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Review Article

Cold War in Southern Africa

Matthew Graham

Gary Baines, Peter Vale (eds.) (2008), *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa's Late-Cold War Conflicts*, Pretoria: Unisa Press, ISBN 978 1 86888 456 8, xix + 342 pp.

Sue Onslow (ed.) (2009), *Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Liberation*, Abingdon: Routledge, ISBN 978 0 415 47420 7, 253 pp.

Vladimir Shubin (2008), *The Hot "Cold War": The USSR in Southern Africa*, London: Pluto Press, ISBN 978 0745324722, 320 pp.

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Matthew Graham is a PhD candidate at the University of Sheffield. He has a longstanding interest in Southern African history and has carried out research on decolonisation and post-colonialism in the region. His current research is investigating the foreign policy of the ANC, from liberation movement to governing political party, with a specific focus on Southern Africa.

The Cold War conflict between the US and the Soviet Union had an enormous influence on the contemporary history of the world, leaving few regions untouched by the ideological contest of the superpowers and the ensuing wars that accompanied this rivalry. Despite often being neglected in Western histories, Southern Africa was also greatly affected by this global contest. It undoubtedly had wide-ranging ramifications for the region and its people, many of them negative. The Cold War rivalry helped frame the thirty years of turmoil in Southern Africa, and it acted as an important ideological foundation for the white-minority regimes and the various liberation movements. Both sides exploited this ideological rivalry for their own ends, but had ultimately opposite goals. The Cold War tensions provided an opportunity for the belligerents to legitimise their own actions. In pursuit of these aims, Southern Africa bore witness to several damaging wars which attracted interventions from both superpowers and from various states from both sides of the political divide; there were guerrilla insurrections in many countries, and the South African government's policy of destabilisation against its independent neighbours hindered the economic and political development of the region. Many of these legacies are still evident in Southern Africa today.

As new sources have become available and various individuals have begun to offer their own accounts, a clearer, more nuanced picture has started to emerge about the complexities of the Cold War in this part of Africa. The three books under review go a considerable way to enriching our knowledge beyond conventional approaches to the conflicts in Southern Africa; they accomplish this by delving into hitherto under-researched aspects, thereby providing exciting new interpretations of the Cold War. This has helped in plugging some significant gaps in our understanding of this period. The diversity of approaches on offer in these books allows the conflicts in Southern Africa to be investigated from a number of angles, such as: how the apartheid state used the Cold War to construct identity in the white population; post-traumatic stress among conscripts; and the attempts by Zambia to use its anti-communist credentials to gain nuclear technology from the USA.

A welcome addition to the burgeoning historiography on the Cold War in the region is Sue Onslow's edited collection *Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Liberation*. The book is split into two themes with chapters covering white nationalist power and its projection onto neighbouring states, and African liberation struggles against these regimes.

The chapters focusing on white rule in Southern Africa explore the ways in which their virulent adherence to anti-communist ideology influenced the policies of these regimes. Onslow argues that white fears of

communism blinded them to the realities of their own policies, which in fact fuelled much of the violence in the region. Several chapters build upon this point, investigating the security policies of the white minorities. John Daniel affirms that the NP's linking of apartheid's legitimacy to the Cold War was a grave error for South Africa, which ensured that the white minority failed to recognise the genuine demands for political emancipation in Southern Africa, instead viewing any bids for freedom as part of a global communist conspiracy. Additional contributions cover diverse topics such as Pretoria's efforts to gain nuclear technology in partnership with the US, and its bid to manipulate the Zimbabwean elections in 1980. They pursued these policies mainly due to their fears of Marxism as a threat to their security.

The second half of the book covers liberation movements and the ways in which the Cold War shaped and influenced their struggles. The complexity of superpower interaction in the region is analysed in some detail and the essence is that the Cold War's manifestation in Southern Africa was not as clear cut as scholars may originally have thought. As a case study, Namibian independence is highlighted as an at times neglected case in the Cold War narrative, despite its relative importance in the War's twilight phase. Piero Gleijeses believes that SWAPO's efforts helped bring about the 1988 New York peace agreements, while Chris Saunders asserts that Namibia was one of the last ideological conflicts of the Cold War, ultimately bringing the superpowers together and easing hostilities.

