

## Intelligence in Public Media

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### **White Malice: The CIA and the Covert Recolonization of Africa**

Susan Williams (PublicAffairs Hachette Book Group, 2021), 651 pages, maps, photographs, list of acronyms, list of archives, notes, selected bibliography, index.

### **Reviewed by Charles Long**

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More than 75 years since CIA's founding, intelligence officers and students continue to reflect on the agency's legacy and accomplishments, many of which still cannot be fully explored in the public domain. One such chapter is CIA's role in Africa during the Cold War. Dr. Susan Williams is an accomplished academic and researcher who explores this important period in *White Malice: The CIA and the Covert Recolonization of Africa*. Williams is the author of *Spies in the Congo* (2016), which was about Office of Strategic Services' efforts in World War II to control the Belgian Congo's uranium and keep it from reaching Nazi Germany. Based in part on OSS archives, it was favorably reviewed in these pages and is a favorite of CIA officers working Africa.<sup>a</sup>

*White Malice* focuses primarily on the overthrow and eventual assassination of Congolese Premier Patrice Lumumba by his Congolese rivals and secondarily on the overthrow of Ghana's first prime minister, Kwame Nkrumah, by the Ghanaian military. She draws on a wide range of sources, including declassified CIA and UN archives, US congressional investigations, interviews (conducted by others) of former CIA personnel, books of two former CIA officers involved in operations in Cold War Africa, and even *Soldier of Fortune* magazine.

Williams' superior research skills are evident as she lists a panoply of programs, organizations, and individuals that she concluded were part of a CIA effort to destabilize newly independent African countries. US government policy and actions in Africa back then were often a few steps behind those of Soviet and East Bloc rivals. Soviet programs to influence and manipulate the emerging African leaders and governments were quite formidable. Yet Williams' book is comparatively less generous

in depicting this adversarial landscape of the Soviets that CIA faced in Africa. Readers may consider reading the Africa-focused sections of Christopher Andrew and former KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokhin's excellent book, *The World Was Going Our Way* to develop a balanced view of competing US and Soviet efforts in Africa.<sup>b</sup>

Alleged CIA involvement in the death of Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba is an old story. Williams offers nothing new or compelling to prove that, despite the wide range of options explored by the US government, CIA had anything more than official relations with Congolese forces that overthrew Lumumba or that CIA had a hand in Lumumba's murder by Katangan rivals on January 17, 1961. To back up her contention that CIA was involved, she draws on the memoir of Larry Devlin, CIA chief of station in the Congo at the time.<sup>c</sup>

Devlin had a front row seat to the events in the Congo. He is also Williams' main villain, and she often treats him as a hostile witness. She frequently relies on Devlin's accounts of the events to build her arguments, yet broadly dismisses the memoir by claiming that "the book is incomplete and unreliable," (224) that "many examples of claims made by Devlin in his memoir do not hold up to scrutiny" (327), and that "it would be a mistake to rely on (his) memoir for any kind of truth." (347) Williams demonizes Devlin as "a CIA official who was cold-bloodedly plotting the death of the democratically elected prime minister of the country." (330) As the Senate investigation of CIA activity in the Congo determined in its detailed report, "there (was) no evidentiary basis for concluding that the CIA conspired in this plan or was connected to the events in Katanga that resulted in Lumumba's death."<sup>d</sup> The CIA did not act alone, as the White House and US

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a. See David Foy, "Review: *Spies in the Congo: America's Atomic Mission in World War II*," *Studies in Intelligence* 60, no. 4 (December 2016). Also at <https://cia.gov/static/1ad4ff4038891a50db48493ed1ff1b2f/review-spies-in-congo.pdf>

b. Christopher Andrew, Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (Basic Books, 2005), 423–70. The book was reviewed in Hayden Peake's "Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf" in *Studies* 50, no. 4 (December 2006)

c. Larry Devlin, *Chief of Station, Congo: A Memoir of 1960–67* (PublicAffairs, 2007).

d. "The Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, Foreign and Military Intelligence," Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders, report, no. 94-4655, 94th Cong., 1st Sess. (United States Congress, 1975), 48.

