

SILENCED VICTIMS OF THE COLD WAR IN AFRICA: RECOGNITION AS PATHWAY TO RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Cold War's enduring impact in Africa, showing how propaganda, censorship, external interventions, and geopolitical rivalries silenced victims—and how similar dynamics persist today. It argues that recognition of these silenced voices is essential to achieving restorative justice and genuine reconciliation. Without such acknowledgment, justice remains denied and reconciliation incomplete. To address this challenge, this article proposes a normative framework grounded in African *palaver* ethics—emphasizing communal dialogue and accountability—together with Catholic principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. This approach offers a constructive pathway for reclaiming suppressed narratives, restoring dignity, and advancing justice in Africa's post-Cold War and neo-Cold War realities. It further traces how Cold War powers instrumentalized African struggles through propaganda, ideological alliances, and militarized aid, revealing the continuity of these tactics in contemporary contexts. Ultimately, this article seeks to redress historical neglect and chart practical pathways for recognizing silenced victims, restoring human dignity, and fostering authentic reconciliation across Africa.

KEYWORDS

Africa, Cold War, Communism, Recognition, Restorative Justice, Palaver Ethics, Reconciliation, Human Dignity, the Common Good, Solidarity, and Subsidiarity.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1960s marked a turning point in Africa. More than fifteen countries gained independence from European colonial powers, and this surge of sovereignty quickly drew global attention. Both the United States and the Soviet Union sought to expand their spheres of geopolitical influence over Africa—a continent rich in resources and symbolic value. But the initial gestures of solidarity toward Africa soon yielded to realpolitik.¹

Washington viewed Africa as a battle for influence, believing that supporting African nationalism was crucial to preventing the continent from falling to communism. Kennedy's administration, for instance, sought to win this competition through both diplomatic engagement—including personal meetings with African leaders—and practical aid programs like the Peace Corps. The idea was that if the US supported African independence movements and economic development, these new nations would naturally gravitate towards democracy and the West rather than the East.²

Moscow supported African nationalism with ideological and material aid, as part of its rivalry with the West, providing military aid, weapons, and training to anti-colonial and liberation movements like the MPLA in Angola and the ANC in South Africa, while also welcoming decolonization diplomatically.³ Thus, emerged a blend of genuine solidarity and strategic maneuvering, as both the US and the Soviet Union sought to expand their influence across Africa.

I. AFRICA'S NON-ALIGNED RESISTANCE AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF COLD WAR MANIPULATION

Many African nations joined the Non-Aligned Movement to resist pressure from both blocs, viewing alignment as a new form of ideological imperialism that ignored local realities. Inspired by the 1955 Bandung Conference and later consolidated at Belgrade in 1961, this movement sought

1. See JOHN KENT, AMERICA, THE UN AND DECOLONISATION: COLD WAR CONFLICT IN THE CONGO 1, 4–5 (John Kent et al. eds., 2010); see generally Jay Dee, *The Cold War in Independent Africa*, CENT. COLL.: SYNAPTIC (1993), <https://central.edu/writing-anthology/2019/07/02/the-cold-war-in-independent-africa/> (on file with the Ave Maria Law Review) (providing an overview of American and Soviet policy toward African affairs during the Cold War).

2. See PHILIP E. MUEHLENBECK, BETTING ON THE AFRICANS: JOHN F. KENNEDY'S COURTING OF AFRICAN NATIONALIST LEADERS, 17, 29, 44–45, 57, 86, 94, 106 (Oxford Univ. Press ed., 2014).

3. See

to safeguard political independence and promote South–South solidarity.⁴ Yet despite these efforts, Africa soon became a proxy battlefield in the broader Cold War struggle. For instance, “the prevailing conception of John Kennedy’s presidency has been that of a liberal administration unable to take a stronger stand on apartheid, not out of its own doubts about the desirability of black self-rule, but because of South Africa’s Cold War geopolitical value.”⁵ These superpowers advanced their strategic agendas through local factions by turning independence movements and fragile governments into tools for ideological rivalry.

Foreign interests eventually eclipsed local developmental priorities, as the quest for liberation was subsumed under competing projects of containment and expansion. The result was a profound distortion of Africa’s sociocultural, political, and economic trajectories, coupled with the postponement of genuine self-determination.⁶ By the 1980s, the devastating costs of these rivalries were undeniable. Civil wars in Angola and Mozambique—both fueled by Cold War patronage and manipulation—inflicted human suffering on a scale comparable to the most violent conflicts elsewhere. These wars made global headlines, but they were seldom analyzed as direct by-products of Cold War interventionism.⁷

The complex entanglement of local grievances with superpower interests remained obscured, leaving victims largely unacknowledged and their stories either untold or distorted. As William Minter compellingly documents, this systematic silencing of African voices was not accidental but integral to Cold War strategy. The following section draws extensively on Minter’s analysis to explore how Africa’s initial resistance to Cold War pressures gave way to deep geopolitical manipulation.