The possible weakness of this edited collection is that most of the material has already been published elsewhere. Be that as it may, the most important anomaly is the choice to omit chapters on the lusophone states of Angola and Mozambique. While acknowledged that they would not be included, this is a surprise, as the 1974 Lisbon Coup and the subsequent withdrawal of Portugal played a significant role in the Cold War crises that ravaged the region. Without the events in Portugal, there is little doubt that the advancement of black emancipation from white-minority rule would have been further delayed across Southern Africa.

The Portuguese withdrawal from Mozambique allowed the first Marxist-inspired regime to take power in Southern Africa on the very borders of the white-minority regimes of Rhodesia and South Africa. This was a very real threat to white power, especially as these regimes thought it would inspire the populations they were oppressing, and in particular undermine the security of their borders. For South Africa it was a very important psychological factor as the buffer zone of white-ruled states had collapsed, leaving them prone to "black Africa". The emergence of Marxism on its borders encouraged a sea of change within the South African political elite, which

was later translated into the policy of destabilisation towards independent states of Southern Africa.

The new FRELIMO government supported efforts to advance African liberation in the region, and permitted the ANC and ZANU to operate out of the country. For white rule in Rhodesia it was a catastrophic moment, as it opened up a new, large and porous front for the guerrilla armies of Robert Mugabe's ZANU, whose activities greatly undermined the security and political stability of Ian Smith's RF. The ZANU incursions into Rhodesia ultimately destabilised many rural areas of Rhodesia, allowing guerrillas to attack white farmers and pressurise locals into supporting and sheltering the liberation fighters. In the end, their activities out of Mozambique, not forgetting those of ZAPU, combined with South African political pressure on Ian Smith, culminated in the Lancaster House Agreement, and the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980.

The decolonisation of Angola was far more disastrous for Southern Africa as a whole. In the months leading up to independence on 11 November 1975, the three rival liberation movements—the MPLA, FNLA and UNITA—embarked on a process of fierce political competition for control of the country. Each movement had a different ideological background and thus appealed to various external backers for support, largely in the form of weapons and money. By 1975, the US, the USSR, China, and crucially Cuba, had all in some way played a role in Angola, ultimately escalating the cycle of violence in the country. The US, most notably Henry Kissinger, played an important part in the events in Angola.¹ Wary of reported Soviet interests, and viewing the decolonisation process in Angola through the prism of the Cold War rivalry, the US was unwilling to allow another country to fall to communism, especially in the wake of Vietnam. With the US having appealed to South Africa to intervene and having promised support, Pretoria committed combat troops to the anti-communist alliance of the FNLA and UNITA, and invaded Angola.² However, as news of this invasion leaked, Cuba sent soldiers to protect the communist MPLA, who on the eve of independence controlled the capital Luanda. As international support turned towards the MPLA and with the US denying any knowledge of supporting Pretoria's intervention, the South Africans, along with the FNLA and

1 For further discussion see: Graham, Matthew, *Covert Collusion? American and South African Relations in the Angolan Civil War, 1974–1976*, (unpublished MA Thesis, University of Sheffield, 2007).

2 Pieter Willem Botha, 17 April 1978, Republic of South Africa, House of Assembly Debates, Col. 4852.

UNITA, were forced to retreat by the Cuban and MPLA forces.³ The instalment of the MPLA as the governing party of Angola introduced another independent communist nation to the region. However, the presence of the MPLA in Angola, backed by a permanent force from Cuba, was even more disturbing to apartheid South Africa than FRELIMO in Mozambique. Due to Angola's vast oil and diamond resources the MPLA were relatively free from Pretoria's influence, unlike Mozambique which was still largely dependent upon South Africa. From 1976, South Africa and UNITA, backed by the US, fought an almost continuous war in Angola until the late 1980s.

The collapse of Portuguese rule in Angola and Mozambique, which in turn played a part in the demise of white rule in Rhodesia, was crucial to the events after 1975 across Southern Africa. In South Africa, the political elite were forced to re-evaluate their political and security positions. The apartheid regime failed to recognise calls for black emancipation, and saw events in Southern Africa solely in terms of the Cold War. The apartheid government linked apartheid and its legitimacy to the protection of Christian values and civilisation in the face of the threat of communism. It also saw from 1975 the increasing dominance of the military over South African politics, with the SADF having an almost permanent presence in southern Angola, and regularly carrying out destabilisation missions across Southern Africa. For the liberation movements of the region, the decolonisation in lusophone Africa was a source of inspiration and material assistance, as well as a location from which to launch guerrilla attacks against white minority regimes. Movements such as the ANC, SWAPO and ZANU greatly benefited, as they now had the ability to attack their intended targets from neighbouring countries, and their hosts were, on the whole, supportive of their aims.