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government contemplated options to remove or eliminate Lumumba, CIA supported and ultimately benefited from his overthrow by Mobutu.

A chapter in this book that grabs significant attention is Williams' shaky claim that CIA made use of famed musician Louis Armstrong's US Information Agency-sponsored visit to the Republic of the Congo in October 1960 as a means of concealing actual CIA operational meetings in Katanga and Kamina. Williams bases this on speculation and a circumstantial chain of events that she maintains "would have been an ideal opportunity for secret meetings." (328) Like several other alleged CIA and US government transgressions listed in her book, the charges are easy for her to make but harder to disprove more than 60 years later.

After an uplifting opening chapter set in Accra during Ghana's independence, Williams recounts Kwame Nkrumah's governance, Pan-African leadership, and relations with Lumumba. These passages are insightful and valuable for students of African independence movements. Ultimately, Nkrumah became increasingly authoritarian. As Williams notes, some policies like the Preventive Detention Act of 1958 disturbed some of his most loyal supporters. (186) While Nkrumah visited Beijing in February 1966, he was overthrown by Ghanaian military officers. Williams draws on the memoir of John Stockwell, former CIA officer turned critic, to place responsibility for the coup squarely on CIA. The charges are unconvincing and appear based on accusations remarkably similar to the propaganda once used by the KGB during the Cold War.

Williams underplays the significant release in a 2013 volume of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series of formerly classified information about CIA covert action programs and paramilitary and air support to the Congolese government to quell provincial rebellions; many rebellions were communist-aided.<sup>a</sup> Some other key conclusions are circumstantial and highly speculative, such as "despite the barriers, it is reasonable to assume

that ... an agreement was made" (297–98) and "No evidence is available to suggest that the CIA was involved in the publication ... but it is a reasonable speculation." (314–15) Using a declassified 1961 CIA financial expense report and accompanying certification statement for travel expenses, Williams places CIA at a Congolese military camp in Thysville, where Lumumba had been held and alleges that "CIA was therefore involved in events in January 1961, a fact that Devlin frequently denied." (387–88).

Extrapolation and conjecture aside, *White Malice* offers useful background on Ghanaian and Congolese independence and pan-African movements. Williams provides a broad bibliography and a useful list of archives to enable further study into US policy and activity in post-colonial Africa. With the exception of the author's more sensational claims, some CIA officers and intelligence followers come away from this book impressed with the range of the activity and the resourcefulness of officers in an intelligence service that had been formed fewer than 20 years earlier and that operated in a continent not well known to Americans.

Williams has lived in Africa and knows of intelligence in an academic sense, but this does not give her clear insights into the realities and limitations of foreign intelligence activity in Africa nor factors such as ethnic-based sectarianism and other conditions that affect such activity. In blaming CIA for so many of the events, Williams often understates the responsibility of many African protagonists. Although newly independent, they had agency. Readers who admired *Spies in the Congo* may find several disappointing instances of bias and hasty judgments in *White Malice*. CIA officers and students of intelligence and of post-colonial Africa should nevertheless consider reading *White Malice*, not necessarily to get a balanced view of CIA activity in Africa during the Cold War, but to be aware of the many misconceptions and distortions of that activity recirculating in the public domain.



*The reviewer:* Charles Long is the pen name of a retired CIA operations officer who served in Africa.

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a. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIII, Congo, 1960–1968* (Government Printing Office, 2013). CIA Historian David Robarge reviewed the document in 2014: "CIA's Covert Operations in the Congo, 1960?1968: Insights from Newly Declassified Documents" in *Studies in Intelligence* 58, no. 3 (September 2014). Available at <https://www.cia.gov/static/b0454a75708171d0f7e59d3e63ef7a8b/CIAAs-Covert-Ops-Congo.pdf>.