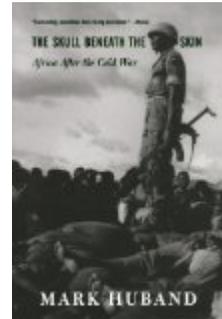


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark Huband. *The Skull beneath the Skin: Africa after the Cold War*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2001. xi + 376 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-3598-8; \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-4112-5.

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Published on H-Africa (May, 2004)



Strictly speaking, this book is not an academic work; it was written by a journalist who had been reporting on various parts of Africa for a decade. One would wish, however, that every academic book could be as well researched and documented as this one. The overall mood of the book is hardly optimistic. This is expressed in the titles of its parts and chapters: “Empty Promises,” “The Deadly Harvest,” “Blood of the Ancestors,” and “Genocide.” Mark Huband seeks to follow and analyze major developments in tropical Africa in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War. At that point, in his opinion, Africa was “orphaned by the superpowers” (p. xi), but for the first time in history had “its destiny as a continent of nations ... in its hands” (p. xi). By that time “the vast majority of people faced detachment from the source of power” and movement for democracy in the following decade was resisted “most wholeheartedly by the incumbent regimes,” while “a large part of the blame for the intransigence of Africa’s despots can be laid at the doors of the foreign powers which lent vital credibility to some of the worst leaders the world has ever known” (pp. x-xi).

Indeed, Huband puts responsibility for how those regimes evolved during the Cold War, at least partly, “on outside powers—the United States, France, Belgium, the former Soviet Union, Portugal, Britain, Libya, South Africa, or a juggled combination of these states” (p. x). (However, it should be noted that Libya is hardly an outside power.) In particular, he believes that the Western democracies were ready to connive “in the destruction and squandering of Africa’s mineral and cultural riches” (pp. x-xi). The author has no doubt that “stability on the continent will only be achieved if African countries are left to find their own solutions to the problems they face” (p. xi). Unfortunately, however, “the malaise that

faces Africa today” (p. xi) has gone so far that, even if the solutions are found by Africans themselves, they can hardly be achieved without benevolent support from the outside world. Unfortunately, as Huband convincingly shows, such support was missing in the 1990s.

The first part, “Empty Promises,” contains three chapters concerning Mobutu’s Zaire, Angola during the Cold War, and U.S. involvement in Liberia, respectively. Hardly accidentally, it begins with the first direct U.S. involvement in the nascent civil war in Angola, relating the departure of the U.S. C-141 military transport to Zaire with the 25-ton loads of weapons for Unita in July 1975. Huband considers the beginning of the American support for Unita “the first dose of poison that was to be fed into the veins of Angola” (p. 1), the first piece of a regional network which “depended upon the enthusiastic complicity of African states,” including the Zairean president Mobutu Sese Seko and, after the 1980 coup in Liberia, “our man in Monrovia” (p. 63), Samuel Doe—“bought off with bribes, official aid, and military assistance” (p. 2).

Analyzing the situation in Angola after the Bicesse accord, Huband writes: “The election was held, Unita lost, and Jonas Savimbi’s troops transformed Luanda into a bloodbath,” and while “one superpower had collapsed ... the other was interested only in easing its way out of the catastrophes its policies had done so much to create” (p. 33). However, the author has not freed himself from old propaganda clichés. Thus, he rightly put an emphasis on the word “assumption” when he writes: “the United States had decided [in 1975] to back the FNLA first and then Unita, in both cases apparently on the assumption that the MPLA would take Angola into the Soviet bloc” (p. 37). However, describing his meeting with the TASS

correspondent in Luanda in 1993, Huband calls the correspondent “a chronicler of the last days of the defeated Cold War power’s African ‘empire’” (p. 31).

