

Intelligence in Public Media

Nos chers espions en Afrique (Our Dear Spies in Africa)

Antoine Glaser and Thomas Hofnung (Fayard, 2018), 239 pages.

Reviewed by William Brooke Stallsmith

Like the United States, France is a member of the select club of countries with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, nuclear weapons, and an intelligence apparatus with global ambitions and reach. Unlike US leaders, French policymakers and spy services assign a top priority to Sub-Saharan Africa, reflecting 150 years of colonial, postcolonial, cultural, economic, political, and people-to-people ties. In *Nos chers espions en Afrique* (Our Dear Spies in Africa), journalists Antoine Glaser and Thomas Hofnung offer a detailed look at how, where, and why the French External Intelligence Service (DGSE—Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure—the country’s premier foreign intelligence service) and other spy agencies operate in Africa.^a

Much of the book’s focus is on the DGSE’s major role in French military operations in Africa. In Chad, for example, Glaser and Hofnung say the DGSE provided “the decisive intelligence support that saved the Chadian President” from rebels in 2008. They quote a colonel attached to the service’s *antenne*^b in N’Djaména: “I was in the operations center with Chadian officers. I had my direct communications with Paris. I received French information and I knew the rebels’ position to the very centimeter, minute by minute. I transmitted this strategic data to the Chadian general staff.” (19–20) In Mali, where since 2013 Paris has deployed thousands of troops, dozens of military aircraft, and hundreds of vehicles, Glaser and Hofnung highlight the intricate and often contradictory ties the DGSE’s paramilitary Service Action—counterpart of CIA’s Special Activities Center—has developed with both the beleaguered and ineffective Bamako government and Tuareg tribal militias in campaigns to roll back local branches of al-Qa’ida and the Islamic State. (75–82)

The DGSE and its sister services the French Internal Security Service (DGSI—Direction générale de la sécurité intérieur) and the Military Intelligence Service (DRM—Direction du renseignement militaire)—use a

wide range of tactics to pursue Paris’s main non-military interests in the former French colonies, according to *Nos chers espions*. A top priority is maintaining access to critical energy sources.

- In oil-producing Congo-Brazzaville, President Denis Sassou-Nguesso has enjoyed “powerful godfathers” in the DGSE and other power centers in Paris (26) during his four decades dominating the country. These ties are reinforced by a network of Corsican businessmen—“honorable correspondents” of the DGSE who, while collecting secrets and supporting operations, benefit from well-connected friends in both Paris and African capitals. (83–87)
- In Gabon, another petrostate, the late president Omar Bongo considered himself “an integral part of our [DGSE] services.” When Bongo died in 2009, the DGSE was intimately involved in the clan and political maneuvering to select a new president, ultimately the old man’s son Ali. (32–34)
- Niger is the main source of the uranium that fuels nearly three-quarters of France’s electricity supply. According to *Nos chers espions*, French support of the Niamey government has included having the DGSI surveil the activities in Paris of a Nigerien journalist critical of President Mahamadou Issoufou. The Nigerien leader has reciprocated by providing France (and other Western powers, including the United States) with on-the-ground reporting on terrorists and by rendering other, unspecified services. Issoufou reportedly noted in this context, “In human intelligence, you [France] always need someone smaller than yourself.” (43–45)

Notwithstanding these and other continuities, the intelligence ties between France’s former African colonies have changed in some significant ways since the turn of the century. *Nos chers espions* details at length the aggressive marketing by Israeli firms—in a mutually supportive relationship with Mossad—that has eroded

a. All translations in this review are the author’s. The book is not available in English.

b. A DGSE *antenne* corresponds to a CIA station.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

what had been a French monopoly in providing SIGINT, other technical gear, and close protection training to countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Togo, and Guinea. (119–28) French officials have also admitted their dependence on overhead surveillance provided by US intelligence agencies, described as “determining for our operations” in the Sahel and for hostage rescue missions in Somalia. (129–30)

The DGSE's relations with other French agencies and the profile of its personnel have also evolved, albeit unevenly. Glaser and Hofnung describe “diplomats and spies as an unnatural couple,” (143) but they also document how the DGSE has increasingly integrated its work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Senior diplomats now routinely serve as the DGSE's director of strategy, which in turn seeds the MFA with top officials who “speak DGSE” and “understand the tool box that its services have.” (145–47) Relations with the armed forces have been rockier, even though DGSE is, bureaucratically, part of the Ministry of Defense. Bad blood between the Service action and French Special Forces is chronic, aggravated by harsh operating conditions in Africa. The uniformed services suspect DGSE of withholding critical information and accuse the DGSE of exhibiting a “superiority complex.” As for the DGSE, it fears the military will expose sensitive sources and methods. (159–78)

Many of the issues that Glaser and Hofnung describe in the French intelligence apparatus will be familiar to US intelligence professionals. Close liaison ties with a corrupt, brutal regime like Chad represent a moral and political minefield for a spy service from a country upholding universal democratic values, whether the French DGSE or the US CIA. Bureaucratic rivalries are inevitable between internal and external security services or between civilian and military organizations with similar goals and areas of operations. Also mirroring the experience of veterans of the US intelligence and military services, the French services—as well as private companies with operations in unsettled African locations—increasingly rely on personnel contracted from private companies, following a change in law making it easier for retired spies and soldiers to join such firms. (103–17)

But important differences remain between French and US intelligence practices, in Africa and elsewhere. Most notably, the DGSE and its sister services receive relatively scant legislative oversight; Glaser and Hofnung make no mention of any interaction between the French intelligence agencies and the Assemblée nationale or Sénat. Moreover, the DGSE has a much more military cast than the CIA—about a third of DGSE personnel are active-duty military. This is especially true in the Africa section, where “the dominant color . . . remains khaki” and the section's head at headquarters and the chiefs of field *antennes* are almost always military officers. (153) Finally, the DGSE's hands-on role in advancing the interests of French energy and other companies in Africa reflects Paris's traditionally interventionist approach to economic issues, which differs from how US administrations have framed similar issues—and from the way CIA formulates its operating directives.

The strengths and weaknesses of *Nos chers espions* both stem from the journalistic background of its authors. The book is rich in detail as it paints telling, human-scale portraits of how French and Africans alike view the intelligence relationship. However, this also means it relies heavily on the authors' access to sources. For example, this reviewer suspects Israeli activities receive extensive coverage because Israeli officials and businesspeople were willing to talk—in fact, boast—to Glaser and Hofnung about their exploits. For the same reason, there is an encyclopedic level of detail about “Franco-French” political maneuvering around the intelligence enterprise that might baffle anyone who doesn't regularly read *le Monde*. Russian and Chinese intelligence activities on the continent, on the other hand, get only scant mention, no doubt because no one from the GRU in Moscow or Ministry of State Security in Beijing was willing to grant an interview. The reviewer also caught one factual error—the claim that French deployments to Mali represent “the biggest military operation since the Algerian War”^a (151)—which made him wonder whether there were similar misstatements that he missed. Still, on balance, this book is a useful resource for anyone seeking a better understanding of a key US ally's role in combating terrorism and bolstering stability in Africa and of the part played by the DGSE and its sister services.



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a. As of mid-2020, France had deployed 5,100 troops to Mali. The French contribution to Operation Desert Storm in 1991 was 18,000.