Introduction

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We are approaching Luanda, but nobody is at the airport. Our AN-12 lands. I walk out. In front of me, I see an Angolan soldier standing ten to fifteen feet away. He carries an American automatic rifle hanging on a piece of rope. His eyes are blank. Holding his finger on the trigger, he aims at my stomach. It’s not clear who’s in charge. I can’t reach him because he will open fire and riddle me with bullets. He stares at me menacingly, and I assume that he doesn’t know Portuguese. I was rescued by the chief of airport security, an Angolan who knew me well. He ran towards me for about a hundred and fifty meters, shouting, “Boris.” This helped me. Then we were accompanied to our hotel.¹

— Boris Putilin

**This is how Boris Putilin** recalls arriving at Angola’s capital, Luanda, on November 11, 1975. Putilin was a Soviet Chief Intelligence Directorate (GRU; Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie, military intelligence) officer whose job had been to coordinate arms transfers from the Soviet Union to the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA; Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola). The MPLA had been fighting for control over Luanda in the run-up to Angola’s independence on November 11. The previous day, celebrations in the capital had begun with a symbolic torchlight procession to commemorate the beginning of a popular uprising against Portuguese colonial rule in Luanda on February 4, 1961. Near midnight, crowds crammed into Luanda’s stadium, cheering and firing weapons into the night sky as the red and black flag of independent Angola was raised to the sounds of the new national anthem, “*Angola Avante!*” (“Forward Angolat”).²

Putilin flew to Luanda to attend the inauguration of the MPLA’s leader, Agostinho Neto, as the first president of independent Angola. He arrived with other dignitaries, including Evgenii Afanasenko, the Soviet ambassador to the Republic of the Congo (hereafter “Congo-Brazzaville”). After landing in Luanda, they were escorted to a hotel and then to city hall for the ceremony. Putilin
recalled that Afanasenko was the first foreign dignitary to address the crowds from the balcony of city hall. Standing next to Neto, he read out a short greeting from the Soviet government to the cheering crowds. That day, November 11, 1975, Portuguese colonialism in Africa came to an end.

The Portuguese Empire in Africa began to crumble after a group of military officers overthrew the Portuguese dictatorship in a military coup in Lisbon on April 25, 1974. Spurred in part by fourteen years of colonial wars, the coup brought to power a coalition of political forces that initiated a series of fundamental changes to democratize Portuguese society, known as the “Carnation Revolution.” The new government also moved swiftly to negotiate independence for the Portuguese colonies in Africa. In 1974, the Portuguese government negotiated transfers of power to the Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC; Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde) in Portuguese Guinea (hereafter “Guinea-Bissau”) and to the Mozambican Liberation Front (FRELIMO; Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) in Mozambique. The PAIGC and FRELIMO had dominated the military struggle against Portuguese colonial rule in Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique, respectively, and thus transitions to independence were relatively smooth.

The situation was markedly different in Angola, where the collapse of the Portuguese dictatorship intensified a power struggle between the MPLA and rival nationalist movements that had gained support from Zaire (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo), the Republic of South Africa, and the United States. By June 1974, their rivalry turned into a full-scale civil war. As independence approached, the MPLA’s rivals launched an assault on Luanda. Armed with Soviet weapons and backed by a contingent of the Cuban Special Forces, the MPLA managed to retain control of the capital. Afanasenko’s symbolic appearance next to Neto on November 11 was no coincidence: it signified the Soviet role in enabling the MPLA to hold onto the capital during the crucial transition to independence.

This book argues 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. Their contacts began in the 1950s when the Soviet Union first attempted to win over the “hearts and minds” of Third World elites. As the anticolonial campaigns in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau started in the 1960s, the Soviets began to provide cash, training, and weapons for the MPLA, FRELIMO, and PAIGC. This assistance was managed by a small group of Soviet bureaucrats and military officials. This book explores the evolution of
the relationship between the Soviet elite and African revolutionaries to explain the Soviet role in the collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa. As such, the book makes three major contributions to the new histories of the Cold War. First, the book establishes the importance of African agency in the process that led to the collapse of the Portuguese Empire. Second, it highlights the role of ideology and the contribution of the Soviet bureaucratic and military elite in the conduct of foreign policy. Finally, it provides a fresh interpretation of Soviet involvement in Angola in 1974–75, substantially revising existing scholarly accounts.

