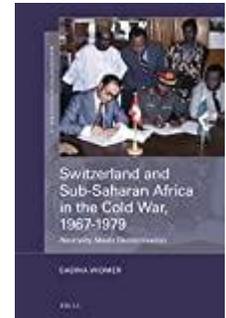


Sabina Widmer. *Switzerland and Sub-Saharan Africa in the Cold War, 1967-1979: Neutrality Meets Decolonisation.* New Perspectives on the Cold War Series. Leiden: Brill, 2021. 376 pp. \$132.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-46402-5.



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Sabina Widmer's *Switzerland and Sub-Saharan Africa in the Cold War, 1967-1979* is a valuable new contribution to the historiography of relations between Cold War Africa and smaller powers. This well-written and well-researched book is built on the foundation of primary source research conducted in sixteen archives in five countries (Switzerland, the United Kingdom, France, Portugal, and the United States). The study is not a comprehensive look at Swiss policy toward the entire African continent but instead focuses on Bern's policy toward and relations with Portuguese Africa (metropole Portugal, Angola, and Mozambique) and in the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia and Somalia). These case studies were understandably chosen because they were the Cold War hotspots on the continent during the 1970s.

There were three pillars of Swiss foreign policy toward sub-Saharan Africa during this period: the principle of noninterference in the affairs of another state, the belief in the equality of all men and opposition to racial discrimination, and

the principle that the Swiss state would not intervene in the foreign economic policies of Swiss international companies. The first and third of these principles often served to inhibit the second principle because not only did Switzerland refuse to criticize the racial policies of white-minority regimes in Africa but it also played a significant role in keeping the South African economy afloat during a period when it faced economic sanctions from most of the rest of the world. From the 1960s to the late 1980s up to 80 percent of South Africa's gold production was commercialized via Zurich-based banks (p. 54). Because such economic links with apartheid Africa profited the Swiss banking industry there was "a strong domestic lobby [within Switzerland] that prioritised relations with South Africa over those with the rest of the African continent" (p. 307). Widmer notes that between 1961 and 1973 50 percent of Swiss exports to Africa were to South Africa (p. 54).

Widmer concludes that Swiss policymakers used primarily two policy instruments to advance Swiss interests and influence in Africa: offering

humanitarian aid and their good offices of a neutral state to African belligerents. Meanwhile, Swiss technical aid to Africa had two motivations: containing the spread of Communism and promoting the spread of Swiss exports. These motivations, of course, were not much different from those of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.

According to Widmer, Swiss relations with Portugal and Portuguese Africa were guided principally by its overriding policy of neutrality and the manner in which Swiss attitudes toward Portuguese Africa might affect their relations with South Africa, which was a far more important relationship for Bern. That is to say that the Swiss government did not want to cut economic relations with Portugal over its colonial policies in Africa not so much because of the importance of trade with Portugal to the Swiss economy but rather because it would be a slippery slope that could force change in Swiss relations with South Africa and to a lesser extent with Rhodesia. The Swiss fulfilled their traditional role as a neutral mediator between Portugal and Senegal during the Portuguese colonial war in neighboring Guinea-Bissau but upset African states by refusing relations with the liberation movements in Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Mozambique. From the Swiss perspective, the wars in Portuguese Africa were a domestic matter for Portugal and therefore Bern felt it inappropriate to open relations with the national liberation movements. Conversely, African states took the viewpoint that refusing contact with the national liberation movements was an expressly pro-Portuguese position. Since the Swiss government restricted arms sales to Portugal and invited Angolan refugees to Switzerland the Portuguese were not pleased either so the Swiss policy of neutrality during the wars of liberation in Portuguese Africa seemed to displease both sides.

After the Carnation Revolution in Lisbon, which led to regime change in Portugal and its granting of independence to Angola, Mozambique,

and Guinea-Bissau, Swiss policy toward these countries changed. Following historical Swiss policy the Swiss government recognizes states, not regimes, granting recognition to the states of Portuguese Africa rather quickly despite refusing relations with the liberation movements during their wars for independence. According to Widmer, the Swiss pattern of recognizing these states focused on the granting of humanitarian aid, coordination on timing with other European neutrals like Austria and Sweden, and a desire to be neither the first nor the last Western country to grant recognition.

