

Review

Burton, Erich/ Dietrich, Anne/ Harisch, Immanuel R./ Schenck, Marcia C. (2021, eds.): Navigating Socialist Encounters: Mooring and (dis)Entanglements Between Africa and East Germany During the Cold War. Berlin/ Boston: de Gruyter Oldenbourg. 399 Seiten (<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110623543>).

reviewed by
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In the edited volume *Navigating Socialist Encounters*, four young historians offer a welcome addition to the growing literature on what has been called “the second world’s third world”.¹ Their key conceptual terms – moorings and (dis)entanglements – allow the editors to approach the temporary and fleeting nature of the encounters under study as generative and valuable, while their focus on individual experiences foregrounds the personal meanings GDR citizens and Africans found in the spaces of socialist encounters. The editors situate their collection firmly within African global history, arguing that attention to socialist vectors of connection can enrich our understanding of Africa’s transnational positionality in the era of independence and complicate conventional conceptions of global socialisms.

The volume consists of an introduction, ten analytical chapters and three annotated life histories co-written by Africans who lived part of their lives in the GDR. The introduction, co-written by the editors, explains the volume’s analytical and conceptual framework and offers a detailed narrative of Africa-GDR encounters over the second half of the twentieth century that serves to ground the focused essays within in a longer arc of connection and the wider

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¹ Engerman, David (2011): The Second World’s Third World. In: *Kritika* 12, 1: 183–211.

literature. This chronological narrative is thorough, if a little long and occasionally meandering, and the author-editors display such a masterful knowledge of previous work that the footnotes alone are a resource. This long introduction serves to drive home the multivalent nature of socialist entanglements in Africa and the ways in which their complex temporality pushes against classic cold war chronologies.

The main topics of the chapters are education and labour migration, with questions of memory and representation of encounter given attention throughout. The chapters are firmly grounded in African locales even when the subjects and actors under study are themselves elsewhere. Alvarado's discussion of Kenya student unions, for instance, analyses the role of the students – who were physically in the GDR and Yugoslavia – with respect to intra-Kenyan political discussions. Machava's chapter, like Raposo's life history, focuses not so much on Mozambicans' lives in the GDR but the journeys taken to get there and get home again, as well as the meanings of their sojourns in Mozambican national and personal lives. Similarly, essays exploring GDR Friendship Brigades in Angola and personal photographs taken by GDR citizens in Mozambique are located – moored – in specific African spaces, even as the practices of technical assistance in which these individuals engaged were often geographically diffuse. Finally, in a chapter on German language learning in Cairo, Depta and Hartmetz show how the regional political context played a more decisive role in Egyptians' choices for GDR-run German courses over FRG-run courses than any ideological or Cold War debate.

Another notable theme across the volume is the relative lack of socialism in the motivations and worldviews of historical actors. Machava, for instance, argues that Mozambican so-called 'new men and new women' who had undergone worker training programs in the GDR had become 'new' thanks to their acquired wealth, returning as fashion icons and bearers of goods rather than models of socialist transformation. Likewise, in his reading of the novel *By the Sea* by Zanzibari author Abdulrazak Gurnah, Burgess finds a portrayal of student life in the GDR that was characterized more by human connections than anything particularly 'socialist'. The volume authors' commitments to contextualization and personal motivations help it push back against ideological readings of these histories that have remarkable staying power.

The life histories are a highlight of the volume. They differentiate the collection from many others and offer an alternative method of understanding these histories that is valuable for teaching as well as research. I immediately added the Raposo narrative to my syllabi for its clear expressions of personal motivations and longing for a chance to study away from home alongside the

Mozambican state infrastructures that organized such possibilities. As Raposo says in her narrative, the GDR context is much less relevant than the desire for education she shared with the nascent socialist government and the challenges to this goal present in her immediate family setting. Her account, like the volume, highlights the complex motivations behind encounters made in the apparent name of socialism.

As with any edited collection, the volume suffers some internal inconsistencies in quality and coverage. I suspect that other reviews may challenge the editors on their choice to oppose tiny GDR with the vast continent of Africa; I find this less of a problem on a conceptual level since their focus on the GDR does not at all signal – as it could have done – a privileging of German perspectives. Indeed, just three of the ten chapters focus primarily on GDR points of view. In my reading, organizing the volume around the GDR creates a lens that flips the classic description of this subfield I used to begin my review and produces multiple views of the GDR from the perspectives of Africans. On the level of content however, the imbalance becomes clearer. Fully half of the chapters and two of the three life histories address Mozambique, making the volume of great interest to scholars of Mozambique, but threatening a chronological distortion as well as geographical since the majority of GDR moorings with Mozambicans occurred in a narrow sliver of time between independence in 1975 and the dissolution of the GDR in 1990. The chapters that explore Egyptian, Kenyan and Zanzibari encounters in earlier decades, along with the life history of the Ghanaian Osei and Angermann's exploration of a pan-African mixed nationality group of students in Bernau, offer some redress. As is common among work on socialist entanglements – but notably not in writing exploring life within African socialisms – the volume offers little by way of gender analysis, even as it does foreground embodied experience (of men) and highlight a few female participants in these networks. Despite this, the open-access volume is a valuable collection that represents ongoing work by each of the editors, most of the authors, and many others, including myself, to shed light on African understandings of the multiple, intimate, national, local, global encounters between Africans and “northern” state socialists. The ambition of this endeavour is to use close attention to small encounters to access the contours of the messy, aspirational times. Students of this moment will find much of interest in this collection, and its individual essays can contribute to complex global histories of socialism and of Africa's place in the world.