

Cold War Liberation: The Soviet Union and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, 1961–1975. By Natalia Telepneva. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022. xxi, 277 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Maps. \$35.95, paper.
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A recent documentary film, *Red Africa* (Russia/Portugal, 2022), directed by Alexander Markov, took advantage of the available archival footage to recreate the “feel” and materiality of Soviet encounters with Africa during the Cold War. The film is remarkable in its ability to revive a lost world of Soviet internationalism. On screen, a jovial and youthful looking Leonid Brezhnev struts through palm groves and gives bear hugs to “African comrades” on an airport tarmac; laser-focused Soviet experts hover over their attentive African students; and guests of the Soviet Union from Ghana, Mali, or Guinea partake of the joys of sledding on the pristine Russian snow. The footage exerts a powerful impact through its immediacy, yet one is left guessing as to the reality concealed behind the government-sponsored news reels and propaganda materials. What was really lurking behind all those joyful smiles and enthusiastic backslapping? Who are these people laying wreaths by the Kremlin wall or visiting Lenin’s Mausoleum on the Red Square? What are they thinking? What are they doing in the Soviet Union? Why were the Soviet propagandists so keen to beam throughout their country and around the world the images of smiling Patrice Lumumba University students confessing their eternal gratitude to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics? Why Africa?

Natalia Telepneva’s fascinating new book provides some answers, but also, importantly, it suggests a new analytical lens through which we might better understand the grand Cold War project of Soviet outreach onto the continent and its newly independent and decolonizing nations. At a time when historians are often eager to ascribe primary explanatory power to systems, structures, and grand historical narratives, Telepneva has suggested a deceptively simple alternative: let’s look also at the individuals involved in these efforts, let’s infuse the narratives of geopolitical competition and nation-building with the agency of those who sought to “make the fairy tale come true.”

The choice of Portuguese Africa as a unit of such analysis makes sense, considering the prominent place of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau in the history of African liberation and, subsequently, of the Cold War. Lusophone Africa experienced particularly bloody and protracted anticolonial wars, which drew in a vast array of outside actors, including the USSR and some of its close ideological allies, especially Cuba and Czechoslovakia. It was in the course of and in connection with these nations’ fight for liberation from Portuguese colonialism that Moscow’s commitments on the continent deepened considerably and to a significant extent came to shape the final decade-and-a-half of the Cold War. So it is a very “big” story indeed—a story of decolonization and superpower contests, but, Telepneva suggests, it is simultaneously a story of personal encounters and connections, personality clashes, cultural idiosyncrasies and misunderstandings, a story of inspired and sometimes misguided idealisms that in some cases would

linger on into the post-Soviet era. Some of those smiles we see in the restored archival footage were, it appears, quite genuine.

While ideology did motivate the Soviet Union's outreach to the Third World and its accompanying efforts to export its own version of socialist modernization, the purveyors of those beliefs were real human beings, shaped by the extraordinary and often extreme circumstances of the early Soviet decades. Among those who would come to shape Soviet policies in Africa during the Cold War, Telepneva recognizes two distinct groups of individuals. The old guard, according to the author, consisted of the so-called "Cominternians," that is, the party cadres who had risen through the ranks of the Communist International (Comintern) and whose interest in Africa originated in the early Soviet aspirations to globalize the revolution. Probably the most prominent among these individuals was Ivan Potekhin, a Bolshevik agitator and Red Army soldier in his youth and later the first director of Moscow's Institute of African Studies. Potekhin was an ideologue, but he also was a survivor: many of the Comintern activists perished in Stalin's purges and the dictator was notoriously suspicious of area studies.⁵ These hardened individuals would come to share the stage with a cohort of experts and ideologues that Telepneva terms the "War Generation." This younger crowd consisted of war veterans like Petr Evsiukov, one of the central characters in this saga of Soviet engagements in Lusophone Africa. Evsiukov and some of the Soviet functionaries of his generation were more outward looking; they pursued and built their careers during the period of post-Stalin liberalization and the Khrushchevian thaw. Just as committed to a Marxist vision of decolonization as their elder comrades, they tended to be less dogmatic and found it easier to connect on a personal level with African revolutionary and nationalist elites, many of them their own age. These personal connections, Telepneva argues convincingly, mattered a lot and, on occasion, drove Soviet foreign policy choices.

Another valuable insight contained in the book echoes some the conclusions by such historians of the global Cold War as Odd Arne Westad and Sergey Mazov and has to do with the centrality of African agency in the story of decolonization.⁶ As Mazov demonstrated in his study of the Cold War in West Africa, Soviet experts, diplomats, and decision-makers often struggled and routinely failed to grasp the nuances of local politics and cultural peculiarities, especially when it came to ethnic rivalries and the ambiguity of racial categories. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Iosif Stalin's early aversion to area studies and the Soviet academy's refusal (or inability) to seriously study race outside of the Marxian matrix greatly complicated the Soviet Union's efforts to support African liberation movements. By engaging with newly available archival sources and oral histories, Telepneva powerfully drives this point home, based on the example

5. Apollon Davidson and Irina Filatova, "African History: A View from Behind the Kremlin Wall," in Maxim Matushevich, ed., *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters* (Trenton, NJ, 2006), 111–31.

6. Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York, 2019); Sergei Vasil'evich Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo, 1956–1964* (Washington, DC; Stanford, 2010).

of liberation struggles in Lusophone Africa, where the Soviets were left to navigate the racial and ethnic landscapes that were confusing to them. In Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Mozambique, the Soviets had to work with allies who often embraced the visions of anti-imperialism rooted in race and ethnicity. While Soviet experts remained uncomfortable with race and ethnicity as categories of analysis, they were often confronted with a reality of inter-elite racial and ethnic conflicts within the leadership of the liberation movements in Portuguese Africa that Moscow supported, including the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), and the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO, Frente de Libertação de Moçambique). In Angola and Mozambique in particular, the cause of liberation suffered from the persistent tensions between the *mestiço* and western-educated leadership and the rank-and-file activists, some of them committed to ethnic and racial particularism. In all three of the above cases, the arrival of independence would largely fail to bridge the internal rifts of race and ethnicity. In the case of Angola and Mozambique, protracted civil wars would accompany the rise of their respective independent nation states.

Moscow's task of forging durable alliances with the forces of African liberation was further complicated by the challenges presented to it by its two main global rivals in the struggle for the "soul of the Third World." While the United States' involvement on the continent remained fairly straightforward and generally reflective of its Cold War policy of containment (it is also hard not to conclude that Americans tended to view Africa as a distraction from their other preoccupations, particularly in Southeast Asia, Latin and Central America, and the Middle East), the growing influence of the People's Republic of China on the continent produced lasting headaches for Soviet decision-makers. Mao's focus on peasant-driven modernization and his attention to the question of race had a broad appeal to African revolutionaries, who also recognized the political leverage they could extract by playing both sides. Even though the Soviet Union would eventually emerge as the most important and indispensable provider of military aid to these liberation movements, some of the decision-making, particularly when it came to dealing with FRELIMO in Mozambique, was clearly influenced by Moscow's desire to stem the rise of Beijing's influence.

Any attempt to understand decolonization and postcolonial nation-building in Portuguese Africa cannot be complete without addressing the question of Cuban involvement. And here again Natalia Telepneva's book does not disappoint. Telepneva builds on some of the arguments put forth by such scholars as Westad and Piero Gleijeses to explain Cuba's role in the liberation of Angola and, subsequently, the Angolan civil war as an expression of Havana's independent agency. During the Cold War, western analysts and policymakers were often inclined to see Cuban foreign policy initiatives proceeding in lockstep with the Kremlin. This Moscow-centric vision of the Cold War has been largely revised by post-Cold War scholarship, including by the historians mentioned in this review. Telepneva makes a meaningful contribution to these arguments by revealing the substance of the debates between Havana and Moscow and making it quite clear that their ambitions and visions for

African decolonization did not necessarily overlap. Based on the available archival record, Cubans embraced a more interventionist approach, which sometimes blindsided their Soviet partners, who preferred an “African solution” to Africa’s problems. One is reminded of Fidel Castro’s behavior during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and his frustration at the time with Moscow’s conservative gradualism. His intervention in Angola may have been in part a payback to his allies in the Kremlin for past humiliation. Once again, the issue of agency looms large in the pages of Natalia Telepneva’s excellent new book.

Formally the book ends in 1976, following the MPLA triumph and the Cuban-Soviet intervention in Angola. Yet, as the author notes, the triumph descends into tragedy as the rival factions (both in Angola and Mozambique) proceed to do battle in the course of lengthy and bloody civil wars. And in some counterintuitive ways, the story of Soviet involvement in the liberation struggles of Portuguese Africa, just as the larger story of Soviet-African encounters, has found its continuation in the present. Telepneva appropriately ends her book with a nod to Russia’s more recent attempts to revive its rusty African ties. Much has been written and said lately about Russia’s “return” to Africa, most visibly manifested in the proliferation of state visits, the signing of new commercial agreements, multiple arms deals, and even two summit meetings with African heads of state, hosted by President Vladimir Putin in Sochi in 2019 and in St. Petersburg in 2023. Even more has been written about the alarming spread of Russian mercenaries throughout parts of the continent. It is tempting to conclude then that Russia’s engagement with the continent can be viewed as a gauge to measure the state of its relations with the west. In the early 2020s, just like in the late 1970s, the relationship between Russia, the self-appointed successor state to the Soviet Union, and the so-called “collective West” is at a particularly low point. Does this indicate that we are about to witness a dramatic expansion of Russia’s commitments in Africa? Natalia Telepneva’s book may contain some possible answers.

MAXIM MATUSEVICH
Seton Hall University

Kin Majorities: Identity and Citizenship in Crimea and Moldova. By Eleanor Knott. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022. vii, 356 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Figures. Tables. Maps. \$120.00, hard bound.
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Eleanor Knott’s book makes several important contributions to the fields of post-Soviet studies and studies of identity and nationalism. First and most important, it challenges the widespread perception of society as consisting of the ethnic majority and ethnic minorities and demonstrates a variety of identification patterns within the perceived majority, thus problematizing the very notion of an ethnic majority. Second, it examines diverse attitudes of putative majority members toward the foreign state claiming them as its ethnic kin and their diverse responses to that state’s offer of citizenship or benefits short of citizenship. Third, it productively compares two such “kin