

Decolonization of a Special Type: Rethinking Cold War History in Southern Africa

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In November 2009, a great fanfare of celebration occurred in Germany to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Built in 1961, the wall came to symbolize the tense Cold War standoff between Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union against Western Europe and the United States. It divided not only a city, but a set of competing ideologies that defined global politics over the second half of the century. November 2009 also marked the twentieth anniversary of independence for Namibia – to considerably less fanfare in the global north. In November 1989 the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) was elected to power, thus ending South African rule there which had lasted since 1920. South Africa had gained control over the territory after World War I through a mandate granted by the League of Nations, its previous colonial occupier being Germany. This coincidence of timing and historical connection is circumstantial, but it is a familiar reminder of the ways in which historical periodization and meaning continue to be shaped and defined vis-à-vis Western perspectives and criteria. In the same fashion that histories of colonization were once characterized by the perspectives of imperial powers, Cold War histories have tend to be dominated by views anchored in Soviet or American archives, with Europe serving as the primary theatre for this conflict despite more active engagements in Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and southern Africa.

This special issue of *Kronos: Southern African Histories* speaks to this imbalance, contributing in small measure to a recent turn in Cold War studies that has sought to incorporate regional perspectives found in area studies to readdress the parameters and politics of this extended period. Departing from the influential early work of scholars like John Lewis Gaddis – who helped to define the field of Cold War history in books such as *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (1972) and *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (1982) – scholarship published over the past two decades has reached beyond an exclusive American-Soviet dynamic and a 'great men' approach to history – whether Stalin or Eisenhower, among other leaders – to consider the role of social movements and popular trends, the factor of identity politics such as racial solidarity and, perhaps most significant, a broader political geography created through the global wave of decolonization after the Second World War. This change in focus can be attributed to a generational shift, as well as the end of the Cold War itself, which has resulted in the opening of archives and research areas previously unavailable. In fact, the expansion of Cold War history and diplomatic history more generally – at least in the American academy – has generated calls for renaming the field as 'international history' in order to move

attention away from nation-state interactions to examine instead patterns of social and cultural history that transcend the totalizing effect that the 'Cold War period' as such has had.¹

There is good reason for this position of renewal, perhaps argued most forcefully by Matthew Connelly, who has suggested that the Cold War lens for understanding global history after World War II has outlasted its usefulness.² As anticipated, this proposal has not met with complete favour, but it does highlight the extent to which scholars have sought to diversify the field of Cold War studies beyond diplomatic memoranda and discussions of military strategy. Demonstrating the ways in which identity politics and social movements had transnational reach, historians such as Brenda Gayle Plummer, Thomas Borstelmann, and Penny von Eschen, for example, have addressed the different ways in which the American civil rights movement intersected with and affected American diplomacy before and during the Cold War in social, cultural, as well as political spheres.³ Among their mutual insights is the manner in which trends of grassroots solidarity and a politics of recognition emerged through global activist networks, thus relocating and redefining 'diplomacy' as a political practice beyond sovereign states. Activist-intellectuals and other figures equally undertook ambassadorial roles to engage in forms of alignment and community beyond the conventions of the nation-state.

In a separate vein, Robert McMahon, Mark Lawrence, and Matthew Connelly (once more) have offered studies – on Indonesia, Vietnam, and Algeria, respectively – that address the linkages between European decolonization and the establishment of a Cold War political order fundamentally shaped by U.S. and Soviet interests, thus underscoring the need for conversations between the fields of colonial history, postcolonial studies, and Cold War history.⁴ Taking a more panoramic view, Vijay Prashad and Arne Westad have argued for broader continuities between an age of formal imperialism by European countries and the informal empires created by the U.S. and Soviet Union during the Cold War.⁵ Their work echoes earlier concerns expressed by figures like Frantz Fanon and Kwame Nkrumah, who warned that the liberation struggles and postcolonial countries, respectively, found themselves in a new context of power and influence that threatened to compromise their respective achievements.⁶ But, in reaching the present, Westad and Prashad

1 John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972); John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). For other studies of significance, see, for example, William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Norton, [1959] 1988); Melvyn P. Leffler, *The Specter of Communism: The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917-1953* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994); Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, [1967] 2008); Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, [1987] 2009).

2 Matthew Connelly, "Taking off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North-South Conflict during the Algerian War for Independence," *American Historical Review*, 105 (June 2000), 739-769.

3 Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

4 Robert J. McMahon, *Colonialism and the Cold War: The United States and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence, 1945-49* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

5 Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

6 Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Heinemann, 1968).

also work beyond assigning perpetual blame to modern Western colonialism to consider the role of Cold War politics in shaping the politics of the present.

