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Congo's uranium Rich pickings

An intriguing account of why America was so interested in Congo in the 1940s

Spies in the Congo: America's Atomic Mission in World War II. By Susan Williams. PublicAffairs; 369 pages; \$28.99. Hurst; £25.

"A HOTBED of spies", remarked Bob Laxalt when he arrived in Léopoldville, capital of the Belgian Congo, in 1944. Why, wondered the fresh-faced young code officer for the American Consul-General, was his government so interested in this "dark corner of darkest Africa"? After all: "There's no war here."

Laxalt was not alone in his ignorance. America's interest in the Congo—and, specifically, in the resource-rich south-eastern province of Katanga—was one of the best-kept secrets of the second world war. Beneath its verdant soil lay a prize that the Americans believed held the key to victory. It was the race to control this prize that brought the spooks to Léopoldville. The Germans, they feared, might be after it, too.

The prize, Susan Williams explains in "Spies in the Congo", was uranium. Congo was by far the richest source of it in the world. As the architects of America's nuclear programme (the "Manhattan Project") knew, uranium was the atom bomb's essential ingredient. But almost everybody else was kept entirely in the dark, including the spies sent to Africa to find out if the heavy metal was being smuggled out of the Congo into Nazi Germany.

The men—and one woman—charged with protecting America's monopoly of Congolese uranium worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), an organisation set up by President Franklin Roosevelt as the wartime intelligence agency, and the precursor to what in peacetime became the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Ms Williams presents the reader with a large cast of characters, some of them quite eccentric. Wilbur Owings Hogue, a civil engineer and the OSS station chief in Léopoldville, was also a part-time author of popular fiction. Two of his colleagues were ornithologists. His assistant, Shirley Chidsey, was a friend of F. Scott Fitzgerald, who later inscribed one of his books for her.

The work these individuals undertook was dangerous. Hogue survived repeated assassination attempts. After the war ended, four of them—Hogue included—died young, quite possibly owing to exposure to nuclear radiation. Their work ensured that the essential Congolese ore (as far as is known) never reached Nazi Germany; without it, the Germans could not build an atom bomb. Yet their efforts went unacknowledged.

Ms Williams pieces together her history in forensic fashion. The result is a gripping, if occasionally dense, work that uncovers a world long cast in shadow. Yet it is no mere thriller. Much of what runs through "Spies in the Congo" will be wearily recognisable to the Congolese, and many Africans. America's early nuclear supremacy was dependent on African uranium, just as Europe's industrial pre-eminence had been sustained by African copper, iron and rubber. But Congo's role in this has been forgotten, deliberately erased from the historical record by officials hailing the success of the Manhattan Project following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Shortly after the war ended the focus of America's nuclear rivalry shifted. In 1949 the Soviet Union tested its own nuclear bomb, launching a new era for America, Congo and the rest of the African continent. Huge sums were pumped into Katanga to facilitate uranium export and to prop up Belgian defences. After Congo became independent in 1960 the CIA lingered there for decades to keep uranium and, later, other minerals out of Russian hands. Much of Congo's tragic late-20th-century history is attributable to these machinations. Thus in her account of this wartime scramble for African raw materials, Ms Williams tells a little-known story, but one with a terribly familiar ring—and ultimately devastating consequences.