

University at Albany, State University of New York

## Scholars Archive

---

History Faculty Scholarship

History

---

10-2012

### Periodizing Pretoria's Cold War

Ryan Irwin

University at Albany, State University of New York, [rirwin@albany.edu](mailto:rirwin@albany.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/history\\_fac\\_scholar](https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/history_fac_scholar)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Irwin, Ryan, "Periodizing Pretoria's Cold War" (2012). *History Faculty Scholarship*. 3.  
[https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/history\\_fac\\_scholar/3](https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/history_fac_scholar/3)

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@albany.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@albany.edu).

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Article Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 369

Published on 8 October 2012

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Jamie Miller. "Things Fall Apart: South Africa and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire, 1973-74." *Cold War History* 12:2 (May 2012): 183-204. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2011.649946. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2011.649946>

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR369.pdf>

Review by **Ryan Irwin**, Yale University

---

### *Periodizing Pretoria's Cold War*

Is there such a thing as African international history? To be honest, I'm not entirely sure. The theoretical richness of contemporary African historiography is undeniable; some of the best scholarship about imperialism and globalization has grown from African community studies, and few fields have better mined the rich insights of symbolic anthropology and cultural studies. But international history this is not. Beyond well-trod platitudes about corruption and colonialism, scholars know relatively little about the mechanics of most African political structures and almost nothing about the nature of (and barriers to) pan-African collaboration. Comparative analysis has filled in some of the blind spots, but large histories of cross-regional topics—drawing on multiple perspectives and archives—have gained little methodological traction.

Or at least it seemed that way a few years ago. Jamie Miller's essay, "Things Fall Apart: South Africa and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire, 1973-74," is part of a turn in the literature toward what might be called African foreign relations history. A graduate student at the University of Cambridge, Miller is writing a dissertation about Pretoria's political strategy between 1974 and 1980. His article here represents either a preliminary dissertation chapter or an early summary of his research findings. The crux of the argument is simple enough: Pretoria, which was economically stable with influence that stretched well beyond its borders, began the 1970s as one of the principle players in African affairs, only to remake itself into a militarized and isolated garrison state during the late 1970s. Miller focuses particularly on the impact of Portugal's April 1974 coup, which presaged the collapse of that country's African empire and set in motion conflicts that embroiled South Africa through the end of the 1980s. For Miller, the event was a turning point that not only altered Pretoria's tactical options, but also set the stage for the region's transformation into one of the most violent battlefields of the Cold War.

The originality of Miller's article rests more on its footnotes than its thesis. The essay opens with an overview of South African–Portuguese relations on the eve of the coup. Utilizing some interesting new archival data, Miller shows that Pretoria spent enormous sums trying to prop up Lisbon during the late 1960s and early 1970s, specifically 100.7 million rand on war supplies and 35 million rand on development programs in Angola and Mozambique, which matched about half of South Africa's annual defense budget and culminated in a five-year, 150 million rand commitment just months before Portugal's government collapsed. To protect these investments, South Africa placed Afrikaner military experts on Portuguese counter-insurgency councils in Angola and Mozambique and took control of Lisbon's equipment purchases and military spending. According to Miller, the arrangement had no hope of success. Administratively cumbersome and fiscally unwise, South Africa's willingness to subsidize Portugal's African misadventures all but assured the dissolution of the latter's empire.

The article then shifts attention to South African–United States relations. If the first prong of Pretoria's grand strategy focused on buttressing Lisbon against anti-apartheid insurgents from the north, the second prong tried to use Washington for protection in the international arena. Miller draws on a few published documents in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, specifically the Nixon administration's new southern Africa volume, but his research here is obviously a work in progress. Relying on secondary literature that skims over the place of decolonization, civil rights, and liberal internationalism, Miller depicts American policy as cynical, contradictory, and apathetic. He misses several opportunities to deepen his analysis. Most obviously, although Miller actually marshals evidence to show that South Africans were unusually confident when discussing apartheid with U.S. officials, he dismisses such thinking as "delusional" and ignores the ambiguities of global race relations in the aftermath of Africa's decolonization and America's civil rights movement.

The essay's final section turns toward internal South African politics. Miller draws an interesting contrast between two titans of apartheid South Africa—Prime Minister John Vorster and Defense Minister P.W. Botha—suggesting that the former planned to implement fundamental reforms to the apartheid system. This is a debatable assertion, but it helps Miller cast Lisbon's coup as the end of an era in South African foreign relations history. Vorster's embrace of détente in Africa, calibrated both to build alliances with black Africans and strengthen white rule in southern Africa, couldn't coexist forever alongside his support for colonialism in Angola and Mozambique. As South Africa's northern neighbors descended into civil war after 1974, Botha's supporters gained prestige within Pretoria by championing military self-reliance as the logical alternative to Vorster's multilateral diplomacy. The resulting power struggle culminated in Botha's ascension as Prime Minister in 1978. By the end of the decade, South Africa had increased defense spending 400%, setting the stage for the violence and isolation that transformed the region into a combustible cauldron of the Cold War.

Miller's article makes a nice addition to the literature. The prose could be more evocative and the claims need to be sharper, but the author has put together a sturdy piece of

scholarship that hints at a good dissertation topic. Was the Lisbon coup a turning point in African international history? This seems perfectly plausible, and Miller has found some important data to show the nature of South Africa's commitment to Portugal in the early 1970s. His larger causal linkages require more research and tighter argumentation. It would be nice, for instance, to see some Portuguese materials, which are mostly open to researchers in Lisbon, as well as perspectives from Accra, Dar-es-Salaam, and Lusaka, which would substantiate Miller's depiction of Vorster's outward policy. Also, considering the article's emphasis on high-level diplomacy, the correspondence of top officials would be helpful, as would South Africa's (easily accessible) parliamentary records. As it stands, the essay's evidence is mostly suggestive, and the project seems primed for a fuller exposition of Pretoria's policymaking processes.

Beyond research, there are bigger questions for Miller to consider. The most obvious is probably the most important: Why does this story matter? Or, if Miller's essay *is* part of a larger turn in the literature, why should other international historians take notice? Is the author updating the canonical scholarship of James Barber and John Barratt or doing something fundamentally new? If Miller's intention is to update Barber and Barratt's *South Africa's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, 1990), it would be useful for him to explicate how his archival research adjusts their claims, lest some readers gain the impression that he's merely retelling the familiar narrative with more quotes and new data. What do the archives tell us about the forest? Alternatively, if the author is writing an international history designed to engage global historians, it might be useful to elaborate the context around South Africa between 1974 and 1980. Miller might think, for instance, about the role of nonstate actors in these years, especially within the ascendant post-1976 anti-apartheid movement, or reflect on how decolonization and globalization—processes that crested in distinct yet interlocking ways during the late 1970s—impacted events in southern Africa.

By framing the significance of his claims precisely, Miller's contribution will only grow bolder. The author has the outlines of an excellent dissertation topic on his hands. This reviewer eagerly awaits the larger project.

**Ryan M. Irwin** is the Associate Director of International Security Studies at Yale University. His *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* will be published with Oxford University Press in September 2012. He's currently working on a book project about the spread of nation-states and writing a collection of essays on the mid-1970s. In December, he will become an Assistant Professor at the University at Albany-SUNY.

---

**Copyright © 2012 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.**

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).