

Sabina Widmer (2021), *Switzerland and Sub-Saharan Africa in the Cold War, 1967-1979. Neutrality Meets Decolonisation*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 367 p.

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Citer cet article : Joe Gazeley (2023), « Sabina Widmer, *Switzerland and Sub-Saharan Africa in the Cold War, 1967-1979. Neutrality Meets Decolonisation* », *Revue d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique*, en ligne.

URL : <https://oap.unige.ch/journals/rhca/article/view/crgazeley>

Mise en ligne : juin 2023

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2023.cr08>

It is a rare achievement for a book on Cold War diplomacy to feel so urgent and contemporary. Widmer's powerful critique of Swiss policy towards Africa between 1967 and 1979 has clear relevance for ongoing debates over the place of Switzerland in the world. In a detailed and thorough account of Swiss-Africa policy during the long 1970s, Widmer exposes the contradictions inherent to an international agenda which seeks to incorporate as core principles both economic self-interest and international neutrality.

Through multi-archival research Widmer shows clearly how different conceptions of neutrality intersected and evolved across the period under examination (1967-1979) through the key case studies of the book: Southern Africa, the Horn and the former Portuguese colonial empire during and immediately after the decolonisation struggle. The new material and the analysis presented by Widmer are invaluable for those investigating the foreign policy of Switzerland or for those interested in an empirically grounded, theoretically situated, although somewhat veiled, critique of international neutrality. Despite the author clearly holding strong and complex views on this subject, the text is hesitant to challenge the presumed utility, or indeed the ethics, of neutrality writ large. This appears to be a choice meant to maintain scholarly objectivity and to allow the facts of the Swiss case to speak for themselves. This is understandable, but the interested reader may find themselves wishing that the author had pushed their implicit critique all the way into the open and engaged with the consequences of the contradiction hanging over Swiss foreign policy: that neutrality was a means to recover Swiss respectability following the Second World War yet the attempt to maintain neutrality with respect to imperial domination (in Lusophone Africa) and apartheid oppression (in Southern Africa) increasingly undermined this respectability. The book does identify this contradiction, and indeed this forms the key driving force of the text in some places (particularly the conclusion to part 1 and the final conclusion), yet, as the book is so substantial and detailed, in other places this thread gets lost.

The text is broken into three parts: Switzerland's foreign policy during the late independence wars in Angola and Mozambique (1967-1974), during the radical regime changes that occurred in Somalia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Angola (1969-1979), and Swiss actors' roles in and reactions to the wars in Angola and the Ogaden (1975-1979). Widmer explains that this overlapping thematic arrangement allows for more depth of understanding and that these sections largely stand alone for those who wish to dip in and out. However, in some places this very modularity works against the overall cohesiveness of the book, gaining depth at the cost of forming a cohesive whole. Each part has a largely stand-alone introduction and conclusion which breaks up the flow of the



work and, while each part has a different thematic focus, the three sections' overlapping timeline makes some subsections feel repetitive and a little disorienting to the cover-to-cover reader. Nevertheless, this decision to break the text into clear-cut parts makes the book easy to read in separate sections and, given the important contributions that each section makes, I would encourage anyone interested in Swiss or Cold War diplomatic history to download a copy of the book immediately. For those pushed for time, the conclusion to part 1 (starting p. 144) is accessible to everyone and makes a clear and forceful presentation of the book's key argument.

In the conclusion Widmer delivers a stinging critique of the way in which the principle of international neutrality too often served as a covering for underlying economic motivations with regard to Swiss policy towards Southern Africa in particular. Given the progressive support provided by Sweden (also a neutral European country) to liberation movements in African countries subject to colonial occupation, the Swiss explanation of neutrality for continuing to resist sanctions on the Smith regime in Rhodesia and the apartheid regime in South Africa rings hollow for Widmer. Through this comparison the text raises the question of whether neutrality is a morally defensible position with respect to oppression. The book does not give an explicit answer to this question, which would perhaps stray from history into moral philosophy, but the author's position is nonetheless clear. Yet, this is no simplistic condemnation, and despite a painstaking elucidation of how the diplomatic cover provided by the principle of neutrality enabled Swiss foreign policy actors to pursue narrowly perceived self-interests, Widmer also demonstrates that the commitment to an ideal of Swiss neutrality was nevertheless genuine and widely held throughout this period both among officials and the general public. Not everyone agreed on what neutrality meant, but most agreed that it was important. In this respect, Swiss foreign policy, with vaguely defined but nevertheless strongly held core principles, presents a fascinating alternative case study for those familiar with the foreign policies of the former colonisers, with debates both familiar and yet distinctly Swiss playing out in the corridors of power in Bern. For scholars of British or French Africa-policy during the Cold War, there is much to learn from this vision through the looking-glass.

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