The Angolan civil war presented another challenge to Switzerland's policy of neutrality. The Swiss favored Jonas Savimbi's UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) for a multitude of reasons, including the fact that UNITA was viewed as a pro-Western and multi-ethnic organization and the fact that Savimbi had studied in Switzerland and married a Swiss woman. Conversely, Bern had consternation over the relations of the rival MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) with the Soviet Union, especially after Cuban combat troops arrived in the country to aid the MPLA. Nonetheless, Bern was assiduous about not favoring UNITA in action and made sure that all humanitarian aid to the country was funneled through the provisional government (which the MPLA was in de facto control of) rather than directly to any of the three warring parties.[1]

Walking the line of neutrality in the Horn of Africa was also a complicated task for Switzerland during the Ogaden War between Ethiopia and Somalia. In that conflict Somalia had invaded Ethiopia's Ogaden region (which is primarily inhabited by ethnic Somalis) in an attempt to annex the region. Through the Swiss nongovernmental organization International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Swiss sent humanitarian aid to those affected by the conflict, but in their appeals for donations the ICRC did not name the Somali

state as a party to the conflict, which in essence accepted the Somali position that the war was a local uprising of Somalis living within Ethiopia rather than a war between Ethiopia and Somalia, a position that undermined Switzerland's neutrality in the eyes of the Ethiopian government. Since Switzerland had negligible economic interest in either Ethiopia or Somalia, its position on the conflict was swayed much more by Cold War priorities to limit Soviet influence in the region than was the case in Portuguese Africa.

Swiss policy toward the African continent came under frequent criticism from African states. Widmer writes that throughout the 1960s and 1970s African states increasingly came to view Switzerland as part of the imperialist North exploiting the global South. They criticized Switzerland's reluctance to criticize South African, Portuguese, and Rhodesian white-minority rule and Switzerland's close economic links to apartheid South Africa and "accused Swiss foreign policymakers of using neutrality as a smokescreen for economic interests and racism" (p. 2). Another subject for criticism was the propensity for Swiss banks to house bank accounts for African leaders who had plundered their country's resources for their own personal gain. Perhaps the most common theme of African criticism of Switzerland stemmed from comparing its style of neutrality against that of Sweden. While both the Swedish government and public provided significant support (moral, political, humanitarian, and financial) to African liberation movements and treated their leadership like governments-in-waiting, Switzerland refused to have any contact whatsoever with such organizations. Widmer writes: "Switzerland's image problem on the African continent was compounded by the fact that African actors frequently compared its foreign policy to that of Sweden. The Swiss conception of neutrality—which insisted on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and the separation of political and economic issues—was poorly adapted to a context where conflicts focused on the end of

white minority rule and the reorganisation of global economic relations. Yet, while Switzerland's foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa was criticised by Afro-Asian governments, Sweden's outspoken position created tension with the leaders of the Western bloc. One side's 'good neutrals' were the other's 'bad neutrals'" (p. 9). Widmer's narrative paints a picture of Swiss leaders viewing Africans as powerless in the Cold War yet powerful vis-à-vis Switzerland in their potential for undermining Swiss political and economic relations with the white-minority regimes in southern Africa.

In her final analysis of Swiss foreign policy toward sub-Saharan Africa in the long 1970s Widmer writes that Bern's policy was "the result of crisis management and contingency planning rather than strategy" and "a selective interpretation of neutrality that prioritised the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and the separation of political and economic affairs guided the Swiss government's foreign policy decisions on the African continent" (pp. 283, 308). Swiss policy toward Africa during this period was founded on its historical policy of neutrality and centered on providing humanitarian aid. Although the Swiss government was concerned with the spread of Soviet influence on the continent, its policies were driven more by North-South relations than by East-West relations. Widmer further finds that Bern coordinated its Africa policy more with Sweden, Austria, the United Kingdom, and France than with the United States. Economic factors, in particular financial links with apartheid South Africa, were most important in Switzerland's policies toward sub-Saharan Africa, not the Cold War or even humanitarian concerns.

Switzerland and Sub-Saharan Africa in the Cold War, 1967-1979 is a welcome addition to the subgenre of studies that focus on the Africa policies of non-super power countries during the Cold War era.[2] My only minor criticism of the book is that it would have been beneficial to have

a short overview offering a more holistic view of Switzerland's relations with Africa during this period giving figures of the amount of total Swiss aid and trade with the continent, the number of embassies and diplomatic staff it had on the continent, and so forth, so that the reader had a better understanding of the extent of Swiss-African relations. Nonetheless, the study covers the intersection of decolonization, super power détente, Cold War intensification in "hot wars" in Angola and the Horn, and Cold War neutrality and is a worthwhile read for historians of any of those genres in addition to scholars of Swiss foreign policy and Cold War Africa.

Notes

[1]. Besides the MPLA and UNITA, the third party to the Angolan civil war was the FNLA (National Liberation Front of Angola).

[2]. Other works in this genre include: Jerry Davila, *Hotel Trópico: Brazil and the Challenge of African Decolonization, 1950-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); T. L. Eriksen, *Norway and National Liberation in Southern Africa* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2000); Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Zach Levey, *Israel in Africa, 1956-1976* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 2012); Christopher M. Morgenstierne, *Denmark and National Liberation in Southern Africa: A Flexible Response* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2003); Philip E. Muehlenbeck, *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945-1968* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Kevin O'Sullivan, *Ireland, Africa and the End of Empire: Small State Identity in the Cold War, 1955-75* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Tor Sellström, *Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2003); and Kevin A. Spooner, *Canada, the Congo*

Crisis, and UN Peacekeeping, 1960-64 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014).

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