Power, Agency, and African Diplomacy during the Cold War

The most popular conception of the Cold War, the conflict that pitted the Soviet Union against the United States after 1945, invites a binary understanding of power in international society. Since both the United States and the Soviet Union were the only “superpowers” during the Cold War, power, by implication, must have resided solely with the two giants. The end of the Cold War led to a substantial rethinking of the definition and geographic context of the conflict. In one trend, scholars have shifted their attention to examining the agency of what Tony Smith has called “junior members in the international system” and their role in “expanding, intensifying, and prolonging” the titanic struggle. While many early studies that adopted the “pericentric” framework focused on U.S. and Soviet allies in Europe, the publication of Odd Arne Westad’s *The Global Cold War* inspired a plethora of new research emphasizing the role of local actors in shaping Cold War struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The final dissolution of European empires coincided with the onset of the Cold War. By the mid-1960s, most European powers had given up de jure control of their colonies in Africa. Portuguese rule in Africa was widely considered a relic of the past, yet Portugal managed to hold onto its colonies until the 1970s amidst armed opposition from the liberation movements. One reason for the prolongation of Portuguese rule was the Cold War. Portugal was a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and controlled the Azores archipelago, which hosted a crucial military base in the middle of the Atlantic. Portugal’s prime minister, António de Oliveira Salazar, skillfully used access to the Azores as a bargaining chip to resist Western pressure for decolonization. Portuguese colonial rule was also sustained by an unofficial alliance with its powerful neighbors: Southern Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe) and the Republic of South Africa. By the mid-1960s, however, Portugal came into violent conflict with anticolonial movements in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, all of
which demanded independence. In each case, military support for armed struggle was available mainly from socialist countries. Portugal’s delayed decolonization thus embedded struggles against colonial rule within the international context of the Cold War.

The first generation of African studies scholars had little to say about the liberation movements’ international alliances. Their primary task was to revive the history of resistance to colonialism, but these accounts often confirmed metanarratives drawn up by African elites to legitimize their nationalist projects. When the Cold War ended and archives opened up, a number of historians began to subvert the narratives of “national liberation” to explore connections among the liberation movements, African host states, and international allies. The extent to which the Soviet Union was able to influence the African National Congress (ANC) in its struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa has in particular attracted significant controversy.

While the literature on South Africa is substantial, historiographies of anticolonial movements in the Portuguese colonies—Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau—are much fewer by comparison. Studying nationalist movements in Portuguese-speaking (Lusophone) Africa is no less important than examining English-speaking movements for numerous reasons. First, they were engaged in guerrilla campaigns against the Portuguese through the 1960s and 1970s, in contrast to the ANC, which had limited opportunities to engage in active combat at that time. Second, they were led by influential African leaders who were inspired by Marxist thought. Recent years have seen a proliferation of studies on Amílcar Cabral, the leader of the PAIGC who fought for the independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. However, only a fraction of this work considers his ideas in conjunction with diplomatic strategies.

After the Portuguese Empire collapsed, the liberation movements that came to power in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau adopted socialist-inspired modernization projects, which were arguably much more inspired by Soviet socialism than the strategies embraced by the first generation of African leaders. By looking at the international connections of the liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies, we can better understand why certain elites would come to dominate political life in Lusophone Africa after independence.

This book highlights the agency of African anticolonial nationalists in the Cold War. Nationalist activism in the Portuguese colonies took off in the aftermath of World War II, and the first organizations campaigning against Portuguese rule were set up in the 1950s, mainly among émigré communities in neighboring states. Initially, there were many groups with competing agendas
and strategies for liberation. As the Portuguese stepped up their repression of nationalist activism in the late 1950s, it became clear that whichever group could successfully mobilize resources for armed struggle would be able to capture the “national liberation” movement title.

Specifically, this book looks at a set of African intellectuals from the Portuguese colonies, many of whom grew active in anticolonial nationalist movements while studying in Portugal in the 1950s and would come to dominate the liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. It explains how these African intellectuals managed to obtain assistance in the aftermath of the Angolan uprising in 1961 and details the varied diplomatic strategies they employed to obtain military support from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. The narrative follows the cast of characters into 1975, as it reexamines how the MPLA leadership drew the Soviets into increasingly deeper commitments in Angola in 1974–75. For better or worse, the Africans in this story were agents of their own liberation.

