

Spies in the Congo: America's Atomic Mission in World War II

Susan Williams (Public Affairs, 2016), 332 pp., cast of characters, locations, abbreviations, codewords, notes, index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

While the US effort to develop the atomic bomb, usually referred to by the umbrella term the Manhattan Project and headed by Army MG Leslie Groves, is becoming better-known to the public, certain aspects of that compelling story remain largely in the shadows—partly by design, partly by neglect. Susan Williams's *Spies in the Congo: America's Atomic Mission in World War II* shines a welcome light on one aspect of the tale—namely, the resolute US desire to control the highest-quality and quantity of uranium ore available in the world in order to ensure that the all-important ore did not reach Nazi Germany, working on its own atomic weapons program. *Spies in the Congo* focuses on the Shinkolobwe mine, source of the world's highest-purity uranium ore, located in the then-Belgian Congo and operated by the Belgian firm Union Miniere. The particular emphasis in Williams's volume, however, is on the mission given to CIA's forerunner, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and its agent operations in the Belgian Congo to keep the uranium out of the clutches of Hitler's scientists, several of whom were world-class physicists. Williams's study of a little-known OSS contribution to the US war effort was made possible in part by the 2008 release of the Official Personnel Files (OPFs) of 35,000 OSS officers, among other records—such as the collection of 8mm films shot and retained by the “lead spy.”

Throughout the course of World War II, the OSS deployed 93 agents to the continent of Africa—the one who figures most prominently in *Spies in the Congo* is Wilbur “Dock” Hogue, a Firestone engineer by training before joining the Secret Intelligence (SI) Division of OSS early in the war. Hogue, or as he was better known, TETON—a pleasant memory of his formative years in Idaho—arrived in Leopoldville, Belgian Congo (now Kinshasa, Zaire), in November 1943. He began setting up agent networks in Liberia and the Ivory Coast as a means of fulfilling his assigned mission—to spy on enemy agents and devise effective means to expand US intelligence operations in the area, collecting secret military and economic infor-

mation. His “extra” mission—and the focus of Williams's book—was to prevent enemy seizure of the uranium ore during its transit from the Shinkolobwe mine to the United States. To preserve arguably the most important secret of the war, neither Hogue nor any of his accomplices were ever told why uranium was so important, only that it was so sensitive that they were never to use the term in either oral or written communications and to use “diamond smuggling” (also a legitimate concern in Africa) as a euphemism. By the time Hogue arrived in the Congo, Groves had tasked the Army's Counterintelligence Corps (CIC, or the “Creeps,” as colleagues referred to them) with the all-important job of securing atomic intelligence secrets; the particular responsibility fell to LTC Boris Pash, a military intelligence officer whose Intelligence and Security Division personnel investigated over 1,500 cases of “loose talk” between September 1943 and December 1945.

Although President Roosevelt had approved MG William “Wild Bill” Donovan's request to send an OSS officer to Africa in November 1941, it took a while to find the right individual. Hogue had replaced several less effective predecessors, some of whom had been—oddly enough—renowned ornithologists in the United States, their bona fide occupation serving as handy cover for their operational activities, allowing them to travel throughout the area without suspicion. Dock Hogue was aided in his operations by Accra, Gold Coast station chief Doug Bonner (CRUMB), and especially by the selection of Shirley Chidsey (ANGELLA), a very capable deputy in Leopoldville. When Hogue arrived in the Belgian Congo, he was challenged by the 242 different languages spoken by the populace of 15 million, only 30,000 of whom were white; by the Belgian tendency to play both-ends-against-the-middle throughout the war; by the rampant racism in the Congo at the time; and by the hostility displayed toward OSS operations both by the State Department representatives (“festering mistrust” is the descriptor the author used) and by British Special Operations Executive (SOE)

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personnel, who by war's end had been superseded by their OSS counterparts.

By the fall of 1944, Hogue had learned that the feared scenario had occurred—some Belgian companies in the Congo—one of them Union Minière—had sold uranium ore to the Germans. Groves had known this information since January, when OSS officer Morris “Moe” Berg, of baseball fame, had confirmed that 700 tons of uranium ore had been delivered to Duisberg, Germany, which, with the small stock of inferior ore to which the Germans had access in Czechoslovakia, might be enough to build a bomb. A subsequent, dedicated bombing raid leveled Duisberg, but the question of Belgian complicity in the German atomic bomb program was a volatile postwar topic—over 1,200 people were sentenced to death for such activities, 242 of whom were actually executed. Groves also was compelled to intervene to prevent Belgian officials from exposing the secret relationship with the Allies, and in a secret White House ceremony in 1946, President Truman awarded the Medal of Merit to Edgar Sengier, the New York-based managing director of Union Minière, to recognize the company's contribution to the allied war effort.

