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Empire, Agency, & Documents

Ryan Irwin

University at Albany, State University of New York, rirwin@albany.edu

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Empire, Agency, & Documents

Odd Arne Westad opens the inaugural chapter of *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (2010) with a declaration that captures the essence of contemporary cold war studies: “Historians have always believed that good sources make for good studies.”¹ The sentence permeates Sue Onslow’s *Cold War in Southern Africa*. This book, in Onslow’s words, emerged directly from the current push to use newly available archival documents to glean fresh insight about the nature of the global cold war. Framed around the tension between local politics and superpower plans in southern Africa, the volume’s ten chapters—based on the contributions of historians from three continents—move between an assortment of viewpoints and topics, tackling not only South Africa’s controversial nuclear program and Zimbabwe’s circuitous road to independence, but also, among others, the intrigues of the United States and Soviet Union and the experiences of Namibia and Angola in the 1980s.

Cold War in Southern Africa is a welcome addition to the literature. The book provides a quick introduction to some of the interesting work being done today by scholars of this region. In a general sense, about half of the essays examine how local players navigated the opportunities and obstacles that came with the superpower contest. Pretoria played its hand competently, according to Onslow and Anna-Mart van Wyk, compensating for its diplomatic isolation by manipulating Washington’s insecurities after the Vietnam War.² Lusaka, dealt a more challenging political hand in Andy DeRoche’s mind, struggled to walk the tightrope of nonalignment, pushing the United States to support decolonization without cutting off its access to American economic aid.³ Salisbury, as Donal Lowry shows, moved in the opposite direction in the mid-twentieth century, mixing anti-communism and racism to form the explosive cocktail of white nationalism.⁴ Piero Gleijeses’s Havana—residing on

¹ Odd Arne Westad, “The Cold War and the international history of the twentieth century,” *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Volume 1, ed. Odd Arne Westad and Melvyn Leffler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

² Sue Onslow, “The South African factor in Zimbabwe’s transition to independence,” in *Cold War in Southern Africa*, ed. Sue Onslow (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 110-129; Anna-Mart van Wyk, “The USA and apartheid South Africa’s nuclear aspirations, 1949-1990,” in *Cold War in Southern Africa*, 55-83. This argument reinforces generally the interpretations of James Barber and John Barratt, *South Africa’s foreign policy: The search for status and security, 1945-1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and James Sanders, *Apartheid’s Friends: The Rise and Fall of South Africa’s Secret Service* (London: John Murray, 2006).

³ Andy Deroche, “Non-alignment on the racial frontier: Zambia and the USA, 1964-1968,” in *Cold War in Southern Africa*, 130-153.

⁴ Donal Lowry, “The impact of anti-communism on white Rhodesian political culture, 1920-1980,” in *Cold War in Southern Africa*, 84-109.

the other end of the ideological spectrum—reshaped the terms of regional exchange through military action in 1975-1991, sending an unprecedented number of soldiers to the region to fight on behalf of revolutionary change.⁵ Small states, in short, exercised agency in the global cold war. They pursued an eclectic set of goals with acumen and determination.

The essays look also at the aims and influence of Moscow and Washington in southern Africa. In Vladimir Shubin's retelling, the Soviet Union played a pivotal role in generating the conditions for positive change in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Namibia. Drawing on untapped sources, as well as his personal experience as a U.S.S.R. official, he shows how Moscow's "unsung heroes" provided financial and military aid to the liberation movements in the region.⁶ Other authors focus on the United States. Washington's motivations are framed differently—with themes of race, economics, and security emerging at the forefront—but most contributors agree that the empire of liberty slowed progress toward regional majority rule. Even President Jimmy Carter, who Nancy Mitchell suggests empathized with calls for racial justice, found it difficult to transcend fully the cold war paradigm that dominated his nation's capital.⁷ By the end of the 1980s, as Christopher Saunders explicates with élan, regional issues—specifically the Angola/Namibia crises—had become entwined with superpower agendas, amplifying the pressure to end apartheid while ensuring that change would be non-revolutionary.⁸ Washington and Moscow, for better or worse, shaped the pace of events in southern Africa. They opened and closed doors for regional players, influenced international discourse, and empowered their patrons to achieve certain ends in the global arena.