As discussed above, Portuguese decolonisation set in motion much of what occurred in the region and affected the mindsets of both the liberation movements and apartheid South Africa. It is therefore difficult to put into context the events in Southern Africa without some explanation of what occurred in Angola and Mozambique. This inexplicable omission diminishes the book's effectiveness.

Vladimir Shubin's book looks at the evolving role of the Soviet Union in Southern Africa from the 1960s onwards, predominantly focusing on

3 Gleijeses, Piero (2002), *Conflicting Missions, Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press; Gleijeses, Piero, Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959–1976: New Evidence from Cuban Archives, in: *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issues 8–9, (Winter 1996–1997), 5–8; Gleijeses, Piero (2006), Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975–1988, in: *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 8, 4, 98–146.

Angola. But this is far from a conventional study. Only Shubin has looked at the story solely from the perspective of Moscow. In his own words, it is a book that aims “to set the record straight” and re-write the Western bias and misinterpretations that dominate the historiography. Having been head of the African Section of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union during his career, Shubin has first-hand knowledge of what occurred from behind the iron curtain, and what the policies of Moscow were towards the liberation movements of the region. Due to the fact that much of the relevant archival material is off limits to researchers, or was destroyed as Russia moved away from communist rule, the book has had to make do with only a limited number of official documents. Shubin attempted to negotiate this problem by furnishing his account with details of his own experiences, and with interviews with other figures involved in Southern Africa, all of which provide a glimpse into the “real” story of Moscow’s involvement.

Clearly superpower rivalry played a significant role in attracting the Soviets to Southern Africa, though Shubin argues that Moscow’s involvement was caused by something greater than simply Cold War ideology—namely, the liberation of the oppressed. He claims that Soviet policy was on the whole beneficial to the Marxist movements and governments that they aided. Most of the recipients badly needed the provision of weaponry, crucial to fighting their wars of liberation and to defending themselves against South African incursions. However, Soviet assistance stretched far beyond this point, into the realm of financial contributions, educational and political training, and medical and food supplies, among other things. This is an important point and a crucial message of the book. Very few histories of the Cold War have recognised the positive role of Soviet involvement in the region, and *The “Hot Cold War”* emphasises this.

While Shubin is innovative in offering a new dimension to the literature on the Cold War in Southern Africa, there are several shortcomings to his contribution. Even as the book sets out to address the bias of the literature, it itself becomes one-sided in its attempt to propagate an alternative vision. There is no critical analysis of the Soviet Union’s activities in the region, which would have been beneficial. As the book strives to point out, the Soviet Union did have some positive influence in Southern Africa, but there is no admission that its policies towards Africa were not always appropriate. Indeed it would be hard to argue that the Soviet Union’s involvement stemmed from altruism: Its interest focused upon those who adhered to their particular version of Marxist doctrine. Moscow attempted to combat the activities of the US and China in Southern Africa, which in some cases pitted liberation movements against one another, for example ZAPU and ZANU in Zimbabwe. The book also has an uneven focus. Despite covering

thirty years of Southern African history, the country that dominates this account is Angola. While the Angolan Wars from 1975 onwards were at the centre of the superpower rivalry in the region, nations such as Namibia, Mozambique and South Africa are mentioned only briefly in comparison. A deeper investigation into the Soviet role in these countries would have been informative. While further research on the Soviet role in Southern Africa is required for a clearer picture to emerge, Shubin's efforts have set this process in motion.

By comparison, J. H. Thompson's *An Unpopular War*, a collection of conscripted soldiers' experiences in the service of the South African Defence Force (SADF) fighting the "communist menace" in Southern Africa, heralded the beginnings of quite a new approach.⁴ Bringing together a diverse selection of stories from white South Africans who had fought on the border in Angola and Namibia, the book allows a new reading of the Cold War conflict that engulfed Southern Africa. For the first time, ordinary soldiers had the opportunity to tell their side of the story. This approach was different in the sense that, post-1994, most studies of Southern Africa have been from the perspective of the victorious liberation movements. Such a trend was entirely understandable as movements like the ANC and SWAPO, which had since become governing political parties, moved to champion their own histories of their victorious struggles against apartheid. It meant, though, that the experiences of anyone outside this narrow prism were neglected. While this is a journalistic account, Thompson's work is the first key effort in addressing this gap in the literature, and one that acts as a starting point for more rigorous academic work.