As the pace of activity in the Congo accelerated, Hogue argued for more personnel and “clout” to reflect the significance of the mission, and in July 1944, the consulate in Leopoldville was elevated to a consulate general, indicative of a rising US stake in the Congo. As a result of the apparent indiscretions of a cutout, Hogue's true mission in the Congo was compromised, and he was ultimately deemed *persona non grata* and compelled to leave, turning operations over to Henry Stehli (LOCUST), who had joined the OSS team in the Congo the same month. Hogue's return to the United States in September 1944 was also impelled by three attempts on his life by German assets. At home, he wrote a report summarizing his activities in the Congo, highlighting the lack of support from the American consul general.

The nagging questions that had prompted US intelligence involvement in the Congo early on in the war were finally resolved in November 1944, when the United States learned that not only did Germany *not* have the atomic bomb but was unlikely to develop one. This welcome news came almost simultaneously from Pash's Alsos team—which interrogated Union Minière managers from the Shinkolobwe mine—and from an OSS mission known as AZUSA; neither entity was aware of the other's

existence. Pash's personnel seized the German uranium stocks and shipped them to the United States. Meanwhile, Berg—tasked with the assassination of leading German atomic theoretician Werner Heisenberg—decided he was not a threat and aborted the mission. By this time, US authorities had already dismissed Japan as an atomic threat, although the prescient worrywart Groves was already concerned about Russian atomic bomb development efforts. The British Joint Intelligence Committee estimated it would be at least 1954 before the Soviets could conduct an atomic test, which closely paralleled CIA assessments. The fact that some 50 people privy to the secrets of the Manhattan Project—notably including Donald Maclean, second secretary at the British Embassy in Washington from 1944 to 1948 and a Soviet spy—provided program information to the Soviets was unknown at the time. At this juncture, Williams makes the important point that it was primarily the lack of uranium ore that stifled both Japanese and German development of the atomic bomb.

The author begins her final chapter by stating that the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima was constructed with uranium from the Congo—as she quotes President Truman, “We spent \$2,000,000,000 on the greatest scientific gamble in history, and we won.” (218) She then shifts focus to address the fact that several of those closest to the uranium ore—physically and occupationally—died early deaths. Dock Hogue died at age 42 of stomach cancer. His replacement in the Congo in 1944, Henry Stehli, died at age 52 of brain cancer, and Doug Bonner died at age 58. Whether or not their premature deaths were due to exposure to the radioactive uranium ore is left unanswered, as is the fate of the Congolese workers and Union Minière managers who were constantly exposed to the threat. The only exception to the “rule” was Major Adolph Schmidt, the Accra station chief later in the war, who lived to age 96.

In the “Postscript,” the author notes that the Shinkolobwe mine remained the “best source” of US ore throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s. In the latter decade, US military and civilian authorities remained so concerned about the importance of the ore that they dispatched \$7 million worth of military supplies to bolster Belgian troops in the Congo and gifted the first nuclear reactor in Africa. The mine and its ore has remained a political and foreign policy shuttlecock in the decades since, and although it is closed now, freelance miners still dig

uranium and cobalt from the mine, exposing themselves to dangerous levels of radiation.

Spies in the Congo is a welcome addition to the genre of World War II history and the first book to tackle this important and overlooked subject. Although Groves's 1962 book *Now It Can Be Told* touches on the subject, *Spies in the Congo* is the sole definitive book on the topic. Equally important, it pays tribute to a sizable number of individuals who labored in obscurity—then and until now—and under dangerous conditions to fulfill their mission with no other explanation than that it was “important.” As the thorough bibliography attests, Ms. Williams—a senior research fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London—has mined both primary and secondary sources, with numerous references to archival collections and to NARA records. The “Cast of Characters” section and the “Locations with Changed Names” are both gifts to the reader, as are the short, easily-digestible chapters. *Spies in the Congo* is Williams's fifth book—her previous works include *Ladies*

of Influence (2000), on elite women in interwar Britain; *The People's King* (2003), on the abdication of Edward VIII; *Colour Bar* (2006), on the founding president of Botswana; and most recently, *Who Killed Hammarskjöld? The UN, the Cold War and White Supremacy in Africa* (2011). The author has published widely on Africa, decolonization, and global power shifts in the 20th century.

Flaws in the book appear few and generally minor. For example, when the author describes “the Farm” in Maryland (4) where Hogue received his initial OSS training, informed readers may be thinking of another facility besides (likely) the site of the Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, and there is no further explanation. This reader also at times found himself thinking that the book kept straying from its stated theme by turning to distracting peripheral topics such as African colonialism and racism, French politics, and even Russian attempts to acquire the uranium ore—perhaps understandable, given her background and previous works.