While a number of these insights will resonate with many, this last observation is particularly pertinent to scholarship in African studies. The Cold War has not been entirely absent from historical research, particularly for southern Africa, but it has remained a marginal presence in the discipline for several reasons.⁷ First, the postcolonial field of African history has held a long-standing concern with pre-colonial patterns of trade, cultural exchange, and state formation as a means of de-centring the advent of colonial rule as the start for 'History' itself. This stress, while well-intended and productive, has established an enduring epistemology of knowledge such that historical dynamics unrelated to a *longue durée* view of Africa's past have arguably been seen as less significant and, in many cases, less 'African'.⁸ Second, the practice of social history as a genre has become so entrenched that other types of history – in this context, diplomatic history, for example – have received less attention. While this emphasis has also been undoubtedly fruitful, this method possesses limitations of technique, geography, and topical scope like any other genre. Third, as suggested before, there is a political complexity in addressing the Cold War period that contrasts with the more simplified politics of the colonial period. In short, the Manichean dialectic of the colonizer and colonized that underpins colonial history is not only absent in a strict sense, but the basic politics of African historical scholarship – for example, perpetual concerns for the 'African voice' – that have been employed against Eurocentric perspectives and histories appear inadequate in dealing with postcolonial political elites, gatekeeper states, and the networks of international support they often received.⁹ Indeed, the ways in which Cold War politics both enabled and compromised liberation struggles as depicted in several articles in this issue (see especially the contributions by Ryan Irwin, Jeffrey Ahlman, and Christian Williams) raise stimulating questions about the writing of these histories and the political opportunities and challenges they can present to conventional nationalist narratives. With diffuse, haphazard, and often restricted postcolonial archives added to this task, scholarship of this kind has been difficult to pursue on the whole thus far, resulting in a kind of historical 'leapfrogging' as cited by Frederick Cooper that problematically explains the historical present with an ever-receding colonial past.¹⁰

This special issue seeks to overcome these prevailing tendencies and dilemmas. The contributions work beyond established conventions of 'nativism' and 'Afro-radicalism', in the words of Achille Mbembe, as found in precolonial and colonial histo-

7 Consider, for example, Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (London: James Currey, 1992); Thomas Borstelmann, *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle: The United States and Southern Africa in the Early Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Vladimir Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2008). The literature in political science is vast, but for studies elsewhere on the continent that will be of interest to historians, see, for example, Donald L. Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Elizabeth Schmidt, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946-1958* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007); Jamie Monson, *Africa's Freedom Railway: How a Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Tanzania* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011).

8 On this temporal imbalance and the relative absence of postcolonial African histories, see Stephen Ellis, 'Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa', *Journal of African History*, 43, 1 (2002), 1-26.

9 On the problem of African social history and its political uses, see in particular the dilemma that Terence Ranger has recently confronted: Terence Ranger, 'Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 2 (2004), 215-34. Historians have, of course, sought to complicate the Manichean dynamic of colonialism. See Frederick Cooper, 'Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History', *American Historical Review*, 99, 5 (1994), 1516-45.

10 Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 17-18.

ries, to consider new possibilities of historical writing through a Cold War lens.¹¹ In keeping with the new research mandate of *Kronos*, this set of articles demonstrates how the Cold War period provides a way of bringing regionalism into play, thus breaking with forms of South African exceptionalism and nation-state history more generally that has animated postcolonial scholarship in southern Africa. But it also supplies a means for reconsidering the application and meaning of the term 'postcolonial' itself, an expression that has gained popular traction throughout the region and in South Africa particularly since 1994. Working in this latter context, Premesh Lalu has explored the connections between 'post-apartheid' and 'postcolonial', with a subsequent call for a deeper sense of critical engagement between apartheid and colonialism – namely, that the intellectual legacies of apartheid can only be surmounted once South Africa confronts the present effects of its colonial past.¹²

This position by Lalu recalls an earlier debate among activists of the African National Congress (ANC) with members of the Communist Party of South Africa (established in 1921 and disbanded in 1950) and the South African Communist Party (established in 1953) during the early 1950s that resulted in the perspective that apartheid in South Africa was 'colonialism of a special type' – a view that would inform political strategy between the ANC and the SACP in the decades that followed.¹³ Sharing a genealogy with an even earlier debate over the 'Native Republic' thesis, this expression sought to reconcile tensions and debate as to whether to pursue national liberation versus class struggle to enact political change in South Africa.¹⁴ Yet this dilemma over strategy reflected not only ideological differences, but also the uncertain political definition of South Africa vis-à-vis other African countries with its open political suppression and economic exploitation of a black majority, yet its independent self-governing status in the British Commonwealth since 1910. 'Colonialism of a special type' sought to capture both these unique conditions in South Africa and its similarities to political struggles elsewhere. In similar fashion, I call the end of colonialism in southern Africa from 1964 to 1994 'decolonization of a special type' to mark the specific qualities of political change in the region as well as to include southern Africa within broader discussions of decolonization that occurred globally after the Second World War. As in other parts of the continent and the world, decolonization in southern Africa – from the independence of Zambia and Malawi in 1964 to the end of apartheid in 1994 – was shaped by the politics of the Cold War, given its span across the colonial and postcolonial periods. Indeed, in the same way that histories beyond the West can challenge prevailing research assumptions and practices about the Cold War, its origins, and its impact, so too might the Cold War as a conflict, time period, and context of ideological debate offer a critical reassessment of our epochal time frames of 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' by questioning differences and continuities of power, in addition to providing greater historical content to the expression 'postcolonial'. The Cold War, in short, offers an alternative framework to think beyond certain political and temporal assumptions that have been well-established for some time.

