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League and an “elitist” coalition dominated by the children of high-ranking officials from earlier eras and their allies in the business and entrepreneurial class. This is a helpful framework, but it does not always persuasively explain recent developments in Chinese politics or lead to convincing forecasts of the future. For example, the elitist coalition leaders Jiang Zemin and Zeng Qinghong helped pave Xi’s path to power, but since then, Xi has hardly repaid their kindness: he vilified and purged Jiang’s protégé General Xu Caihou and Xu’s followers, which suggests that Xi was more interested in dominating the military than in cooperating with Jiang. Li also argues that if Xi were to establish a dictatorship without sharing power, he would risk “robust resistance” from parts of the populist coalition. But Xi has placed trusted followers in key positions, which has presumably increased the costs and risks of defying him. Despite these problems with Li’s analysis, his book stands as a definitive study of Xi’s reign to date.

VICTOR SHIH

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## Africa

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### *Nicolas van de Walle*

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

BY SUSAN WILLIAMS. PublicAffairs, 2016, 432 pp.

**T**he uranium used to build the first U.S. atomic bombs came from the Shinkolobwe mine in Katanga Province in what was then the

Belgian Congo. The mine was attractive because it yielded an especially fine grade of uranium, and it would serve as a main source of material for the U.S. nuclear arms program well into the 1950s. The focus of Williams’ engaging book is the challenge posed by transporting thousands of tons of uranium 1,500 miles, by rail and truck, from the mine to the Atlantic coast, and then moving it by ship and airplane to the United States—all in the middle of World War II. After Belgium’s defeat and occupation by Germany, the Belgian Congo formally sided with the Allies. But the colony was not without its Nazi sympathizers, particularly when it seemed as though Germany might win the war. So the Americans also had to make sure that the Nazis did not find a way to tap into the area’s uranium mines for their own nuclear efforts. The story’s main players sometimes seem like stock characters: the handsome young American spy from Idaho; the mean-spirited, racist Belgian colonial official. But plenty of intrigue livens up the narrative, and Williams also offers a useful discussion of the strategic issues both sides faced.

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*This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime*

BY STEPHEN ELLIS. Oxford University Press, 2016, 256 pp.

Ellis, a British journalist and an accomplished historian of African affairs, passed away in 2015. This was his final work, and it characteristically combines mastery of the subject with elegant, lively writing. Despite its title, the book is not really about “organized crime,” at

least in the usual sense of that term, which denotes large, well-structured, hierarchical organizations engaged in illicit business. Instead, Ellis analyzes the fraud, political corruption, and general criminality that has plagued Nigeria for the last century, most of which stems from small, flexible networks of individuals. Emblematic of this kind of activity are the Internet-based scams that Nigerians perfected in the early years of this century, in which a con artist would promise someone a large sum of money if only the target would provide a much smaller amount up-front. Ellis reveals that Nigerians were at the forefront of such gambits as far back as 1920. More substantively, he skewers the culture of self-enrichment and brazen corruption that has plagued Nigerian politics since the country gained its independence.

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*Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*

BY OUSMANE OUMAR KANE.

Harvard University Press, 2016, 296 pp.

Medieval Timbuktu was a wealthy city whose great libraries allowed it to flourish as a center of learning and scholarship. Kane's compelling intellectual history of West Africa places Timbuktu within a much broader tradition of Islamic learning in the region, which was home to other medieval knowledge centers and which continues to advance the study of Arabic philology even today. Kane wants to show that West Africa has been much more central to Islam than has been typically understood. His wide-ranging book focuses on the intellectual traditions of the region and its role in the production

and circulation of key Arabic-language texts regarding religion, law, and ethics. Kane is far less interested in the political and economic history of the area, making only passing references to the trans-Saharan slave and gold trades that enriched it and to its colonization by France and the United Kingdom.

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*The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa*

BY KATE BALDWIN. Cambridge University Press, 2015, 253 pp.

Across contemporary Africa, modern states coexist with traditional institutions such as chiefdoms and kingdoms. Some of these predate colonialism, such as the kingdom of Buganda in Uganda. In other cases, colonial powers looking for clients to help them assert control, particularly in rural areas, elevated the status of existing traditional authorities or even simply invented new ones. Post-independence governments initially promised to eliminate what they viewed as retrograde, antidemocratic institutions. But most chiefdoms have survived, and in many cases, they have even gained in stature and legitimacy. As Baldwin notes in her exceptional new book, the region's democratization in the last two decades has paradoxically strengthened unelected traditional chiefs. With her creative use of different types of evidence, Baldwin argues convincingly that voters have come to appreciate how traditional chiefs serve as "development brokers" who lobby politicians for more social services and better infrastructure. For their part, politicians rely on chiefs for help in carrying out development

projects. Baldwin is a bit vague on the motivations of the chiefs themselves but argues that they generally avoid self-dealing out of a sense of commitment to their communities.

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*Omar al-Bashir and Africa's Longest War*  
BY PAUL MOORCRAFT. Pen and  
Sword Books, 2015, 232 pp.

Omar al-Bashir has ruthlessly ruled Sudan since 1989. In 2009, his alleged role in orchestrating mass violence against civilians in Darfur earned him the distinction of being the first sitting head of state to be indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. Moorcraft was granted a remarkable amount of access to Bashir and his closest advisers and presents the Sudanese president as a leader treated unfairly by the West and as an often reluctant actor in the terrible events that have marked his reign. It's an unpersuasive portrait and one that oddly makes Bashir seem not particularly interesting. Prior to the coup that brought him to power, Bashir was a career army officer, and the book focuses on military tactics and campaigns. More about Bashir's legendary skills as a political tactician and Machiavellian wielder of power—the keys to his remarkable longevity—might have made for a more valuable and credible book.

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## FOR THE RECORD

"Rethinking Nuclear Policy" (September/October 2016) mistakenly stated that no civilian officials had scrutinized the U.S. nuclear war plan since the early 1990s. In fact, such a review was carried out under President Barack Obama.

"The Crisis in U.S.-Israeli Relations" (November/December 2016) misidentified the university where Dov Waxman is a political scientist. It is Northeastern University, not Northwestern University. 🌐

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