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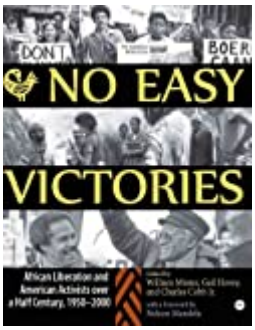

William Minter, Gail Hovey, Charles Cobb Jr., eds. *No Easy Victories: African Liberation and American Activists over a Half Century, 1950-2000.* Trenton: Africa World Press, 2008. xvii + 248 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59221-575-1.

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Solidarity Forever?

This is a remarkable and often insightful collection of essays and reflections, many of which have been penned by those who played leading roles in the dramatic story of how a conservative hegemon–the United States–was compelled to retreat somewhat in its support for colonialism and apartheid during the second half of the twentieth century. The numerous photographs alone make this book well worth the price and underscores how this book, *inter alia*, is a valuable document.

It is because of this book that I came to discover that a man I have known as a friend–Robert Van Lierop, the attorney and filmmaker who produced the wonderful documentary, *A Luta Continua* (1971)–had a grandfather who had participated in the so-called Boer War over one century ago in South Africa, while his father, who was a merchant seaman, visited there. The Van Lierops, who are of Surinamese descent, are worthy of a book all their own, yet for the time being his contribution to this worthy volume must suffice.

In her finely crafted essay in the book, Lisa Brock reminds us of the legacy bequeathed to us by the Council on African Affairs, which, beginning in the 1930s until its unfortunate and untimely demise in the 1950s hounded out of existence by the bloodhounds of the Red Scare, held high the banner of anticolonialism in Africa. Their leader, Paul Robeson, once shared a London flat with Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, while their intellectual inspiration, W. E. B. Du Bois, was invited to settle in Ghana by his pupil, Kwame Nkrumah.

It is because of this book that I was made to recall the enormous contributions that figures like Harry Belafonte and Peter and Cora Weiss have made to the cause of progressive humanity for decades. Belafonte, who is still active at a time when lesser mortals have chosen comfortable retirement, helped to make Martin Luther King Jr. the icon he is today and, likewise, contributed heavily to the success of Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba. The Weisses helped to bring attention to nations like Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau–and not least their leaders Eduoardo Mondlane and Amilcar Cabral–at a time when, sadly, many of their compatriots could find neither on a map. Peter Weiss, in addition to being a major philanthropist for African causes, also has been a pioneering lawyer, creatively applying interna-

tional human rights standards in notoriously parochial U.S. courts. Cora Weiss, in addition to her humanitarian efforts, has been a stalwart of the movement against nuclear weapons.

It is because of this book that I was reacquainted with old friends like Gay McDougall, who still bestrides the planet like a Colossus and who was standing alongside Nelson Mandela when he cast his first vote. This book also reminds us of the gargantuan contributions of Randall Robinson, who built TransAfrica into a major force in Washington, D.C., and continues to write best-selling books that force us to engage with issues that some would prefer to forget, such as reparations for the ravages of slavery and colonialism.

This book also reminded me of figures I had forgotten–sadly enough–such as the late Congressman Charles Diggs, who was a legislative lion in opposition to apartheid, and Goler Butcher, who before her tragic death, was one of the most skilled international lawyers in the United States. And, this book also made me recollect the pivotal role played by Julius Nyerere, who at immense cost to his nation and his own security, opened wide the doors of Tanzania not only to opponents of colonialism in Africa but also to opponents of white supremacy in the United States, a group that included a host of Black Panthers who continue to reside in southeast Africa. The priceless memories of the African American activist Sylvia Hill, recalling in this book the Pan-African Congress that took place in Dar es Salaam in 1974, will provide an important building block for the fortunate historian who chooses to write about this important ideological turning point in the history of Pan-Africanism.

