Schmidt tells is only too well known: Africa continues to be a global battleground for hearts, minds, and resources. The results of these struggles, though played out in very different locations, are disappointingly similar: foreign intervention does more harm than good, largely because the motives are selfish, despite claims to the contrary. Across thirteen chapters, Schmidt shows how and why foreign political and military intervention makes things worse for the average citizen. This, too, is nothing new to the student of Africa. Why, then, is this book a "must read"? In my view, it is because the author manages to bring together a massive amount of information across a highly diverse socioeconomic and political landscape, organize it around a very persuasive set of propositions, and present it in a highly readable and compelling way. The concise "suggested reading" essays at the end of each chapter are worth the price of purchase alone.

This book, therefore, will appeal to a very wide audience, from the lay person looking for a sensible way into the complex question of why so much of the African continent seems always to be in upheaval, to regional experts interested in comparative studies and specialists seeking a handy one-stop

shop for information and clarification. Far from presenting a dry delivery, Schmidt's book struck me as the sort of non-fiction book the British novelist Hilary Mantel would write if she were a scholar of Africa. Indeed, Schmidt's book is a little like Mantel's Man-Booker prize-winning novel *Bringing Up The Bodies*; both are densely packed with information, require a glossary, maps, and other signposts to keep the players and geographies straight, and present a gripping plot full of intrigue, twists and turns, and missteps leading to senseless death. Both also deliver a frustrating ending which is far more important in the currently lived reality of African societies and states.

To tell this rather grim tale, Schmidt organizes the book in a way that is most helpful to the reader's understanding. The first three chapters constitute the foundation upon which the case studies are built. Chapter One describes the long, fraught engagement of outsiders with the African continent. In this chapter, she sets out her four central propositions: (a) "free market austerity policies, imposed by international financial institutions acting through weak postcolonial states during decolonization and the Cold War, contributed to deadly struggles over power and resources in the post-Cold War period" (7); (b) "the war on terror, like its Cold War antecedent, increased foreign military presence on the African continent and generated new external support for repressive governments" (7); (c) "although US counterterrorism initiatives cast a long shadow they were not the only foreign interventions in Africa during this period" (8); and (d) "during the period under consideration [1991 to 2017] foreign political and military intervention in Africa often did more harm than good" (8).

Chapter Two describes the post-Cold War context, where Schmidt clearly shows how "[t]he continent, its peoples, and its resources again became the object of internal and external struggles in which local concerns were frequently subordinated to foreign interests" (25). Justifications for foreign engagement, she says, reside in one of two dominant discourses: the response to instability/responsibility to protect (most prominent in the pre-9/11 context); and the war on terror (especially after 9/11).

Chapter Three usefully identifies the actors (ranging from powerful states or coalitions of states to global, regional, and subregional organizations, to international Jihadist organizations and their African affiliates). The next eight chapters present African case studies: Somalia; Sudan/South Sudan; Rwanda; DRC; Liberia and Sierra Leone; Côte d'Ivoire; the Arab Spring (including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco); and Mali and Nigeria. Chapter Twelve focuses on U.S. Africa policy, while Chapter Thirteen reflects on the first steps of the Trump administration in Africa. Schmidt ends the book with a short conclusion.

While Schmidt refrains from offering any specific policy advice, she returns time and again to a central point: the pursuit of self-regarding external interests cannot bring lasting peace or prosperity to the people of the African continent. Every external actor comes in for harsh criticism, especially all post-Cold War American administrations. Whether it is Clinton or Bush, Obama or Trump, U.S. policy paradoxically supports both instability

and the spread of terrorism across the continent. The “war on terror” era came to look suspiciously like the “Cold War” era, with Western powers willing to turn a blind eye to the excesses of “friendly” governments, with friendship defined in terms of an African state being a source of strategic resources (oil, natural gas, or uranium), providing markets for American goods, or offering a beachhead or bulwark to support the “war on terror.”

A quick scan of the state of the continent via the International Crisis Group’s website CrisisWatch (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch>) shows how little has changed since Schmidt’s book went to press. In a critical assessment of the Trump administration’s foreign policy performance, Stephen M. Walt paints a bleak picture that never even mentions Africa (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/05/trumps-final-foreign-policy-report-card/>). But out of sight does not mean out of mind, as continuity of policy has been the hallmark of U.S. policy toward Africa. What is to be done? Schmidt offers no guidance in this direction, but she has provided an important knowledge base to help progressive scholars/activists, civil society organizations, and policy makers within and beyond the continent to shape their actions in support of more lasting and positive outcomes.

Larry A. Swatuk
University of Waterloo
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
lswatuk@uwaterloo.ca

doi:10.1017/asr.2021.129

If you liked this, you may also enjoy:

- Duursma, Allard. 2019. “Mediating Solutions to Territorial Civil Wars in Africa: Norms, Interests, and Major Power Leverage.” *African Studies Review* 62 (3): 65–88. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.103>.
- Ibhawoh, Bonny. 2020. “Refugees, Evacuees, and Repatriates: Biafran Children, UNHCR, and the Politics of International Humanitarianism in the Nigerian Civil War.” *African Studies Review* 63 (3): 568–592. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.43>.
- Inman, Kris. 2020. “Evidence, Weak States, and Identifying Terrorists after 9/11: Africans in the Crosshairs of America’s War on Terror.” *African Studies Review* 63 (2): 424–29. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.21>.