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The crisis in Southern Africa in the 1980s: new research perspectives

Arrigo Pallotti, Timothy Scarnecchia and Corrado Tornimbeni

Southern Africa was one of the regions of the African continent most involved in the dynamics of the Cold War. This happened especially from the mid-1970s onwards, in the wake of the US's new anti-communist focus on the continuing Portuguese colonial presence and the white minority regimes (South Africa with Namibia and Southern Rhodesia). The pace of Cold War attention to the region quickened following the Carnation Revolution in Lisbon (1974) and, as a consequence, the decolonization of Angola and Mozambique. The internationalization of Angola's independence process (1975) and the victory of the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) in the concomitant civil war thanks to Cuban military intervention and Soviet military supplies, prompted the United States to definitively reassess the centrality of Southern Africa in the context of the bipolar confrontation with the Soviet Union. Mozambique also achieved independence from Portugal in 1975 under the leadership of the *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (FRELIMO) that would soon officially declare its adherence to Marxism-Leninism, while Mobutu Sese Seko's controversial regime in Zaire and the apartheid regime in South Africa remained the two cornerstones of Western interests in Southern Africa. Following events in Angola and Mozambique, the Presidents of the so-called Frontline states pushed for the elimination of all vestiges of colonial or racial minority rule. After five years of intense negotiations and a bloody war of national liberation, the United Kingdom managed in 1979, with US support, to conclude a negotiated settlement in Southern Rhodesia. This led to majority-rule independence as Zimbabwe and thus helped to shield the country from communist influence. Cold War conflicts and influence peddling would nonetheless drag on throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

This issue of the «Rivista italiana di storia internazionale» focuses on the 1980s in Southern Africa, as a decade characterized not only by the continuation of national liberation struggles in South Africa and Namibia, but also by the need for the countries in the region to come to terms with a serious economic crisis. The situation in the region was made even more insecure by the destabilization policy undertaken by the South African government with the ultimate aim of ensuring the survival of the apartheid regime. Particularly affected by this policy were Angola and Mozambique, countries in which Pretoria provided military support for the guerrilla forces of the *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA) and the *Resistência Nacional Moçambicana* (RENAMO) respectively.

The processes outlined above have, up until now, mostly been analyzed by scholars through the prism of international Cold War interference. Much attention has been devoted to the policies of Washington, Moscow, and Havana in support of perceived client states or national liberation movements in the region, either through the provision of economic and military aid or in the multiple rounds of peace negotiations for the stabilization of the regional political framework. In fact, the articles that make up this issue offer new archive-based interpretations of the historical events in Southern Africa during the 1980s, with a particular focus and emphasis on the specific political, economic, and military strategies pursued by African governments in the region, by virtue of local political priorities and forms of regional and continental concertation aimed at solving the crisis. These specific histories also foreshadow many of the problems and challenges of the post-Cold War political order. In this way, the governments of the region emerge as the protagonists as they confronted serious political, economic and military challenges by relying, as far as possible, on the support of international actors, who in turn were interested in influencing the end of hostilities in Angola, the decolonization process in Namibia, and the transition of South Africa to a democratic regime. In the face of these daunting political conflicts, regional leaders were attempting to establish

development strategies that would work with their respective countries, as well as within the parameters of regional politics and their international alignments.

In analyzing the case of Mozambique, a country that was one of the main targets of South Africa's policy of destabilization, Corrado Tornimbeni shows how the attempt by the FRELIMO leadership to find a solution to the entrenchment of RENAMO's armed rebellion was part of a long-term confrontation with its antagonists within Mozambican nationalism. Since the years of the liberation struggle, various opponents had attempted, essentially unsuccessfully, to oppose the hegemony of FRELIMO by leveraging support at the regional and continental levels. It was precisely at the regional level, in fact, that Samora Machel's independent government then decided to take action to break the link between some of those same opponents and their sponsors, mainly in South Africa and Malawi, by appealing in turn to the alliance of the Frontline states. The policy of the Frontline states in the same years is analyzed by Timothy Scarnecchia, who questions, in particular, the role played by Robert Mugabe's government after Zimbabwe's independence in January 1980. Contrary to some international expectations, according to Scarnecchia, Mugabe did not contribute significantly to an incisive role of the Frontline states, either in regard to the question of the American «linkage» between Namibian independence and the withdrawal of Cuban troops in Angola, or to that of South African destabilization in Mozambique. Zimbabwe's military intervention in Mozambique should be seen as primarily done to defend pipelines and trade routes vital to Zimbabwe's economy. Both events were essentially subordinated by the Zimbabwean president to his domestic priorities of eliminating Nkomo's opposition and ensuring Zimbabwe's commercial and military security from Pretoria's possible retaliation.

With the linkage, and the broader policy of «constructive engagement» in which it was embedded, the US Reagan administration had clearly framed the relationship between South Africa and other states in the region within the international framework of Cold War divisions, subordinating pressure for reform of the apartheid system to Pretoria's security in the regional context. According to Flavia Gasbarri, with the 1988 New York Tripartite Agreement, the South African government put its signature on what was to be a real watershed for the region and for its relations with the United States, in the perspective of an internal and regional political order no longer codified by the Cold War paradigm. In Zaire, faced with internal and regional tensions, Mobutu had strengthened his authoritarianism by negotiating a relationship with a series of international actors, primarily the United States, according to the dominant Cold War paradigm. Maria Stella Rognoni examines this case study through the lens of recently declassified US intelligence documents. Rognoni's article confirms the room for maneuver that Mobutu was able to build, for example, in negotiations for military and financial assistance to the country during years of dramatic economic crisis, thanks also to a foreign policy largely aligned with US and Western objectives. What emerges is a capacity for resilience which in the short term allowed the regime to survive the changes that accompanied the fall of the Berlin Wall, though in the long term it could not prevent its downfall under the blows of a rebellion linked to an extensive network of regional interests.

Zimbabwe and Tanzania also faced major political challenges during the 1980s, albeit for different reasons. In the former case, analyzed by Tinashe Nyamunda, immediately after independence Robert Mugabe's government embarked on the implementation of a policy of «national reconciliation» between Africans and whites while avoiding jolting the economy. Included in this strategy was the decision to repay the debt incurred by Ian Smith's racist government during the period of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence, as well as the decision to keep the Zimbabwean dollar pegged to the US dollar. According to Nyamunda, these choices, among others, prevented the government from resolving some of the structural knots in Zimbabwe's economy. Such knots would nevertheless come to a head two decades later, causing a very serious political crisis from which the country has not yet recovered. While Mugabe's government received substantial development aid from Western countries, which wanted to keep Zimbabwe safe from communist influence, in the case of Tanzania, analyzed here by Arrigo Pallotti, the government led by Julius Nyerere found itself trying to solve a serious economic crisis without being able to count on loans from the International Monetary

Fund. The tug-of-war between the IMF and Tanzania was exploited by the governments of Great Britain and the United States, which were determined to reduce Nyerere's political role in Southern Africa after Zimbabwe's independence, so that they could more easily influence the process of decolonization in Namibia and the transition to democracy in South Africa.

This special issue, then, offers new perspectives on the agency of Southern African leaders during a period in which the continued escalation of Cold War influence - even as the Soviet Union showed strains in its ability to support client states in Southern Africa - would shape the regional politics for decades to come. We believe this collection of articles will contribute to a growing reassessment of the Cold War in Africa, primarily by decentering the role of the two main powers as essentially dictating the behaviors of their respective client states. The reality was much more complex and dynamic.