This book compels us to recall connections that still need to be contemplated, for example, that between Namibians and the Lutheran Church, and the critical role played by the union of stevedores, headquartered in San Francisco, whose reluctance to move cargo headed for the land of apartheid was a turning point in U.S. labor's engagement with Africa. This book also has considerable information on the all-important "divestment" movement that swept U.S. campuses from the 1960s through the 1990s. This decentralized movement involved students protesting the fact that colleges routinely included in their endowments investments in corporations that had holdings in apartheid South Africa. Forcing them to "divest" was a mighty blow on behalf of liberation and was also a model of how to galvanize a national movement in a vast and conservative nation that stretches three thousand miles from the Atlantic to the Pacific–then two thousand miles more to encompass Hawaii and hundreds of miles more to ensnare Alaska.

Still, as U.S. imperialism continues to play an outsized role in Africa, magnetically pushing states away from public sector remedies to deep-seated problems for fear of angering Washington which has converted privatization and the mythical "market" into a latter-day god, it remains important to provide a critical examination, even of those who so heroically have opposed Washington's policies. Thus, members of this list should be alert to the fact that the title notwithstanding, this book focuses heavily and disproportionately on the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Zimbabwe receives short shrift, for example. This may be part of an inadvertent process of creating a historic narrative of this topic and this period with Mandela on one side of the Atlantic, coupled majestically with George Houser–a Euro-American founder and leader of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA)–on the other side. A problem with this story is that it does not frontally engage the sharp ideological and political combat that determined the final outcome.

During the time of the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, for example, the party of Robert Mugabe, now the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), received substantial support not only from a critical mass of U.S.-based Black Nationalists, but also from many of the Euro-American left who were heartened by its closeness to China; concomitantly, many of these same forces were not particularly fond of Joshua Nkomo's the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), because of the perception that it was overly close to the former Soviet Union. I recall vividly a planning meeting in early 1980 to plan a fundraising concert for Zimbabwe just before the first democratic elections. There was sharp contestation with a considerable number of people demanding that all the proceeds go to ZANU (the eventual decision was a 50-50 split between this party and ZAPU). Inevitably, the perception that ZANU was close to China and represented "true" Black Nationalism proved decisive in the minds of some. Similarly, before these elections, "activists" of a different sort–Euro-American mercenaries–flocked to the then Rhodesia in the hundreds (perhaps the thousands) to combat African liberation. As private sector mercenary firms, such as "Blackwater," capture headlines because of their depredations in Iraq, it would have been informative if this volume had noted their historical predecessors.

As we now know, Mugabe and Co. emerged triumphant in these 1980 elections, as did China in its struggle with the Soviet Union, which has disappeared. Zimbabwe's present political stance has attracted numerous foes in the North Atlantic with Mugabe's presence almost wrecking a summit between the African Union and the European Union (EU) in Lisbon in December 2007. One of the reasons that the EU chose not to pull out of this gathering despite Mugabe's presence is because of the fear that this boycott would only serve to deepen Beijing's already ramified ties with the beleaguered continent of Africa. I think that one of the many reasons that South Africa has not heeded the cries of many calling for a crackdown on the Mugabe regime is because of a justifiable apprehension of crossing swords with the leading regional ally, Zimbabwe, of the planet's rising power: China. Clearly, China and one of its closest African allies, Mugabe's Zimbabwe, will be major factors, respectively, globally and in Southern Africa, for some time to come, and it would have been useful to have received in this book needed historical background and context on these pressing matters.

The same holds true for Angola. The authors do make reference to the mid-1970s crisis in the run-up to independence from Portugal when some in the United States opposed the ultimately triumphant faction, the MPLA, which continues to lead the government in Luanda. Again, some U.S.-based Black Nationalists and others influenced by Beijing opposed the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola) because of its perceived closeness to Moscow. This contretemps helped to split the then vibrant African Liberation Support Committee, which had mobilized thousands, particularly in New York City and Washington, D.C.

Yet, the most lengthy and comprehensive essay in this estimable collection chastises the "Angolan government" since it "made little or no effort to reach out to U.S. civil society or even to Africa activists" (p. 47). Likewise, it is asserted that "the Angolan government never established a working relationship with its potential supporters in the United States" (p. 35). First of all, Luanda may have had justifiable suspicion of "U.S. civil society," since a considerable portion of this amorphous entity backed Angola's mortal domestic opponents on grounds that, in retrospect, seem either shady or specious. A little digging would have revealed that Holden Roberto, one of the key leaders of these vigorous anticommunist forces in Angola and responsible for the slayings of countless MPLA cadre, had enjoyed a long history with "U.S. civil society," including some who are otherwise treated heroically in these pages.