II. COLD WAR TACTICS IN AFRICA: MOZAMBIQUE, ANGOLA, AND

4. See THE NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT AND THE COLD WAR: DELHI - BANDUNG - BELGRADE (Natasa Miskovic et al., eds., Routledge 2014); see KWAME NKRUMAH, AFRICA MUST UNITE 147–48, 197–98, 200 (1963); see also RAMESH THAKUR, THE UNITED NATIONS, PEACE AND SECURITY: FROM COLLECTIVE SECURITY TO THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT 226, 275 (2d ed. 2017).

5. Christian M. De Vos, *Balancing Acts: John Kennedy, The Cold War and the African National Congress*, 32 POLITIKON 103, 103–22 (2005); see also Thomas Borstelmann, “Hedging Our Bets and Buying Time”: John Kennedy and Racial Revolutions in the American South and Southern Africa, 24 DIPLOMATIC HIST. 435, 435–63 (2000).

6. See FREDERICK COOPER, AFRICA SINCE 1940: THE PAST OF THE PRESENT 63 (Martin Klein ed., 2002).

7. WILLIAM MINTER, APARTHEID’S CONTRAS: AN INQUIRY INTO THE ROOTS OF WAR IN ANGOLA AND MOZAMBIQUE 2 (Zed Books et al. eds., 1994).

BEYOND

A recurring Cold War tactic in Africa was the prioritization of external geopolitical interests over local needs, executed through the sponsorship of internal proxies while simultaneously ignoring or silencing victims. This strategy proved devastatingly effective in Mozambique and Angola, and its patterns continue in Sudan, the Sahel, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

A. Mozambique

Mozambique's civil war erupted almost immediately after independence from Portugal in 1975. The new government, led by the Mozambique Liberation Front (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*, or FRELIMO), provoked external hostility by granting refuge to guerrillas fighting colonialism in Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe).⁸ In retaliation, the Rhodesian Army allied with FRELIMO's rivals, the Mozambican National Resistance (initially MNR, later RENAMO).⁹

While scholars debate the extent of RENAMO's eventual spread, there is broad consensus about its origins: "It is well established that Renamo was founded by the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organization, and transformed from a small group to a potent military machine in the early 1980s under the direct supervision of South African Military Intelligence."¹⁰ After Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, the apartheid regime in South Africa assumed sponsorship of RENAMO.¹¹

Although Mozambique's war appeared regional, it was in fact a covert Cold War theater: "FRELIMO got support and aid from the Soviet Union, France, and the United Kingdom, while RENAMO got its aid from South Africa, Kenya, and covertly from the United States."¹² By 1990, as the Soviet Union collapsed and apartheid South Africa weakened, both sides lost significant Cold War sponsorship.¹³ Despite the war's brutality, the conflict

8. *Id.* at 1.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.* at 7.

11. *Id.* at 2.

12. Samuel Momodu, *The Mozambican Civil War (1977–1992)*, BLACKPAST (July 4, 2018), <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/the-mozambican-civil-war-1977-1992/> (on file with the Ave Maria Law Review).

13. *Id.*

remained largely unknown to international audiences. Mainstream media outlets, shaped by Cold War priorities, under-reported the violence.

The world's attention was not drawn until July 18, 1987, when "Renamo forces attacked the small town of Homoine in Inhambane province, killing 424 civilians. Survivors said the victims included pregnant women, children, and other patients in the town's clinic. Some were shot with automatic weapons, others killed with machetes."¹⁴ The Homoine massacre—considered one of the conflict's most infamous atrocities—finally exposed what had been an eleven-year hidden war.

B. Angola

Angola's conflict, by contrast, was marked by overt Cold War intervention even before independence from Portugal in 1975. Three competing movements emerged: the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) fought against the new government of the Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).¹⁵ Here, superpower rivalry was explicit: the CIA and apartheid South Africa supported UNITA militarily, while Cuba and the Soviet Union supplied troops, weapons, and logistical backing to the MPLA government.¹⁶ The humanitarian consequences were staggering.