I ideology, Foreign Policy, and the Soviet Bureaucratic and Military Elite

The role of ideology on both sides of the Cold War divide has attracted substantial attention among historians and observers alike. In the 1950s and 1960s, Western observers often pointed toward the expansionist nature of Marxism-Leninism to explain Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War.12 With the relaxation of superpower tensions in the 1970s, many began to emphasize “national interest” and security concerns. Subsequently, the end of the Cold War has led to the rediscovery of ideology as the key to understanding both sides of the conflict.13 In The Global Cold War, Odd Arne Westad has argued that both the Soviet Union and the United States espoused universalist ideologies, driving interventions in the Third World.14 Friedman’s study of Sino-Soviet competition in the Third World has added another substantial dimension to the debate, reinforcing the importance of ideology.15 Today, this debate continues, and it is fundamentally tied to a larger question about the essential nature of the Soviet Union: was it a continuation of Imperial Russia, a revolutionary state, or a blend of the two?16

This book follows in the path of scholars who have highlighted ideology as the key motivating factor in Soviet foreign policy. The very definition of “ideology” has been subject to debate. If authors like Arthur Schlesinger tended to define ideology as a “body of systematic and rigid dogma,” new studies operate with a more flexible and nuanced understanding of the term.17 Instead of
judging my cast of characters on the basis of a strict set of dogmatic beliefs, I prefer to define ideology as a particular lens through which individuals processed and understood events around them. To the Soviets, the lens was the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, which entailed a particular reading of human history and progress.

This book studies the role of ideology by following a group of people at the forefront of Soviet policy in Africa: the Soviet bureaucratic and military elite. Above all, 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. Some of them were international journalists and members of the Soviet academe. These were also officers of intelligence services, the KGB (Committee for State Security), and the GRU, who were often responsible for the practical implementation of policy.

The importance of this bureaucratic elite is not new to students of Soviet foreign policy. Oded Eran’s *Mezhdunarodniki* was the first comprehensive study of the group and their roles in training personnel, producing knowledge, and legitimating foreign policy decisions. In his analysis of Soviet cultural relations with Latin America, Tobias Rupprecht has called mezhdunarodniki “desk revolutionaries” to underscore the idealism of those who staffed Soviet academic institutes. In *Hot “Cold War,* Vladimir Shubin has described the Soviet officials as “unsung heroes” for their dedication to the cause of African liberation. Still, we know relatively little about the roles that the bureaucratic and military elite played in the conduct of Soviet policy in Africa.

Studying the bureaucratic and military elite has broad implications for our understanding of Soviet policy in Africa. This book argues that the Soviet “interventionism” in Africa during the 1970s was deeply rooted in the prior decade. Rather than a product of strategic parity with the United States, the roots of Soviet involvement in Africa stretched back to the bureaucratic changes that took place under Nikita Khrushchev, the first secretary of the CC CPSU who succeeded Joseph Stalin in 1953. While Stalin prioritized relations with the West after World War II, Khrushchev began to pursue a much more active policy in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, expanding the bureaucratic and foreign policy apparatus in the process. The primary party organ empowered to forge policy toward the liberation movements in the 1950s was the CC CPSU International Department. Responsible for providing support to international communist and anticolonial movements worldwide, the International Department staff and notably its Africa section forged personal relationships with
African revolutionaries, which often proved instrumental in determining policy choices.

The KGB and GRU acted in crucial supportive roles. They often served as liaisons with African revolutionaries, aiding allies in their struggles with local rivals, gathering information and producing analyses for decision-makers in Moscow. As the anticolonial wars in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau escalated in the 1960s, the GRU and the Soviet military also became increasingly involved in the practical side of support for the liberation movements: delivering arms, training soldiers, and advising on military strategy. The book reveals that the Soviet military believed that limited hit-and-run guerrilla tactics were no substitute for large-scale military operations against the Portuguese. Therefore, they often advocated the expansion of military operations and supplied African revolutionaries with increasingly “advanced” Soviet weapons. Such interactions contributed to what I call the “militarization” of Soviet interactions with African allies, which was in itself a product of frustrated hopes for rapid revolutionary transformation throughout the continent and the rise of African militaries as political actors in their own right.

Prior to the second half of the 1970s, the Soviet Union often lacked hard power in sub-Saharan Africa, especially compared to Western powers with a history of presence on the continent. Thus, the Soviets often used secret intelligence to conduct what I call “Cold War on the cheap.” This book uncovers the clandestine relationships that the Soviet and Czechoslovak intelligence officers forged with African revolutionaries as a way to level the playing field. By reconstructing these secret contacts, I show that Africans often used them for personal advantage. This book thus contributes to a growing body of work that aims to revise our understanding of the role of secret intelligence during the Cold War.21

