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**CONSEQUENCES OF THE COLD WAR IN
AFRICA**



THE COLD WAR IN AFRICA

The untold consequences and the havoc these
caused.

Abstract

Evaluate the consequences of the Cold War in Africa: This essay demonstrates the significant consequences of the contests between the U.S. and the USSR in Africa. Consequences, which, can be deemed to some extent the causes of many of the challenges still faced by Africa to this day.

Elizabeth van der Walt
National History Challenge

The Cold War in Africa: Untold consequences and the havoc these caused

The dawn of the Cold War coincided with a wave of struggles for independence in European-ruled African territories. As the Cold War progressed so did the de-colonisation of Africa; some of the first African countries to gain independence post-WWII were Libya in 1951, followed by Egypt in 1952.¹ In the subsequent decade most of Northern and Central Africa would follow suit.² As highlighted by David Birmingham, in “the year 1960 no fewer than 17 former African colonies became independent members of the United Nations, including Nigeria, Somalia, Zaire, and almost all of the French possessions in western, central and eastern Africa.”³

The Cold War “transform[ed] international politics into an extremely dangerous standoff between capitalism and communism.”⁴ And Africa was not immune. Decolonisation created a power vacuum in the region and its complexities rendered African states weak and easily exploitable.⁵ The collapse of half a century’s European hegemony in Africa occurred just as Nikita Khrushchev was “searching for opportunities to expand Soviet influence in the Third World.”⁶ Simultaneously, Washington was pursuing its rigorous policy of communist containment.⁷ In 1957, Vice-President Richard Nixon stated that “the course of [Africa’s] development ... could well prove to be the decisive factor in the conflict between freedom and international communism.”⁸

Hence, Africa could not remain untouched by the global ideological contest between the U.S., the USSR, and their respective allies, and thus it was once again drawn into a struggle between outsiders, with significant consequences.⁹ The challenges of decolonisation faced by states fighting for independence, and instability in newly sovereign African states, enabled

¹ J.D. Hargreaves. (1996). *Decolonisation in Africa*. The University of Michigan. p. 11.

² Ibid. p. 12.

³ D. Birmingham. (2009). *The decolonisation of Africa*. Taylor & Francis. p. 1.

⁴ E.H. Judge., J.W., Langdon. (2018). *The struggle against imperialism: Anti-colonialism and the Cold War*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. p. 101.

⁵ J.H. Meriwether. (2002). *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*. University of North Carolina Press. https://doi.org/10.5149/9780807860410_meriwether. p. 58.

⁶ M. Clough. (1992). *Free at last: U.S. policy toward Africa at the end of the Cold War*. NYU Press. p. 6.

⁷ O.A. Westad. (2005). *The global cold war: Third world interventions and the making of our times*. Cambridge University Press. p. 25.

⁸ Clough. op. cit. p. 6.

⁹ M. Graham. (2010). Cold War in Southern Africa. *African Spectrum*, 45(1), 131-139. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F000203971004500106>. p. 132.

America and the USSR to gain a foothold in the region for ideological and strategic purposes, leaving a lasting legacy of neo-colonialism.

More specifically, the strategic interventions by both superpowers in Africa aggravated and prolonged civil conflicts, thus undermining prospects for regional peace;

As with any dramatic change in system, de-colonisation was complex and fraught with internal struggles for power.¹⁰ America and the Soviet Union used these conflicts to win influence in Africa, often acting as the armourers and patrons of local liberation movements and newly established governments.¹¹

The Soviet Union offered African states friendship; posing as the “leader of the world’s progressive forces in the fight against imperialism.”¹² It implemented programs of military and economic assistance to emphasise the contrast between (what it described as) the “neo-colonialist ambitions of the West” and the “freedom-loving approach” of Moscow.¹³ For example, across Africa it introduced “highly visible low-return public infrastructural projects,”¹⁴ and in a bid to instil Marxist-Leninist ideology in Africa’s future leaders, the USSR even offered scholarships to promising students to study at its universities.¹⁵ Similarly, through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Washington poured money into local security forces; providing them with training, equipment, and other military resources.¹⁶ It has been reported that between 1963 and 1969 the United States “spent US\$3.3 million instructing and supplying arms to African police forces.”¹⁷

¹⁰ L. Ammons. (1996). Consequences of war on African countries’ social and economic development. *African Studies Review*, 39(1), 67-82. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/524669>. p. 73.

¹¹ S.R. Levitsky & A.L. Way. Beyond patronage: Violent struggle, ruling party cohesion, and authoritarian durability. *Perspectives on politics*, 10(4), 869-889. <https://eds.s.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=37fc4188-fe57-47e3-a9ba-7b7921b0d77f%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZW RzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=84402590&db=edb>. p. 884.

