

BOOK REVIEW

Natalia Telepneva. *Cold War Liberation: The Soviet Union and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, 1961–1975*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022. 302 pp. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$95.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-4696-6585-6.

In *Cold War Liberation: The Soviet Union and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, 1961–1975*, Natalia Telepneva has produced an insightful and detailed addition to the history of the Cold War in Africa. Relying on newly available archival sources from Eastern Europe and Russia, along with a plethora of personal memoirs and interviews, Telepneva weaves together a complex narrative of Soviet support for the three wars of independence in Portuguese Africa. Her analysis is focused on the activities of the Soviet elites, showing how the personalities and worldviews of mid-level Soviet political and security personnel were often more important than broader geopolitical concerns in the calculus determining Soviet Union support for African liberation struggles.

Chapters One and Two set the stage for readers. Chapter One offers a fast-paced overview of Soviet policy in Africa under Nikita Khrushchev and introduces the “mediators of liberation” (12), which include several officials from various Czech and Soviet intelligence and security agencies. Because Portuguese Africa was not strategically important enough to warrant the direct attention of Soviet leadership, Telepneva argues that most decisions about whether to support these revolutionary groups were made by these mid-level elites. Chapter Two provides a parallel story for Lusophone Africa, beginning with a brief description of the Portuguese empire in Africa and then turning to a presentation of the life stories of Amílcar Cabral, Marcelino dos Santos, Mário Pinto de Andrade, and Agostinho Neto—key African nationalists who were active in the early 1960s.

In Chapters Three through Seven, Telepneva gives a chronological account of Soviet-African relations between the years 1961 and 1975, beginning with the uprising in Angola in 1961 and ending with the outbreak of the Angolan civil war. These chapters trace how the African elites built alliances with both international and African actors to gain support for their independence movements. They reveal how these international relationships evolved in the context of dynamic internal group politics and inter-group rivalries

over access to training, weapons procurement, and tactical support for the guerrilla wars, and they detail the ways in which Soviet concerns over the future of governance in Portugal and broader Cold War goals shaped Africa's access to Soviet aid.

What becomes clear from this volume is the intricate balancing act these revolutionaries had to perform. They needed to gain assistance for large-scale conflict, which required winning the sponsorship of international donors. Recruiting, training, and supplying an army in exile, however, also entailed finding and maintaining an African host state. Revolutionaries also needed to overcome rival rebel groups, which were often equally adept at playing the superpowers against each other, and they needed to sideline internal rivals within their own groups, many of whom were supported by China. The key to winning Soviet sponsorship, according to Telepneva, was ideological coherency. She stresses the importance of ideology as the basis for rapport with Eastern European actors who were keen to see their clients hold a specific interest in "scientific socialism," rather than in an African socialism or a Chinese-inspired model. While this might have seemed a straightforward gambit, none of these leaders could afford to be so ideologically pure that they could risk alienating hosts such as Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, who was a strong ideologue of a different brand, or Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, who was a client of the United States.

Much of what Telepneva writes is in accordance with the standard narratives on Soviet involvement during this timeframe. However, with access to new material—particularly from the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History—Telepneva is able to add precision and substantiation to certain arguments and give nuance to others. For example, in analyzing Soviet-Cuban cooperation in arming the MPLA, Telepneva shows that the Soviet Union was far more cautious in the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution than was previously supposed and chose supporting the Portuguese Communist Party over pressuring Lisbon to decolonize in Africa (168).

While this is an engaging work, Telepneva's approach of framing the topic from the perspectives of a multitude of political elites necessitates a constantly shifting cast of characters drawn from across Eastern Europe and Africa. This can become difficult to follow, particularly for those readers familiar with African actors but not with the inter-workings of Soviet agencies. Despite this complexity, the payoff is a detailed and closely analyzed work that gives serious insight into the wars of liberation in Portuguese Africa. It is a significant addition to the Cold War literature, making this moment in history, particularly the Soviet strategy in choosing which African actors to sponsor, less opaque.

Erin Kimball Damman 
 University of Idaho
 Moscow, Idaho, USA
 damman@uidaho.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2022.171