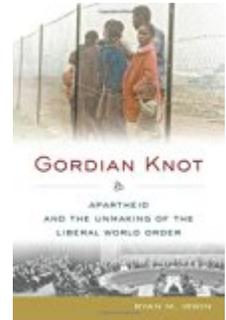


Ryan M. Irwin. *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 244 S. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-985561-2.



Reviewed by Evan Smith

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A substantial portion of literature on apartheid on the world stage has focused on the development of the struggle against apartheid in the 1970s across the globe; the solidarity created between the African National Congress (ANC) (and various other groups in South Africa) and organizations around the world; the wider (armed) liberation movements of southern Africa (such as the South West Africa People's Organisation and People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola); and the anti-apartheid movement in the Western world. By looking at the 1950s and 1960s, Ryan M. Irwin's *Gordian Knot* considers an earlier era in the struggle against apartheid. He explores how the domestic policy of the Republic of South Africa was fought internationally by newly independent African nations (in solidarity with the ANC and the Pan-Africanist Congress), particularly through the supranational institutions of the postwar era: the United Nations (UN) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Irwin shows that the recently decolonized countries of Africa (known as the African Group)

invested heavily in the idea of Pan-Africanism. They believed that apartheid in South Africa was not simply a domestic policy but a threat to the whole notion of a postcolonial Africa. While not able to influence the actions of the UN's Security Council directly, these new African nations used the floor of the UN, as well as various UN committees, to challenge South Africa. While India and other decolonized countries tried to foster collaborative action between the African Group and Western nations on the issue of apartheid, Irwin shows, this proposed collaborative action relied heavily on the political will of the United States to intervene.

At the heart of Irwin's account is the U.S. government's struggle over what course to take regarding South Africa, the UN's involvement, and the African Group's public denunciation of apartheid. By examining the internal files of the State Department and other U.S. government agencies, Irwin shows that while the Departments of Defense and the Treasury saw South Africa as a crucial anti-communist ally and an important

trading partner respectively, the State Department saw the apartheid state as a barrier to closer relationships between the United States and the newly decolonized Africa. The State Department also saw the links between the United States and South Africa as a domestic problem, as the civil rights movement made connections between apartheid rule and the state of race relations in the United States. The momentary hero in Irwin's book is G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams, the assistant secretary of state for African Affairs, who encouraged the Johnson administration to take a more confrontational stance toward the Republic of South Africa and develop closer ties with the African nations inside the UN. In the mid-1960s, Williams and others in the State Department believed that an imminent legal challenge to the apparatus of apartheid in South Africa would lead the United States to agree with the economic sanctions placed on the Republic by the UN that could potentially lead to military confrontation.

This legal challenge was the African Group's second contest of apartheid using the supranational institutions of the postwar era, namely, the ICJ. The African nations used South Africa's occupation of South-West Africa (now Namibia), unresolved from the days of the League of Nations, to challenge South Africa's authority in the southern African region. South Africa's implementation of apartheid in South-West Africa was also challenged by the African Group as a fundamental violation of human rights. Irwin outlines the buildup to the showdown between South Africa and the African Group at the ICJ in 1966 and shows that the decision, which came as a surprise to many, defused the situation at the international geopolitical level for the next decade and a half. With the ICJ not ruling against South Africa, the United States was able to neutralize the UN on the issue of apartheid. Under Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, closer relations were fostered with the Republic as an investment hub and Cold War ally.

The contribution of Irwin's book is twofold. Firstly, it is a very well told and meticulously researched story of the relationship between the United States and decolonized Africa in the 1950s and 1960s regarding the issue of apartheid. Secondly, it presents scholars with a greater understanding of why the transnational movement against apartheid shifted strategies toward direct action and armed resistance in southern Africa as well as grassroots activism among the anti-apartheid movements in the global West. The experience of the African nations in their actions against South Africa through the UN and the ICJ highlighted the fallibility of trying to fight apartheid through purely legal and diplomatic means, demonstrating to South Africa's opponents that more revolutionary strategies needed to be adopted to fight the apartheid state. While Irwin does discuss this shift briefly in the conclusion of *Gordian Knot*, it would have been more compelling to see a greater explanation of the change from the supranational stage to the grassroots level in a stand-alone chapter.

The only other reservation that I can make is that the book's focus on the United States sometimes means that it diminishes the context of the Cold War and the alternative to Western capitalism presented by the Soviet Bloc in the 1950s and 1960s. Irwin asserts that "the United States had become an unquestioned hegemon by the early 1960s," with supranational institutions such as the UN and the ICJ reflecting the dominance of Western social-democratic liberalism (p. 72). I would argue, however, that Irwin underestimates the Soviet Union's influence, which offered an alternate path of political and economic organization and definitely affected the development of the African nations and "threatened" apartheid South Africa. It seems likely that the Cold War and the specter of the Soviet Bloc may have had a greater impact on the attitude of the United States toward South Africa than Irwin suggests. In fact, his argument stands in contrast with the recent book by Irina Filitova and Apollo Davidson, *The Hidden Thread:*

Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era (2013), which focuses on the impact that the Cold War and the Soviet "threat" had on the West's relationship with South Africa under apartheid.

Overall, *Gordian Knot* is a nicely written narrative of how international diplomacy and reliance on transnational justice failed to challenge the issue of apartheid in South Africa. It also uncovers the divisions within the U.S. government over the South African problem and illustrates how the contradictions in its policy toward South Africa resulted in the challenge to apartheid being blunted at the international level.

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