In many ways, Onslow's book is a clarion call for international historians. Sitting at the nexus of decolonization and the cold war, southern Africa was one of the key social, cultural, and political entrepôts of the twentieth century. The richness of South Africa's archives, moreover, makes the region one of the preeminent microcosms of modern world history—a place that reveals much about the contested nature of globalization, imperialism, and multilocalism before and after World War II. As Onslow readily acknowledges, her volume represents not the final word on its subject but the beginning of a soon-to-be-rich conversation. In her mind, work still needs to be done on the collapse of the Portuguese empire and the wars in Angola and Mozambique, as well as the political and economic interventions of China, Yugoslavia, and East Germany during this period. In West

⁵ Piero Gleijeses, "From Cassinga to New York: the struggle for the independence of Namibia," in *Cold War in Southern Africa*, 201-224.

⁶ Vladimir Shubin, "Unsung heroes: the Soviet military and the liberation of Southern Africa," in *Cold War in Southern Africa*, 154-176.

⁷ Nancy Mitchell, "Terrorists or freedom fighters? Jimmy Carter and Rhodesia," in *Cold War in Southern Africa*, 117-200.

⁸ Chris Saunders, "The Angola/Namibia crisis of 1988 and its resolution," in *Cold War in Southern Africa*, 225-240.

Europe and North America, too, documents from the late 1970s and 1980s—the years when fighting and outside interest combined most violently—are only beginning to become available to researchers. Although unmentioned by Onslow, scholarship on nonstate organizations also deserves a prominent place in the literature, especially considering the wealth of information at the Liberation Archives in Alice, South Africa.⁹ Nonetheless her message emerges with clarity: Southern Africa’s sources and stories, good now, will undoubtedly grow better with time, distance, and debate.

With this in mind, the most glaring omission of *Cold War in Southern Africa* is historiographical. The book makes little effort to highlight the interpretive disagreements that separate its contributors and will continue to divide scholars in the coming years. Lowry’s anti-communists, for instance, emerge as Shubin’s rabid racists, while the 1988 battle of Cuito Cuanavale—a defining moment in Gliejeses’s story—appears mostly as Cuban propaganda in Saunders’ chapter. Beneath these disagreements resides a question at the heart of the contemporary South African experience: How should historians narrate the region’s complex path to the present? At a time when Africa’s chroniclers are developing increasingly sophisticated interpretations of postcolonialism, literature on South Africa seems occasionally bound by the now problematic liberation narrative.¹⁰ From a sociological perspective this makes sense, as it provides today’s South African leaders with governing legitimacy, but binaries that reflexively pit white power against black liberation conceal much about the historical record—as several authors in *Cold War in Southern Africa* demonstrate. As the novelty of new documents begins to fade, future

⁹ An initial step in this direction is Scott Thomas, *Diplomacy of Liberation: The Foreign Relations of the African National Congress Since 1960* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1996). The most substantive current project is the South African Democracy Education Trust’s multi-volume *The Road to Democracy* (Paarl: Zebra Press, 2004). In a similar vein, historians are also beginning to turn renewed attention to the global anti-apartheid movement. For recent work, see Håkan Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Francis Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African Americans against Apartheid, 1946-1994* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Donald Culverson, *Contesting Apartheid: U.S. Activism, 1960-1987* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999); Robert Massie, *Loosing the Bonds: The United States and South Africa in the Apartheid Years* (New York: Nan Talese Doubleday, 1997); as well as Eric Morgan, “Into the Struggle: Confronting Apartheid in the United States and South Africa,” (Dissertation: University of Colorado, 2009).

¹⁰ For a seminal works, see Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997). For additional scholarship, see Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Robert Tignor, *Capitalism and Nationalism at the End of Empire: State and Business in Decolonizing Egypt, Nigeria, and Kenya, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); among many others. For popular treatments, see Richard Dowden, *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009); Martin Meredith, *The Fate of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005).

accounts will likely take heed of these points and begin to blend the insights of political history with social and cultural methodologies. Onslow would likely agree, for instance, that southern Africa's global importance predated the violence of the 1970s and continues beyond the momentous events of 1994. Future scholarship, no doubt, will focus less on challenging the stability of the bipolar framework in the late cold war and more on explicating the region's relationship to the complex processes of migration, ideological transmission, and political polarization that swept through the international system in the twentieth century. Regardless, *Cold War in Southern Africa* is a step in a positive direction.