¹² V. Shubin. (2008). *The hot ‘Cold War’: The USSR in Southern Africa*. Pluto Press. p. 3.

¹³ A. Iandolo. (2014). Imbalance of power: The Soviet Union and the Congo crisis. *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 16(2), 32-55. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26924483>. p. 35.

¹⁴ C.W. Lawson. (1988). Soviet economic aid to Africa. *African Affairs*, 87(349), 501-518. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/722891>. p. 505.

¹⁵ C.A. Williams. (2017). Education in exile: International scholarships, cold war politics and conflicts among SWAPO members in Tanzania, 1961-1968. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 43(1), 125-141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2017.1272227>. p. 126.

¹⁶ D. Wiley. (2012). Militarising Africa and African studies and the U.S. Africanist Response. *African Studies Review*, 55(2), 146-161. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43904826>. p. 148.

¹⁷ L. James. (2017, April 2017). Snuffed out democracies and poisoned toothpaste: how the Cold War wreaked havoc in post-colonial Africa. *World Histories*, 1(3), 10-12. <https://www.historyextra.com/period/20th-century/africa-cold-war-proxy-wars-decolonisation/>. para. 13.

Schmidt states that rather than promoting long-term stability, these interventions by the Cold War powers “entrenched power differentials and... contributed to deadly struggles over power and resources, thus exacerbating local conflicts and rendering them deadlier than those of previous eras.”¹⁸ This consequently “undermined the prospects of lasting regional peace.”¹⁹ The perpetual conflicts in the Horn of Africa during the Cold War are a prime example of this. The horn is comprised of Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea.²⁰ Its strategic location in the Gulf of Aden near the oil-rich states of Arabia, gave it major geopolitical importance, and thus rendered it a hotbed of conflicting internal and external interests during the Cold War.²¹ Incessant territorial disputes between Somalia and Ethiopia over the Ogaden region, provided the Soviet Union and America with the opportunity to establish influence in the Horn for their own strategic gain.²² According to Issa-Salwe, “in the 1970s and early 1980s both superpowers poured substantial economic and military assistance into the region” and thus “prolonged military conflicts and heightened already volatile relationships in a part of the world that had rarely witnessed peace.”²³ The extent of this consequence is demonstrated by the fact that since then the Ogaden region has remained an instable hotbed of conflict.²⁴

This is just one of the numerous examples of how America and Russia, motivated by Cold War strategy, took advantage of already unstable African states, and consequently aggravated and prolonged conflicts in the region.

Furthermore, America and Russia’s relentless competition for African alliances rendered both superpowers indifferent to the moral aspects of their African policies, including democracy and human rights issues. This strengthened authoritarian regimes and even assisted with the advent of military dictatorships;

¹⁸ E. Schmidt. (2018). *Foreign intervention in Africa after the Cold War*. Ohio University Press. p. 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 390

²⁰ P. Schwab. (1978). Cold War on the Horn of Africa. *Africa Affairs*, 77(306), 6-20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/721344>. p. 5.

²¹ R. A. Yordanov. (2016). *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa during the Cold War*. Lexington Books. p. 51.

²² A.M. Issa-Salwe. (2000). *Cold War fallout: Boundary politics and conflict in the Horn of Africa*. HAAN. p. 136.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 137.

²⁴ F. Gasbarri. (2017). From the sands of Ogden to Black Hawk Down: The end of the Cold War in the Horn of Africa. *Cold War History*, 18(1), 73-89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2017.1364729>. p. 74.

The ultra-competitive nature of the Cold War meant that Moscow and Washington's African policies fluctuated according to the real or imagined gains of the other superpower.²⁵ For both superpowers this created tension between 'hard' interests, including economic, strategic, and political considerations, and 'soft' issues such as ideology and human rights.²⁶ In the context of the Cold War, hard interests took precedence, and soft issues were overlooked; Claude Ake states that the West "was most concerned with grand strategies of Cold War politics and thus ignored their liberal principles of democracy and human rights for the sake of strategic alliances; often turning a blind eye to human suffering in countries of no geopolitical value."²⁷ Similarly, the USSR prioritised "the advancement of socialist and revolutionary vanguard parties."²⁸ The epitome of this prioritisation of 'hard' over 'soft' issues was Washington's disregard of the economic mismanagement, corruption, injustice and repression by autocratic governments in countries that were willing to oppose Moscow, including Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Zaire.²⁹

The consequences of this support of authoritarian governments and corruptible strongmen with military backgrounds were acute; Many fledgling democracies were snuffed out and, repressive regimes strengthened. This even caused and contributed to the creation of numerous African dictatorships.³⁰ Lawrence James highlights that this is one of the Cold War's lasting impacts in Africa; "a traumatised continent left to pick up the pieces and face the problems created by the corrupt dictatorships sponsored by the American-Soviet rivalry."³¹

Finally, the bi-polar nature of the Cold War created spheres of influence that symbolised the dawn of 'informal imperialism' in Africa - newly independent countries found themselves under external power and influence that threatened their new-found sovereignty;

The two previous points highlight the significant consequences of the Cold War in Africa, demonstrating how post-colonial instability was intensified and prolonged by the struggle

²⁵ Clough. op. cit. p. 1.

