

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, 2021), 302pp., ISBN: 978-1-4696-6586-3

This absorbing account of relations between the Soviet Union and the leaders of anticolonial movements fighting to liberate Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau from Portuguese rule in the 1960s and 1970s is in part the fruit of Natalia Telepneva's doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Odd Arne Westad,¹ whose own work looms large in the historiography of the Cold War. The book opens like a spy thriller with a Soviet military plane landing in Luanda on the day Agostinho Neto, leader of the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), is set to be inaugurated as the first president of independent Angola. On board the An-12 is an intelligence officer by the name of Boris Putilin, 'whose job had been to coordinate arms transfers from the Soviet Union'² to the MPLA. Putilin is almost shot at by an Angolan soldier but is rescued in time to attend the inauguration by the chief of airport security.

It is an arresting way to open a book about national liberation movements in Africa, by foregrounding a relatively unknown Soviet intelligence operative like Putilin. It is, however, in keeping with one of Telepneva's main arguments here that 'Soviet policy toward anticolonial movements in the Portuguese colonies was primarily shaped by the interactions between the Soviet middle-level bureaucratic elite – that is, men and women like Boris Putilin – and African revolutionaries'.³ Drawing on interviews and recently declassified materials from Russian and Eastern European archives, Telepneva closely examines how these interactions played out between 'cadres in the various departments of the CC CPSU [Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union] apparatus diplomats, journalists, and intelligence officers'⁴ and the top brass of the MPLA, Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO), and the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC).

1 Odd Arne Westad is also the series editor of *The New Cold War History* published by The University of North Carolina Press. Telepneva's book forms part of the series which aims at producing 'new interpretations of the Cold War era made possible by the opening of Soviet, East European, Chinese, and other archives', <https://uncpress.org/series/new-cold-war-history/> (accessed 16 January 2024).

2 N. Telepneva, *Cold War Liberation: The Soviet Union and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, 1961–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 1.

3 *Ibid.*, 3.

4 *Ibid.*, 14.

Cold War Liberation: The Soviet Union and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, 1961–1975 is divided into seven chapters and for the most part the book follows a linear chronology. The period Telepneva is most concerned with is the fourteen years between the Angolan uprising in 1961 to Neto's inauguration in 1975. Telepneva closely examines the Soviet Union's diplomatic ties to the MPLA, FRELIMO and the PAIGC during this intense period of guerilla campaigns that led to the collapse of the Portuguese empire. But we would have to go back a few years to the 'revival of Soviet interest in Africa under Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev'⁵ to understand how and why men (and it is, unfortunately, largely men) like Putilin came to exercise as much influence as they did over Soviet-Africa relations.

The revival of Soviet internationalism during Khrushchev's stint as first secretary (1953–1964), Telepneva points out, 'coincided with the quickening pace of decolonisation in Africa.'⁶ Moreover, as Telepneva's book shows, this shift in foreign policy would prove fortuitous for two groups of people, or properly speaking, two generations. The first was an older generation, largely in their sixties and seventies, committed to the principle of proletarian internationalism and known as the Cominternians. (Cadres like Ivan Potekhin, b.1903 – d.1964, who helped to establish the Institute of African Studies in Moscow, were to be found among this small group.) The second were graduates from Moscow State University of International Relations (MGIMO) recruited into the prestigious Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Together with the Cominternians, 'these were the experts in international relations or *mezhdunarodniki* (literally, "internationalists") who staffed the various departments of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.'⁷

Moving from Moscow to Prague to Conakry and elsewhere, and featuring a large, rotating cast of characters that includes familiar names like Eduardo Mondlane and Amílcar Cabral alongside Boris Ponomarev and Vadim Kirpichenko, who are lesser known by comparison, Telepneva's book tells us a complex story about the 'mediators of liberation'⁸ – the military and bureaucratic elite that exercised considerable influence over the Soviet Union's relations with the MPLA, FRELIMO and the PAIGC. Telepneva's book intelligently explores the convergence of factors that shaped Soviet diplomatic ties with African liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies – from fractious internal rivalries to the Sino-Soviet split – but ultimately what her book makes clear is that with or without benefactors, 'for better or worse, the Africans in this story were agents of their own liberation.'⁹

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5 Ibid., 14.

6 Ibid., 14.

7 Ibid., 6.

8 Ibid., 11.

9 Ibid., 5.