Moreover, I should mention that a casual browser in the collections of the New York Public Library will find a pamphlet I edited in solidarity with the MPLA during these tumultuous times–entitled "The Facts on Angola"–which was intended to bolster this party in its struggle against U.S. imperialism, apartheid, Roberto (and Jonas Savimbi), and, of course, Maoist China. I had no problem gaining access to the MPLA representative at the United Nations at that juncture, Elisio de Figueiredo, who emerged as his nation's first ambassador to the United States.

Of course, I did this political work in conjunction with the awkwardly named National Anti-Imperialist Movement in Solidarity with African Liberation, which was similarly perceived as being overly close to the Communist Party in the United States. This organization, which maintained a special relationship to those viewed as allied to Moscow–which, as it turns out, were most of the leading forces in Southern Africa–goes unmentioned in these pages. Similarly, I recall a well-attended meeting in Harlem in the 1980s to hear an address by South African Communist Party leader, Moses Mabhida. Likewise, I recall hosting South African Communist leader Chris Hani during a visit to Los Angeles in the early 1990s. (In retrospect, it seems that the event in which I hosted Hani was spied on illicitly by a so-called "rogue" San Francisco police officer working in tandem with right-wing forces; this was the subject of major litigation that I trust South African investigators will note if ever Hani's assassination is accorded a proper investigation.) There is no mention of the epochal 1981 solidarity conference at Manhattan's Riverside Church, perhaps because U.S. Communists were perceived as playing a leading role, though, in fact, there was a broad constellation of forces at work led by the exceedingly competent Trinidadian-American lawyer, Lennox Hinds, who went on to play a leading role in Mandela's post-1990 rhapsodically received visit to the United States.

Neither Mabhida nor Hani are mentioned in these pages (nor is Hinds), which is fair enough–the book states clearly that it is not meant to be comprehensive–but it fudges the issue by sniping at previous histories for not being comprehensive. The editors assert early on, "when we began working on this project, we were motivated in large part by our dissatisfaction with existing accounts of the period" (p. x). However, for those seeking to understand contemporary reality–which is part of the purpose of reading history like this in the first place–

one can close this book unprepared to comprehend how, for example, Communist-influenced forces played a pivotal role in December 2007 in dislodging a sitting president, Thabo Mbeki, as leader of the African National Congress. Or, for that matter, one is unprepared to comprehend how Mbeki and his challenger, Jacob Zuma, are both former Communists trained in the former Soviet Union with the latter's Russian reportedly being quite fluent. Charlene Mitchell, an African American Communist, is highlighted, but African solidarity was not her primary portfolio (though it would have been useful if, in the pages devoted to her, she had been asked about a journey she made to Congo-Brazzaville during the height of the Cold War when this nation was going through a Marxist phase of leadership; indeed, attention to so-called Francophone Africa is scant in these pages). The contemporary Russian scholar, Vladimir Shubin, has written at length about Moscow's considerable support for African liberation (for instance in his *ANC: a view from Moscow* (Bellville, South Africa: Mayibuye, 1999), and, again, as Moscow revives once more under the leadership of Vladmir Putin and seems destined to continue playing a major role in global affairs, it would have been helpful to readers to provide the relevant historical background for Soviet initiatives in Africa.

Yet, the activist who receives the fullest treatment in these pages, George Houser, acknowledges his anticommunism, and to the credit of this volume, it is pointed out that his organization–the ACOA–was propelled into existence not least as an outgrowth of the fierce governmental assault on the Council on African Affairs, led by the prodigious leftists, Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois. Unfortunately, the reader does not receive much assistance in comprehending how it was that socialist-oriented organizations in Africa came to receive considerable support in the citadel of anticommunism, the United States. Part of the answer rests in the fact that African Americans–who were not as captivated by conservatism–were the bulwark of the movement in solidarity with Africa.