UNITA's widespread use of landmines placed Angola alongside Afghanistan and Cambodia in terms of amputee victims—conservatively estimated at over 15,000.¹⁷ The United Nations calculated Angola's war losses at approximately \$30 billion between 1980 and 1988—six times the country's 1988 GDP.¹⁸ UNICEF estimated that 331,000 children died from war-related causes, a smaller absolute number than Mozambique but proportionately higher given Angola's population of only 9.7 million.¹⁹

Yet, despite the enormity of the suffering, Angola's tragedy remained obscured. The international press, largely confined to the capital, rarely documented atrocities in the countryside.²⁰ Only systematic interviews with survivors conducted between 1989 and 1991 began to reveal the scope of

14. MINTER, *supra* note 7, at 2.

15. *Id.* at 4.

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.* at 4–5; *see also* PIERO GLEIJESES, CONFLICTING MISSIONS: HAVANA, WASHINGTON, AND AFRICA, 1959–1976, 229–31 (Univ. of N.C. Press 2002).

abuses.²¹ This silence left the global community with a distorted understanding of the conflict, minimizing both the human cost and the role of external actors.

Independent reports by Africa Watch and Amnesty International later documented egregious abuses, including a 1983 incident in which UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi personally ordered the burning alive of an entire family.²² Yet, unlike victims in Europe and Latin America, Angolan victims have received little recognition or redress.²³ Their silenced suffering epitomizes the broader African experience of Cold War legacies.²⁴

III. SILENCING AFRICANS VICTIMS THROUGH PROPAGANDA AND CENSORSHIP

As the Mozambican and Angolan cases illustrate, Cold War tactics in Africa were never limited to military battlefields. They also involved propaganda and censorship—tools that marginalized African voices, distorted international perception, and entrenched external dominance. Strikingly, these tactics did not vanish with the end of the Cold War. Instead, they persist in modified form, destabilizing Sudan, the Sahel, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

In Sudan, both Russia and the United States remain deeply entangled, with reports alleging that each side arms rival factions to shape outcomes favorable to its strategic interests.²⁵ Similarly, in the Sahel, the proliferation of terrorism has been exacerbated by covert interventions and weapons transfers facilitated by global actors. The situation in the DRC is even more alarming. In recent weeks, the M23 rebels advanced rapidly, capturing Bukavu after seizing Goma, and now threaten Kinshasa.²⁶ Analysts warn the government could collapse within weeks.²⁷

21. See HUM. RTS. WATCH, *ANGOLA: VIOLATION OF THE LAWS OF WAR BY BOTH SIDES: AN AFRICA WATCH REPORT*, 12–15 (1989).

22. See AMNESTY INT'L, *ANGOLA: VIOLATIONS OF THE LAWS OF WAR* (Lond., 1983).

23. See U.N. DEV. PROGRAMME, *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 1993*, at 111–135 (N.Y., Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).

24. COOPER, *supra* note 6, at 143–46.

25. See Michelle Nichols, *U.S. Accuses Russia of Funding Both Sides of Sudan's War*, REUTERS (Jan. 6, 2025, at 9:08 PM EST), <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-accuses-russia-funding-both-sides-sudans-war-2025-01-07/> (on file with the Ave Maria Law Review).

26. Emery Makumeno, *Second DR Congo City Falls to Rwanda-Backed Rebels*, BBC (Feb. 16, 2025), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0qrq8q5v52o> (on file with the Ave Maria Law Review).

27. *Id.*

Historically, Rwanda and Uganda have been accused of meddling in Congo's internal affairs.²⁸ But today, the crisis bears the hallmarks of a "new Cold War[:]" China extends influence through debt financing; the United States leverages conditional development aid; and Russia deploys military contractors such as the Wagner Group alongside affiliated networks like *Asociatia RALF*.²⁹ The tactics remain familiar—proxy interventions, hidden sponsorship, and the silencing of victims' narratives.

During the Cold War, the superpowers perfected the art of propaganda. On the one hand, they projected an idealized image of liberty; on the other, they systematically suppressed accounts of repression in Africa.³⁰ This duality produced historical narratives that glossed over indigenous experiences and presented Africa as a monolithic stage for superpower rivalry rather than as a continent with agency, diversity, and dignity. African American intellectuals and activists were among the first to expose this hypocrisy. W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, criticized the United States for championing "freedom" abroad while enforcing segregation and racial discrimination at home.³¹ These critiques underscored the absurdity of a society that marginalized dissent at home and abroad while claiming to advance liberty.