For the most part, Huband’s assessment of Soviet actions in Africa and their motives is erroneous. For example he claims that Moscow refrained from “committing significant material support [to the MPLA during the anticolonial struggle] in order to avoid damaging its own relations with Portugal” (p. 36). At that time, however, the Soviet Union had no relations with Lisbon whatsoever. Neither does he substantiate his claim that six thousand Soviet military advisors arrived in Somalia in the 1970s (p. 280).

The second part of the book, “The Time of the Soldier,” is devoted to the role of armies in Africa. It deals with the ethno-social conflict in Burundi, the role of colonial powers in “the creation of Hutu and Tutsi” (p. 97), and the rule of the military in Zaire and Nigeria. The last chapter in this part, “The Deadly Harvest,” describes the civil war in Liberia. In his introduction to part 3, “Blood of the Ancestors,” Huband states that African dictators in the 1990s “sought to prove both that democracy would fuel tribalism and that their own continued presence as heads of state was essential, if the stability of the nation state was to be maintained” (p. 159). An eye-witness to tragic events in Rwanda in 1994, he exposes local extremists, guilty of genocide, and what he calls “the UN’s betrayal of Rwanda” (p. 214). Huband sees the emergence in Africa after the Cold War “of two political trends, one propagated by tribalists seeking to create multiparty systems based upon the distribution of political power in a manner reflecting national tribal complexion, and the other marked by a resurgence of various forms of nationalism,” with moderates and extremists in each camp (p. 218). From this point of view he analyzes developments in Zaire/DRC and Kenya.

Finally, the fourth part of the book has a rather provocative title—“New World, Old Order.” Huband writes: “As the proxy wars became civil wars, the truth became clear, that not only was the ‘New World Order’ a misnomer owing to its limited applicability, but also it represented much of the same desire to impose order from outside as had the old order of the Cold War” (p. 250). However Huband shows that this “desire” is difficult to satisfy. He writes about “American frustration at the refusal of Sudan to succumb to diplomatic pressure following closely on the heels of the U.S. and the UN fail-

ure in Somalia” (p. 267). In his opinion the U.S. cruise missile attack on the al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory on the outskirts of Khartoum in 1998 “exposed an uncontrollable vengefulness in the part of U.S. military planners,” while some European diplomats, who knew that the factory had no links with Bin Laden, condemned the attack (p. 260).

Equally false, according to Huband, was the excuse advanced by Washington for its military intervention in Somalia in late 1992. He quotes General Shaheen, the Pakistani head of the UN force that had arrived in Mogadishu weeks before the U.S. marines: “the operation stinks of arrogance. All this bullshit about 80 percent of food being looted and all that—it’s all very well stage-managed by the United States.... This whole operation is a test case for future conflict resolution. It’s as if the US had a vaccine they wanted to test. Now they have found an animal to test it on” (p. 294). So, if this was a test, Huband vividly describes how and why the United States failed it.

Though the United States emerges from the book as the main force still trying to impose order from outside on Africa, the last chapter of the book is devoted to French policy on the continent. The author’s critical assessment is reflected in his title, “France, Africa and a Place Called Fashoda.” The reference to a humiliation France suffered over a century ago is used by Huband to underline what he sees as a strategic blunder of French foreign policy—its assistance to the former government of Rwanda in 1990-94. The policy finally “left France on the sidelines as the political-military roller coaster launched by genocide led to the subsequent collapse of the entire Great Lakes region and the eventual toppling of Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire in 1997” (p. 318).

In his conclusion the author expresses a view that may appear to contradict his previous arguments. It is one strikingly distinct from the mainstream of African studies in recent years, but one that undoubtedly should stimulate further research: “for many African states the question remains as to whether or not single-party rule on the continent was really the product of the Cold War, and thus ripe for dissolution once the Cold War was over, or whether in fact it was a form of rule that derives its justification from an African tradition of the warrior-chief. If the former, then clearly an alternative had to be found. If the latter, then why should it be dissolved, just because the Berlin Wall had fallen down?” (p. 329).

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Citation: Vladimir Shubin. Review of Huband, Mark, *The Skull beneath the Skin: Africa after the Cold War*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

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