11 Achille Mbembe, 'African Modes of Self-Writing', *Public Culture*, 14, 1 (2002), 239–273.

12 Premesh Lalu, *The Deaths of Hintsa: Post-Apartheid South Africa and the Shape of Recurring Pasts* (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2009), Introduction. See also Nicholas Visser, 'Postcoloniality of a Special Type: Theory and Its Appropriations in South Africa', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 27 (1997), 79–94.

13 David Everatt, 'Alliance Politics of a Special Type: The Roots of the ANC/SACP Alliance, 1950–1954', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 1 (1992), 19–39.

14 On this earlier period and the Native Republic thesis, see Allison Drew, *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

The contributions to this issue explore these intersections and their possibilities. Ryan Irwin (Yale) and Jeffrey Ahlman (Johns Hopkins) begin the issue by addressing the global and continental contexts, respectively, of the early Cold War in which South Africa and southern Africa were situated. Noting South Africa's involvement in the creation of the post-World War II order through the figure of Prime Minister Jan Smuts at the founding of the United Nations, Irwin outlines how the South African situation continued to shape the non-aligned politics of the postcolonial world in the decades that followed, while Ahlman addresses how postcolonial Ghana under the leadership of President Kwame Nkrumah quickly sought to influence the politics of decolonization on the continent, including liberation struggles in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia that faced a Cold War entrenchment of white minority rule. Moving chronologically forward, Ryan Brown (University of the Witwatersrand) and Christian Williams (University of the Western Cape) take up a familiar theme to many in southern Africa – that of exile – to examine how the political effects of the Cold War generated new narratives of individuals and communities that traversed national boundaries. Brown's article sketches the life of South African journalist Nat Nakasa, whose early promise as a staff writer for *Drum* ended with his premature death by suicide in New York at the age of twenty-eight. While his brief life is not reducible to the Cold War and its politics, Nakasa's experience nevertheless indicates the quotidian ways in which this broader context influenced the life and options of many, whether through the Suppression of Communism Act (1950), the covert funding of arts organizations by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, or the sanctuary that the U.S. at times provided to those receiving 'exit permits'. Addressing a different kind of exile, Williams offers a social history of the Kongwa Camp in postcolonial Tanzania, a site established by the Organization of African Unity in 1964 with the support of President Julius Nyerere that served as an intersection for a number of liberation movements, including SWAPO, the ANC, and others. As Williams argues, Kongwa maintained a contingent international community that served as a vital crucible for intellectual and political exchange, in addition to manifesting tensions informed by strategic differences and the pressures and uncertainty of everyday life in exile. In short, Williams provides a significant case study regarding the importance of exile histories and why regional liberation struggles cannot be contained, empirically or methodologically, to the borders of nation-states. The final two contributions by Timothy Scarnecchia (Kent State) and Chris Saunders (University of Cape Town) return to the familiar ground of diplomatic history found in Cold War studies, though in surprising ways. Scarnecchia uncovers how the *Gukurahundi* campaign was not simply an internecine struggle over power internal to Zimbabwe, but it was one shaped by diplomatic maneuvering between Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) officials with South Africa, the U.S., and Great Britain. Saunders similarly explores an unlikely diplomatic exchange, that between Angola and South Africa during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a case study in how regional states stepped beyond the reductive rhetoric and political logic of the Cold War to manage tensions and relations beyond the purview of the United States and Soviet Union – an example of regional interactions offering an alternative perspective to the broader global dynamics of this period.

In sum, to return to the opening of this introduction, these essays do not simply dwell on the origins of the Cold War, but address instead its diverse destinations.

They work on a scale from individual biography, to social history, to continental and global history – demonstrating that Cold War history is not reducible to diplomacy or international relations, but can also occupy realms of culture and community within and beyond the nation-state. These histories demonstrate the transnational connections that emerged between postcolonial countries like Ghana and Tanzania and those still experiencing ‘decolonization of a special type’, whether in Namibia or South Africa, thus pointing to the problems of epochal periodization that can cast a temporal uniformity that misplaces regional and local meaning. Reconsidering the Cold War as a period and experience can offer a means for addressing these issues, providing an additional lens for reinterpreting the categories of ‘colonial’ and ‘postcolonial’ and the power and experiences they capture. Moreover, as suggested at the start, these regional accounts equally put forth a challenge to the prevailing Eurocentric assumptions and focal points of Cold War history and the ‘Cold War’ itself as a framing device, which contains its own risks of totalizing historical experience. A productive conceptual and geographic interplay is needed between these expressions and the histories they represent. With the turn toward ‘international history’ now unfolding, an opportune moment has presented itself for scholars of southern Africa to contribute actively to these discussions, to re-engage with the politics of regionalism during this period, and to readdress the complex narratives of the Cold War that, as in Berlin, no wall – metaphoric or actual – could contain.

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