IV. NEW COLD WAR CENSORSHIP: ALGORITHMIC PROPAGANDA

These tactics have not disappeared. Instead, they have adapted to the digital age, with advanced technologies and interest-laden algorithms serving as instruments of narrative control. Predominantly controlled by US-based technology companies, these algorithms often flag dissenting or anti-Western perspectives as "propaganda," thereby silencing emerging African voices. A vivid example occurred on September 13, 2024, when former US Secretary of

28. See MAHMOOD MAMDANI, *WHEN VICTIMS BECOME KILLERS: COLONIALISM, NATIVISM, AND THE GENOCIDE IN RWANDA* 231 (2020).

29. James Ottomanelli, *A New Cold War: How the U.S., China, and Russia Each Have A Stake In The Congo*, LITTLEAFRICA NEWS (Feb. 10, 2025), <https://www.littleafricanews.com/a-new-cold-war-how-the-u-s-china-and-russia-each-have-a-stake-in-the-congo> (on file with the Ave Maria Law Review); see also Jack Detsch, *Wagner's African Hosts Regret Letting Them In: Libyans, Among Others, Are Sick of the Russian Mercenaries*, FOREIGN POL'Y (Sept. 25, 2023, at 1:02 PM), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/25/wagner-africa-mali-libya-car-prigozhin-putin-russia/> (on file with the Ave Maria Law Review).

30. See generally NOAM CHOMSKY, *MEDIA CONTROL: THE SPECTACULAR ACHIEVEMENTS OF PROPAGANDA* (Greg Ruggiero ed., 2d ed. 2002).

31. See Raymond L. Rigoglioso, *Standard Scholar Tells History of Cold War from the African American Perspective*, STAN. REP. (Mar. 8, 2017), <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2017/03/cold-war-african-american-perspective> (on file with the Ave Maria Law Review); see also W.E.B. DU BOIS, *COLOR AND DEMOCRACY: COLONIES AND PEACE* 70–72, 95 (Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1945).

State Anthony Blinken accused African Stream—a prominent Pan-African media outlet in Kenya—of serving as a conduit for “Kremlin propagand[a].”³² Without producing evidence, the allegation triggered a cascade of digital suppression.³³

Nigerian journalist, David Hundeyin, observed that “within 12 hours of Blinken’s completely evidence-free claim that African Stream is part of a ‘global Russian propaganda network,’ African Stream’s YouTube channel was suspended.”³⁴ Facebook, Instagram, and Threads followed in rapid succession.³⁵ Stripe ceased payment processing, demonetizing its X profile. Eleven days later, TikTok removed its nearly one-million-follower accounts without the State Department producing a shred of proof.³⁶ Hundeyin argued that this rapid de-platforming replicated Cold War “Red Scare” tactics, using baseless accusations to suppress dissent and delegitimize alternative narratives.³⁷

The consequences of such censorship are profound. When indigenous African voices are silenced, international audiences receive a distorted picture—one still dominated by stereotypes of conflict, poverty, and corruption.³⁸ This bias undermines investor confidence and discourages global engagement with Africa’s innovations, economic growth, and cultural achievements.³⁹ Press freedom within African states is likewise endangered. Amnesty International has documented the harassment, detention, and assault of journalists in East and Southern Africa, particularly those reporting on corruption and human rights abuses.⁴⁰

Financial constraints exacerbate these vulnerabilities. Because many African outlets rely heavily on Western wire services such as Reuters, AFP, and AP, they often struggle to produce independent, nuanced reporting. This

32. *Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press*, U.S. DEP’T OF STATE (Sep. 13, 2024), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-29/> (on file with the Ave Maria Law Review).

33. Jasper Saah, *Why is the U.S. Government Targeting African Stream?*, LIBERATION (Oct. 9, 2024), <https://liberationnews.org/why-is-the-u-s-government-targeting-african-stream/> (on file with the Ave Maria Law Review).

34. David Hundeyin, *The Empire Finds an African Enemy: African Stream in the Crosshairs*, BLACK AGENDA REP. (Sep. 25, 2024), <https://www.blackagenda.com/empire-finds-african-enemy-african-stream-crosshairs> (on file with the Ave Maria Law Review).

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.*

37. *Id.*

38. *Id.*

39. *Id.*

40. *Id.*

structural dependency ensures that African realities remain filtered through external lenses, perpetuating Cold War-era distortions.