²⁶ T.J. Noer. (1985). *Cold War and black liberation: The United States and white rule in Africa, 1948-1968*. University of Missouri Press. p. 8.

²⁷ C. Ake. (1996). Rethinking African democracy. In L. Diamond & M.F. Plattner (Eds.), *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*. Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 63.

²⁸ T. Dunning. (2004). Conditioning the effects of aid: Cold war politics, donor credibility and democracy in Africa. *International Organization*, 58(2), 409-423. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3877863>. p. 410.

²⁹ Clough. op. cit. p. 1.

³⁰ G. Rossi. (1992). Africa facing the end of the Cold War. *Journal of International Political Studies*, 59(3), 384-392. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42737057>. p. 387.

³¹ L. James. (2017). op. cit. para 24.

between the U.S. and USSR. However, they also hint at the symbolic consequences of the Cold War in the region, showing neo-colonialism in action.

Traditional Cold War scholarship often ignore the continuities between the formal imperialism of Europe in Africa, and the spheres of influence of America and Russia during the Cold War.³² However, the examples explored above challenge this paradigm. They clearly demonstrate how the superpowers exploited post-colonialist instability to influence African states for their own gain, thus creating informal empires.³³ As pan-African leader Kwame Nkrumah stated at the time; many African States had “all the outward trappings of international sovereignty, but their economies and political programs were directed from outside.”³⁴

This symbolic consequence of the Cold War in Africa is exemplified by the Congo (also called Zaire) crisis of 1960 to 1965.³⁵ Following Belgian’s withdrawal from Congo, the Soviet Union supplied Congo’s president Patrice Lumumba with resources in order to stabilise his government and hence “lure him into the Communist camp.”³⁶ Washington, alarmed by this development, planned to kill Lumumba with poisoned toothpaste and started funding his rival, Colonel Joseph Desire Mobutu.³⁷ Subsequently, Mobutu orchestrated a coup d’état, overthrowing the government, killing Lumumba and repositioning Congo as anti-communist and pro-West.³⁸ Congo subsequently endured 5 years of civil war. The Congo Crisis demonstrates how the Cold War struggle for a foothold in Africa was a form of neo-colonialism.³⁹ When foreign governments are attempting to poison presidents and funding rival leaders, they are indirectly just as controlling as traditional empires.⁴⁰

³² C.J. Lee. (2011). Decolonisation of a special type: Rethinking Cold War history in Southern Africa. *Kronos*, 31(1), 6-11. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/41502441>. p. 7.

³³ C.R. Stephens. (2012). Complementary tools for studying the Cold War in Africa. *Journal of Black Studies*, 43(1), 95-101. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23215197>. p. 96.

³⁴ K. Nkrumah. (1965). *Neo-colonialism: The last stage of imperialism*. Thomas Nelson & Sons. p. 2.

³⁵ A. Rivkin (1960). The Congo Crisis in World Affairs. *Civilisations*, 10(4), 473-479. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41230711>. p. 473.

³⁶ Iandolo. op. cit. p. 37.

³⁷ S.R. Weissman. What really happened in Congo: The CIA, the murder of Lumumba, and the rise of Mobutu. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(4), 14-24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483553>. p 14.

³⁸ O.I. Natufe. The Cold War and the Congo crisis. *Africa: Quarterly review*, 39(3), 353-374. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40759745>. p. 370.

³⁹ J. Kent. (2017). The neo-colonialism of decolonisation: Katangan secession and the bringing of the Cold War to the Congo. *Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History*, 45(1), 93–130.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2016.1262644>. p. 94.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 100.

Trevor Getz argues that “many of the challenges facing Africa today are consequences of these informal Cold War empires.”⁴¹ Therefore, it is clear that the consequences of Cold War bipolarism in Africa also have symbolic significance. They mark the advent of informal imperialism in a region that had just battled (and in some cases was still battling) against formal imperialism.⁴²

This goes to show the momentous consequences of the Cold War on numerous aspects of post-WWII Africa; from the symbolic, to the physical. Consequences, which, as demonstrated throughout this essay, can be deemed to some extent the causes of many of the challenges still faced by Africa to this day.

⁴¹ T.R. Getz. (2011). *Modern imperialism and colonialism: A global perspective*. Pearson. p. 5.

⁴² Lee. op. cit. p. 7.