Again, unfortunately, this volume underestimates the support that the anticolonial resistance in Kenya received during the most frigid period of the Cold War, the 1950s. We are told that with rare exception there "was virtually no analysis or criticism of the war" in East Africa (p. 19). This is simply not true. The Kenyan labor leader, Tom Mboya, first visited the United States in 1956 at a time when the Suez crisis marked the beginning of the end of British colonial rule, as Moscow was threatening to rain rockets down on London. Subsequently, Mboya appeared on U.S. national television–perhaps the first African to do so–and was on the cover of the major newsweeklies, rubbed shoulders with both John F. Kennedy (from whom he was able to obtain considerable sums for an airlift of students to matriculate at U.S. universities, one of whom was his Luo comrade, Barack Obama Sr.) and Richard M. Nixon, and received maximum financial support from the U.S. labor movement. Mboya also spoke eloquently and at length about Africans' outrage at the maltreatment of African Americans–a factor that separates him conspicuously from the bulk of his Southern African counterparts who, too often, were notoriously silent on this bedrock issue. This synergistic relationship between Africans and African Americans redounded to the benefit of both, a fact that too should have received more attention in these pages.

It is evident that another factor which spurred the existence of the ACOA was the apocalyptic reaction to "Mau Mau" in the North Atlantic community. There was a real fear that it might signify a final reckoning when the myriads of sins committed over the centuries by white supremacy and colonialism, including the slave trade and land expropriation, were finally meeting the retribution they so richly deserved. As things turned out, thousands of Africans were slain–and a few dozen Europeans (as they were termed accurately then)–but that reality should not be allowed to obscure the real hysteria that put colonialism and white supremacy decisively on the back foot.

One cannot separate the popularity of the Swahili language in black America–including the manufactured holiday that is Kwanzaa–from the resonance struck by Kenya beginning in the 1950s. Likewise, the confluence of the Suez crisis with "Mau Mau" led to more attention to the chief victim of the joint British-French-Israeli aggression: Egypt. This, in turn, gave a boost to the Nation of Islam in the United States, an indigenous nationalist-oriented religious formation that was born decades earlier but only began to gain traction when the organized left (Robeson, Du Bois, and others) were in retreat. Similarly, the U.S.-born philosophy known as "Afro-centrism" could easily be termed "Egypt-centrism," which is a direct manifestation of this growing fascination with Cairo. "Mau Mau" was studied extensively by Medgar Evers, a leading African American martyr of the movement for whom a college in New York City is named; he named one of his children after Kenyatta, Kenya's leader, and along with his brother, contemplated the founding of a "Mau Mau" in Mississippi, the heart of darkness where

he was born. Malcolm X, who was catapulted to prominence as a result of his association with the Nation of Islam, had called for a "Mau Mau" in Harlem.

How African militancy inspired the same militancy in Black America is largely an untold story in these pages. In part, it stems from the orientation, which emphasizes the ACOA, students, and religious elements, and does not give sufficient attention to, for example, Black Nationalists and Marxists of various stripes. Thus, when Patrice Lumumba was slain, a group of African Americans invaded the inner sanctum of the United Nations in protest. The gripping film, *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), is still a staple in Black America and inspired the Black Panther Party, which established an outpost in Algeria and continues to have members exiled in Tanzania.

It would have been worthwhile, as well, if this book had pointed out one of the major problems with the solidarity organizations based in Washington, D.C. (as opposed to New York City): their often problematic relationship to the political establishment. At times, activists joked that instead of these organizations lobbying on our behalf in Washington, D.C., they lobbied us on behalf of Washington, D.C.–that is, as if to say, "Congress will not simply accept your demands, please accept half a loaf." Most of the time, they would be ignored and would be sent back to Congress with renewed instructions, but at times, this "reverse lobbying" prevailed.

Another weakness of this trans-Atlantic movement was that when movements came to power, instead of tending to and nurturing solidarity movements that boosted them, they instead abandoned them, discarding them as if they were soiled paper napkins, thereby weakening these newly founded governments' attempt to influence Washington. This was a strategic blunder of monumental proportion to the extent that it merits an intensive study grounded in multiple archives.

Nevertheless, the words with which I opened this review should be emphasized–this is a highly valuable volume–and any reservations expressed here are far outweighed by this fact. It belongs in every library in Africa–and, most of all, in South Africa. Still, in its very strength it exposes an entire realm of research that has yet to be completed.