V. WHAT CAN WE DO? RECOGNIZE VICTIMS AND MISSING VOICES

The continued suppression of African voices demands an alternative approach—one that embraces the core tenets of African palaver ethics alongside Catholic principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. This integrated framework is essential for reclaiming the silenced narratives of African victims and challenging a dominant historical discourse that has long marginalized indigenous perspectives while obscuring the true human cost of Cold War interventions.

The term “palaver” evokes several meanings for various occasions and different people. For many Africans, it represents not only a unique communication style but also a natural gathering space where talk, hearsay, prayer, barter, settlement, and news seamlessly converge. In traditional African societies, the palaver serves as a vital forum for learning, socialization, and decision-making—especially among adult male community members—thus laying the foundation for an inclusive dialogue that values every voice.⁴¹

Building on this rich cultural heritage, Bénézet Bujo, in *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, explores the profound significance of the palaver. Bujo contends that the palaver is more than a simple conversation; it is a dynamic space where the proper use of words can either create or dismantle communities.⁴² His insights underscore the indispensable role of respectful, open dialogue in integrating individuals into the social fabric and in fostering effective communal decision-making.

Nelson Mandela’s reflections in *Long Walk to Freedom* vividly illustrate the practical application of the palaver model. Mandela recounts how the Xhosa Regent and his court held tribal meetings in which every adult, regardless of status, was free to speak and be heard.⁴³ This democratic practice not only nurtured inclusive leadership but also demonstrated the transformative power of participatory communication—the very essence of the palaver tradition.

When combined with Catholic social teaching—which emphasizes both solidarity and subsidiarity—this indigenous model offers a powerful ethics of

41. See JULIA CRESSWELL, *THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF WORD ORIGINS* (3rd ed. 2009).

42. See BENEZET BUJO, *FOUNDATIONS OF AN AFRICAN ETHIC: BEYOND THE UNIVERSAL CLAIMS OF WESTERN MORALITY* 45–54 (2001).

43. See NELSON MANDELA, *LONG WALK TO FREEDOM: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF NELSON MANDELA* 21 (1994).

recognition. Solidarity calls for a commitment to the common good by supporting everyone in recognition of our shared humanity and mutual dependency, while subsidiarity calls for a commitment to the common good by allowing persons and communities to thrive on their own in recognition of individual and social autonomy. Together, these principles foster an environment where marginalized voices are genuinely elevated and skewed narratives are respectfully challenged, paving the way for a more equitable global discourse that truly honors everyone—especially, Africa’s neglected victims.

Recovering Africa’s overlooked Cold War history is far more than an academic exercise—it is crucial for healing and future peace. By bringing to light the systematic repression and suffering experienced in Angola, Mozambique, and beyond, this paper calls on scholars, policymakers, and the international community to adopt inclusive frameworks that honor Africa’s neglected victims. Only by confronting these hidden truths can we pave the way for genuine reconciliation and forge a more balanced global memory—one that acknowledges the full spectrum of Cold War legacies while celebrating Africa’s remarkable gifts to humanity.

Empowering independent African media is essential for ensuring that the voices of those most affected by historical and ongoing injustices are heard. By supporting African journalists and media houses, we can foster authentic narratives that capture the continent’s complex realities and celebrate its diverse achievements—from resilience and innovation to its rich cultural heritage. Shifting the global perspective away from externally imposed narratives toward one that truly reflects Africa’s multifaceted story is not only a matter of representation; it is a vital step toward justice and progress.

CONCLUSION

The struggle for ethical recognition and restorative justice remains one of the most enduring legacies of the Cold War in Africa. External powers continue to advance their strategic interests through local proxies and competing narratives, silencing the very communities most affected by their actions. The same patterns that devastated Mozambique and Angola—proxy warfare, ideological manipulation, and information control—now reappear in Sudan, the Sahel, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo under neo-Cold War conditions.

Addressing these legacies requires recognizing Africa’s silenced victims as central agents in the pursuit of restorative justice. Recognition demands honest engagement with the human cost of Cold War interventions and the

dismantling of narratives that continue to obscure African agency. Empowering independent African media and scholarship is vital to reclaiming the continent's history from external distortion.

An integrated ethical framework rooted in African palaver ethics and Catholic principles of solidarity and subsidiarity offers a pathway toward reconciliation. The palaver fosters inclusive dialogue and accountability, while solidarity and subsidiarity affirm shared responsibility and local autonomy. Together, they form a moral foundation for justice that restores dignity and voice to Africa's neglected victims. Ultimately, restorative justice in Africa must go beyond repairing past harms—it must transform the global systems that perpetuate silence. Only through truth-telling, inclusion, and genuine recognition can reconciliation lead to enduring peace.