The study of the Soviet bureaucratic and military elite also helps explain how ideology functioned in practice. Ideological affinity was essential to develop trust on a personal level between African anticolonial nationalists and the Soviet bureaucrats, spies, journalists, and diplomats who supported them. African nationalists from the Portuguese colonies like Angolan Mário de Andrade, Cape Verdean Amílcar Cabral, and Mozambican Marcelino dos Santos were well-known in leftist European circles. Their ideological “credentials” helped forge their initial contacts with the Soviets and allowed them to receive the first aid packages for their organizations. Meanwhile, the Soviets were highly skeptical of FRELIMO’s first president, Eduardo Mondlane, because of his U.S. education and high-profile contacts in Washington. Ideological affinity also meant that the Soviets continued to support the MPLA, even though relations with its president,
Agostinho Neto, were often conflictual. In each of these cases, ideology was the prism through which Soviet officials looked at their allies as the 1960s transitioned into the 1970s. Relations with the African countries never topped the agenda of the Soviet leadership, who were primarily preoccupied with relations with the United States, Western Europe, Eastern European allies and China. Thus, Soviet middle level bureaucrats often played particularly important roles in shaping relations with African allies.

The Soviet Union and the Internationalization of the Angolan Civil War, 1974–1975

Soviet involvement on the side of the MPLA in the Angolan Civil War has captivated scholars since the 1970s. The majority of early works analyzed Soviet policy from a political science perspective, giving weight to factors such as the importance of ideology vs. strategic interests and competition with China vs. the United States. In line with the general trend, the end of the Cold War led scholars to re-emphasize ideology. John Lewis Gaddis argued that Soviet interventions in the 1970s were shaped by “reasons more sentimental than rational.” Jonathan Haslam has gone even further to suggest that Moscow pursued an aggressive strategy toward revolutionary goals. Vladislav Zubok has explained Soviet policy in terms of the “revolutionary-imperial paradigm,” a mix of Stalin’s realpolitik and Marxism-Leninism. As the Soviet leadership under Leonid Brezhnev grew increasingly myopic, he argues, they became “prisoners” of dynamic leaders like the Cuban Fidel Castro or the Angolan Agostinho Neto, thus allowing them to be dragged into the African gambit. These studies have offered broad interpretations but do not focus on Angola in much detail.

To date, the new narrative of Soviet and Cuban involvement in Angola was based on accounts written by Arne Westad and Piero Gleijeses, both of whom had unique access to archival sources. Westad has depicted the Soviets’ relatively limited and reluctant delivery of arms to the MPLA before switching gears to support the Cuban operation once South Africa intervened in autumn 1975. Gleijeses, like Westad, emphasized Cuba’s key role in pulling the Soviets into supporting the MPLA. However, the authors differ in their analysis of the buildup of Cuban military presence in Angola in September–December 1975, with Gleijeses arguing that Castro was only able to convince the Soviets to support the airlift of Cuban troops in early 1976. Although these narratives still dominate, Vladimir Shubin’s partly eyewitness account has added some critical details, especially about the role of Soviet personnel on the ground.
This book offers a revised assessment of Soviet policy in Angola within the broader context of developments in Portugal after the coup that overthrew the dictatorship on April 25, 1974. It reinforces the role of ideology in how the Soviets perceived events in Portugal as closely interlinked with events in the colonies. It differs from existing accounts to show that the Soviets prioritized revolutionary developments in Portugal and feared that putting too much pressure on Lisbon to decolonize could jeopardize the role of the Portuguese Communist Party and left-wing members of the military who had assumed an important role in government after the coup. It reveals how Agostinho Neto and the MPLA leveraged his close relationship with military officers in Portugal to seek support from the Soviet Union amid increasingly violent competition with his rivals in 1974. The book provides details of the Soviet logistical operation to supply the MPLA with weapons and resolves the debate about the timing of Cuban involvement in Angola. The new narrative also reconstructs the role of Soviet liaisons, “men on the ground” who were fundamental in shaping perceptions of the changing situation in Angola. It shows how pressure from these actors and a broader ideological framework shaped Soviet decision-making on Angola.