Building upon *An Unpopular War*, Gary Baines and Peter Vale's edited book *Beyond the Border War* is another big step forward in the attempt to reanalyse the Cold War from alternative perspectives. A compilation of seventeen different contributions from varying academic fields, the book's overarching theme concerns the making and meaning of the border in the white national psyche, and the related silences that have continued in South African and Namibian society. In doing so, it begins to democratise the history of remembrance, allowing those who for so long have been silenced or ignored to find their voice.

Research into South Africa's contribution to the Cold War in the region has hitherto been monolithic in nature and predominantly looked at through a grand political lens, thus ignoring the impact that apartheid policies had upon the nation's white citizens, the very people they were designed to help.

4 Thompson, J. H. (2006), *An Unpopular War: From Afeka to Bosbefok - Voices of South African National Servicemen*, Cape Town: Zebra press.

Beyond the Border War provides a forum for this period of apartheid history to be re-examined in novel and illuminating ways. A theme raised by Justine Hunter, and which recurs in other chapters, is that truth is the first casualty of war. Through propaganda, disinformation and official silences the populations of Namibia and South Africa before and after independence have been affected in numerous ways, with little concern as to how their experiences of war had shaped them. In dealing with this theme, chapters cover issues such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among conscripts, identity in the post-transition period and the stigma of being involved or oppressed in the conflicts. However, several contributions, while offering some informative insights into the effects of the Border War, do not really fit in with focus of “real stories”, as they take far more conventional approaches investigating Cuban intervention at Cuito Cuanavale in Angola, and the leader of UNITA (the rebel guerrilla movement), Jonas Savimbi.

The value of *Beyond the Border War* is that it has taken a step away from the traditional historiography and started a shift towards a broader and more diverse approach to the Cold War in Southern Africa. No longer are studies confined merely to the activities of nations, liberation movements, and key political or liberation figures, but now provide insights into the ways in which the Cold War shaped and affected the lives of ordinary people, both black and white. The varied contributions are not the usual point of entry for Cold War studies, and are hopefully the beginning of a lively academic debate. While not claiming to be definitive, the book begins what looks to be a new phase of future research into a much-neglected period of apartheid and Cold War history.

For some time there have been significant gaps in our understanding of the Cold War in Southern Africa, but these three books have begun to address this problem. They hopefully mark the start of further academic interest in the field of Cold War studies in the region investigating it from a range of alternative perspectives. These studies have contributed new and diverse research into parts of the superpower rivalry previously ignored by the traditional historiography. With examples ranging from the effects of war art in Angola and the Soviets’ positive influence across Southern Africa to the neglected role of SWAPO in the peaceful transitions across the region in the late 1980s, these studies have marked the beginning of a new way of looking at the Cold War, from which we can derive new and innovative insights. As new archival documents start to become available from previously closed collections, and as more people, many of whom were previously excluded from telling their histories, are encouraged to provide their perspectives on the Cold War, academics will hopefully be able to delve

deeper into some of the avenues which have been barely touched upon in previous studies.

However, a notable gap in the historiography that needs to be addressed (bar a few notable examples like Joseph Hanlon, Piero Gleijeses, Fernando Guimaraes and John Marcum) is that of lusophone Africa, in particular Angola. Many of the studies that deal with lusophone countries are Western or South African-focused accounts, and fail to analyse what was actually going on in Angola and Mozambique—namely, their interactions with foreign powers and the true nature of their role in African liberation in Southern Africa. This is a much under-researched area, and only when archives from around the world are opened more fully will we discover the exact role of these nations in the Cold War. When more information comes to light, it is likely that it will point to their vital role in the region, but also to a more complex set of relationships with the other liberation movements and independent governments of Southern Africa, which have shaped and influenced the inter-relations of the members of the SADC in the region today. Every step in this direction is beneficial to our understanding, as it further unravels the mysteries and complexities of the Cold War in Southern Africa, offering a clearer picture of what actually happened.