

The Skull Beneath the Skin: Africa After the Cold War. Mark Huband. Boulder, CO.: Westview Press. 2001. 408 pp.

Mark Huband, a British journalist, offers a detailed, if tendentious, account of Western contributions to the current African predicament. The author intends to illuminate the role of Western Cold War foreign policy toward Africa during and after the Cold War as the main cause of the relative durability of dictatorships across the continent.

Huband divides the book into four parts. In Part I, entitled “Empty Promises,” he elucidates the United States’ Cold War role in propping up corrupt dictatorships in Zaire and Liberia, and in aiding UNITA, an Angolan insurgent group. The core of his argument is that the United States overestimated the Soviet Union’s stake in each of these countries, causing US officials to make erroneous assumptions about the nature of different political groups in Africa. Therefore, he reasons, the United States’ Cold War policy in these nations actually amounted to destructive meddling and support of ruthless tyrants and insurgents of no actual strategic value.

In Part II, “Time of the Soldier,” Huband argues that the military regimes that survived and succeeded in this Cold War politics purposefully factionalized ethnic groups as a political tool in Burundi, (then) Zaire, Nigeria, and Liberia. This has contributed to those countries’ current struggles with transitions to democracy. In Part III, “Blood of the Ancestors,” Huband delves deeper into these strategies to show how political leaders in Rwanda, (then) Zaire, and Kenya reinvented ‘tradition’ to exacerbate ethnic rivalries in order to divide groups whose unity likely would have threatened the incumbent rulers. Huband explains that the source of ethnic rivalry, including that between Hutus and Tutsis in Burundi and Rwanda, springs more from these political strategies than from deep-rooted indigenous conflict. That is, for Huband, relations among pre-colonial ethnic groups tended to be less contentious than those manipulated by the European colonial powers and post-colonial African rulers.

In Part IV, entitled “New World, Old Order,” Huband’s analysis uncovers interesting questions about whether the end of the Cold War could foster the end of Western ‘meddling’ in Africa, whether the West is in fact interested in a policy that will benefit Africans, and what should be done about failing states. This is the most useful but also the most limited aspect of the book. In this analysis of the West’s post-Cold War policy, Huband largely limits his focus to the behavior of countries like the United States and France and multilateral organizations like the United Nations. Based on the post-Cold War policy of these formal actors, Huband offers a cautiously optimistic forecast for 21st century Africa. More importantly, however, he fails to take into account new forces whose influence in post-Cold War Africa is pervasive: international financial institutions (IFIs), such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and transnational firms.

IFI conditional loans typically demand political and economic liberalization. But previous research has found that aid flows from IFIs to regimes, as in the Cold War politics that Huband describes in the first part of the book, do not depend on levels of corruption or human rights abuses. Thus one has reason to question whether or not conditional loans will yield meaningful reform. Moreover, trade liberalization has not meant that predatory transnational firms cease dealing with corrupt African rulers who oligarchically control resources and commerce while formal state institutions collapse. In fact, case studies show that Liberia’s Charles Taylor used partnerships with transnational firms to assert authority in Liberia and West Africa in lieu of functional institutions. Huband could also have shown in his case study

of Zaire in Part I how Mobutu Sese Seko's relations with foreign firms in Zaire even then stood in as a proxy for actually developing state institutions and instead produced conditions that were a threat to already-fragile African regimes.

Huband's prescription for African politics is two-fold: first, he suggests that Africa needs to become free from foreign influence. Second, he suggests that continued democratization and democratic consolidation are necessary to promote political pluralism. Both notions are idealistic, yet flawed. In spite of the tentative withdrawal of official foreign government forces from Africa after the Cold War, economic globalization and foreign firms show no sign of abandoning the continent. More problematic for Huband is the fact that the increasing integration of African states into the global economic system further decentralizes foreign forces that affect African domestic policy. This makes it still more difficult to know precisely at whom blame ought to be levied. The blanket recommendation of democratization and democratic consolidation is wishful, but also reckless if applied to countries with long histories of instability, institutional weakness, and simmering ethnic conflict. In fact, elections in places like Congo-Brazzaville and Cote d'Ivoire have played significant roles in generating violence and increased state weakness and instability, even as they help promote reform in countries like Kenya that already are relatively stable.

The Skull Beneath the Skin offers neither an innovative theoretical framework nor a rigorously tested one. Problematically, Huband's sample of cases is not random; he carefully selected cases in which Western policy fostered detrimental effects on the continent. Useful for comparative purposes would be a section highlighting cases on the post-Cold War fates of African states that were Cold War clients of the Soviet Union. The journalistic aspect of Huband's account of the West's role in Africa's post-Cold War stakes, however, is successful in its descriptive nature. Academics may find this unsatisfying, but those interested in an accessible text about Africa's ills will find it useful.

Overall, Mark Huband's *The Skull Beneath the Skin* offers a well-compiled set of cases illustrating the consequences of foreign intervention on Africa. Students of African politics, international relations, and those with a general interest in Africa will find this to be a useful book. Indeed, Huband's careful account of events and circumstances witnessed on the ground during ten years of study and living on the continent is valuable to better understanding the realities Africans face today. Future research should build on Huband's work by investigating globalization's marginalization of Africa and ordinary Africans in the global economic order.

Patrick Johnston
Northwestern University