

BOOK REVIEWS

HISTORY

Christian Williams. *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa: A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO's Exile Camps*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xviii + 259 pp. Maps and Illustrations. Abbreviations. Bibliography. Index. \$75.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1107099340.

Coming on the heels of widespread challenges to hegemonic nationalist narratives of the history of the decolonization struggle throughout southern Africa, Christian Williams's *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa* is undoubtedly timely. Despite the abundance of scholarship exploring how the organization of the armed struggle in exile shaped contemporary governance in the region, Williams's unique contribution is to be found in his analysis of the liberation camp as a "social space" where contemporary tensions of postcolonialism found root. Focusing on Namibia's liberation movement SWAPO, Williams's thesis is essentially that the failure of the movement to deal effectively with the "problem of accommodating new exiles' ideological views and creating accountable forms of exile government" in the camps has led today to its inability to promote a true national reconciliation process (121).

Drawing heavily on interviews of cadres who suffered gross injustices in liberation camps in Tanzania, Zambia, and Angola, the book's case studies carefully analyze how SWAPO dealt with growing tensions in the camps and uncover new perspectives on how camps were run. Unfair imprisonment, careful propaganda campaigns, and unchecked abuses of power were tools utilized by SWAPO to control its exile community. Williams shows how the SWAPO leadership in the 1970s and 1980s utilized events such as the Cassinga massacre to mobilize the threat of a "2nd Cassinga" and sow seeds of fear and suspicion among cadres, silence opposition, and strengthen the authority of commanding officers in Zambia and Angola. While the roots of this stratagem are to be found as early as the 1960s in Kongwa camp in Tanzania, Williams demonstrates how, in the aftermath of the massacre, the notion of "the spy" was mobilized to wage war not against external threats, but against internal challenges.

Complementing recent studies documenting painful stories of human rights abuses in the prisons of both SWAPO and the ANC-S abroad,

the book tracks how discussions about these matters were sidelined and delegitimized by SWAPO through a hegemonic national narrative portraying any critique of certain leaders as the work of “spies” like those who had betrayed the movement at Cassinga. As Williams explains in his chapter on SWAPO in Lubango, power struggles among competing factions within the leadership played a large role in determining who was targeted as a spy, and tensions among different ethnic groups in the exile community also led to the targeting of certain cadres. Building on work done by other southern African historians of the liberation struggle, Williams also shows how states allied to SWAPO encouraged many of these repressive actions and share responsibility for the pain inflicted on thousands of Namibians.

The concluding chapters turn to an analysis of how these inexcusable experiences in the camps, and the relative silence about these events, are still being challenged by Namibian organizations such as the Committee of Parents and Breaking the Wall of Silence. These groups, backed by progressive non-African organizations and outspoken Namibians, have attempted to create a true reconciliation process in Namibia through their attempts to decriminalize people accused of being spies or traitors. The closing pages track these admirable attempts to combat the marginalization of a number of Namibians whose experiences in the camps do not fit in to the accepted national narrative. Williams’s passion for their struggle is clear and commendable.

Within the context of popular protests led by rebellious youths and impoverished citizens currently challenging paternalistic or authoritarian governance across southern Africa, *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa* is a groundbreaking monograph on how similar problems emerged within the armed struggle in southern Africa. Nevertheless, a number of curious decisions made by Williams in the construction of this book weaken the analysis. Although the testimony of those who suffered abuse in the camps is persuasive and valuable, the central arguments in the text rely perhaps too heavily on those individuals and others who currently are dissatisfied with SWAPO. Equally diligent attempts to garner other opinions are not evident from the primary sources, making some of the conclusions appear one-sided. Moreover, explanations for the divisions within the camps are reduced too often to unconvincing arguments about “tribalism” or innately nepotistic elites; a more imaginative look at other factors such as class divisions could have strengthened the argument. Nonetheless, Williams’s text is a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the Namibian liberation struggle from the perspective of those who lived through it.

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