Organization, Sources, and Limitations

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 review the backgrounds, formative experiences, and worldviews of key protagonists: African nationalists from the Portuguese colonies and Soviet bureaucratic and military elites. Chapter 1 shows how Nikita Khrushchev’s turn to the Third World in the 1950s gave rise to a new stratum of Soviet military and bureaucratic elite with vested interests in developing relations with newly independent African nations. Chapter 2 outlines the key tenets of Portuguese colonialism and recounts the rise of African nationalism, focusing on the life stories of key protagonists—Amílcar Cabral, Mário de Andrade, Agostinho Neto, and Viriato da Cruz. Chapter 3 centers on the 1961 Angolan uprising as the key moment when the two groups forged their first alliances. Specifically, it explains why the Soviets and Czechoslovaks provided their first assistance packages to the nationalists from Lusophone Africa in 1961 and the long-term implications of these decisions.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss how the MPLA, FRELIMO, and the PAIGC tried to dominate their respective nationalist movements and the limits of their endeavors. Chapter 4 examines the politics of liberation movements in exile in the context of the Sino-Soviet split. It illustrates how African revolutionaries used diplomacy to obtain support from their African host states and international
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patrons and tackle local rivals. Chapter 5 concentrates on guerrilla strategy and the role of Soviet military assistance in the context of the “militarization” of the Cold War in Africa. It traces discussions over guerrilla warfare strategies and how these conversations shaped relations between African revolutionaries and their international patrons. Chapter 6 follows the evolution of anticolonial campaigns in the 1970s, placing them in the context of superpower détente. It argues that détente had a minimal impact on Soviet policy in Africa. Chapter 7 reveals Soviet views of revolution in Portugal and the decolonization process, especially in Angola. Finally, the conclusion discusses the broader implications of Soviet involvement in Portuguese colonies within the Cold War context.

This book is based on extensive research in Russian and Eastern European archives. When I first began studying this topic almost ten years ago, access to Russian sources was minimal. I had to consult archives in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Poland, and Germany to construct a partial picture of what had transpired. In a few instances, the need to consult East European archives produced astounding results, as I discovered the depth of Czechoslovak involvement, especially with the PAIGC. Since then, access to Russian archives has markedly improved. In a significant development, the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI) has declassified thousands of documents pertaining to Soviet foreign relations. I was often the first to see the records of the CC International Department and its Africa desk, including reports from Soviet embassies, press agencies, and analytical overviews written by the KGB and GRU. Some of these files were available only for a brief period in the 1990s before access was closed in the early 2000s.28

Major gaps remain. The declassification has not been completed, as many files remain unavailable. Further, there is still no access to the records of the Soviet intelligence services. Therefore, any operational details relating to the activities of the KGB and GRU remain a black box. This lack of access contrasts sharply with the situation in the Czech Republic, which has released almost all the files of its security service (StB; Státní Bezpečnost). I have tried to fill the gaps with information acquired through memoirs and interviews with key protagonists in the story. Here too, the source base is uneven. Readers will notice that the amount of detail is particularly rich when it comes to the PAIGC and the context of anticolonial campaigns in Guinea-Bissau. This is because I was able to conduct extensive interviews with dozens of former participants in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. I also conducted interviews in Maputo. A similar opportunity did not present itself in Angola, mainly for practical reasons.

Other omissions are deliberate. The book is fundamentally a study of the USSR’s foreign policy in Africa, written mainly from the perspectives of the
Soviets and their African interlocutors. With the exception of military training in the Soviet Union, it does not generally address the perspectives of the rank-and-file members of the liberation movements. It also does not address the perspectives of their regional rivals or of those African men and women who did not fit into the narrative of the “national liberation struggle.”

There are several reasons for this. When I started to conduct interviews with some rank-and-file members, I realized that the material was too rich to fit into one book. I also recognized that these perspectives would distract from the main focus of the book, which is a history of relations between the Soviets and the African elites who came to dominate liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. However, I did not want to deliberately privilege elite perspectives over other voices, and I have benefited immensely from a growing literature that looks at nationalism, decolonization, and conflict in Portuguese Africa from the perspective of nonelites.  

I have thus made an explicit choice to focus on the perspectives of those who occupied positions of leadership in the liberation movements because they were the ones who communicated with international patrons. Thus, their strategies shaped relationships with the Soviets and Moscow’s view of the anticolonial movements as a whole. Also, for reasons of space, I have decided to limit the discussions of East German, Bulgarian, Czechoslovak, and Polish support for the liberation movements in Lusophone Africa except when they are directly relevant to the main story. Cold War Liberation is, therefore, a starting point in the journey toward understanding the true extent of the Soviet impact on liberation struggles in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau.

Telling the story of Soviet relations with liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies brings to the fore some understudied aspects of the Cold War while offering a new perspective on such much-debated events as the 1974–75 Angolan Crisis. The anticolonial wars in the Portuguese colonies shaped the Soviet Cold War in Africa in ways that have not yet been appreciated. The story told here offers insights into the Soviet decision-making process and the people involved in it. It also provides a comprehensive overview of the diplomacy of the African liberation movements and helps explain their durability as the often-dominant political forces in modern-day Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. What follows is the story of fourteen years of colonial wars, the African nationalists who would come to dominate the campaigns against Portuguese rule, their supporters and rivals, and the international environment in which they operated. Before going any further, we need to look at the inception of Soviet policy in Africa and the mezhdunarodniki who came to occupy important roles as “mediators of liberation” in this story.