Bibliography: *Includes three annotated (bolded) sources (Ammons, James, Westad).*

Ake, C. (1996). Rethinking African democracy. In L. Diamond & M.F. Plattner (Eds.), *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ammons, L. (1996). Consequences of war on African countries' social and economic development. *African Studies Review*, 39(1), 67-82.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/524669>.

This article was central in developing the thesis that the consequences of the Cold War in Africa are the causes of many other long-lasting problems in the region. While this source is not purely focused on the Cold War, its extensive analysis of the sociological impacts of war, and the Cold War more specifically, highlights the significance of conflict in Africa. However, due to the sociological rather than historical scope of the article, it was instrumental only for the initial development of the thesis but did not provide concrete evidence for the essay itself.

Birmingham, D. (2009). *The decolonisation of Africa*. Taylor & Francis.

Clough, M. (1992). *Free at last: U.S. policy toward Africa at the end of the Cold War*. NYU Press.

Dunning, T. (2004). Conditioning the effects of aid: Cold war politics, donor credibility and democracy in Africa. *International Organisation*, 58(2), 409-423.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3877863>.

Gasbarri, F. (2017). From the sands of Ogden to Black Hawk Down: The end of the Cold War in the Horn of Africa. *Cold War History*, 18(1), 73-89.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2017.1364729>. p. 74.

Getz, T.R. (2011). *Modern imperialism and colonialism: A global perspective*. Pearson.

Graham, M. (2010). Cold War in Southern Africa. *African Spectrum*, 45(1), 131-139.
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Issa-Salwe, A.M. (2000). *Cold War fallout: Boundary politics and conflict in the Horn of Africa*. HAAN.

James, L. (2016). *Empires in the sun: The struggle for the mastery of Africa*. Orion Publishing Group.

James, L. (2017, April 2017). Snuffed out democracies and poisoned toothpaste: how the Cold War wreaked havoc in post-colonial Africa. *World Histories*, 1(3), 10-12.
<https://www.historyextra.com/period/20th-century/africa-cold-war-proxy-wars-decolonisation/>

This source gives an accurate and comprehensive overview of the consequences Cold War in Africa. It provides a wide range of examples of the ‘havoc’ it caused; exploring, among others, the Congo Crisis, conflict in the Ogaden region and the numerous dictatorships that emerged during this period. It is important to note that due to the medium of this article (magazine), it only delivers a general overview of these events, and thus other specialist sources were needed to ensure the accuracy and detail of the evidence presented in this essay. Despite this, the source provided a comprehensive starting point for the collection of evidence and hence greatly assisted with the formation of essay’s thesis.

Judge, E.H., & Langdon, J.W. (2018). *The struggle against imperialism: Anti-colonialism and the Cold War*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Kent, J. (2017). The neo-colonialism of decolonisation: Katangan secession and the bringing of the Cold War to the Congo. *Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History*, 45(1), 93–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2016.1262644>.

Lawson, C.W. (1988). Soviet economic aid to Africa. *African Affairs*, 87(349), 501-518. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/722891>. p. 505.

Lee, C.J. (2011). Decolonisation of a special type: Rethinking Cold War history in Southern Africa. *Kronos*, 31(1), 6-11. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/41502441>.

Levitsky, S.R., & Way, A.L. Beyond patronage: Violent struggle, ruling party cohesion, and authoritarian durability. *Perspectives on politics*, 10(4), 869-889. <https://eds.s.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=37fc4188-fe57-47e3-a9ba-7b7921b0d77f%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZlRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=84402590&db=edb>.

Meriwether, J.H. (2002). *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*. University of North Carolina Press. https://doi.org/10.5149/9780807860410_meriwether.

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Shubin, V. (2008). *The hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa*. Pluto Press.

Stephens, C.R. (2012). Complementary tools for studying the Cold War in Africa. *Journal of Black Studies*, 43(1), 95-101. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23215197>. p. 96.

Weissman, S.R. What really happened in Congo: The CIA, the murder of Lumumba, and the rise of Mobutu. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(4), 14-24.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483553>.

Westad, O.H. (2005). *The global cold war: Third world interventions and the making of our times*. Cambridge University Press.

This source was especially helpful in establishing the finer points of the essay due to its specialist nature. Westad's argument relies heavily on primary sources, which assisted with the detail included in this essay. However, the author neglects the historiography surrounding the Cold War in Africa because of this reliance on primary sources. Hence, this book was used only with reference to other specialist sources in order ensure that the analysis of primary sources in the essay would not be skewed. Nevertheless, it remained an important piece of scholarship in the making of this essay.

Wiley, D. (2012). Militarising Africa and African studies and the U.S. Africanist Response. *African Studies Review*, 55(2), 146-161. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43904826>.

Williams, C.A. (2017). Education in exile: International scholarships, cold war politics and conflicts among SWAPO members in Tanzania, 1961-1968. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 43(1), 125-141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2017.1272227>.

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