

# Revolutionary movements in Africa - an untold story

written by Pascal Bianchini, Ndongo Sylla and Leo Zeilig  
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**While revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Europe, the United States, and Latin America have been the subject of abundant literature, similar movements that emerged in Africa have received comparatively little attention. In an extract from their forthcoming book, the editors, Pascal Bianchini, Ndongo Sylla, and Leo Zeilig shed new light on these political movements. They argue that Africa's revolutionary left was extremely active in these years and forms a vital part of global history.**

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The history of revolutionary left movements in Africa is largely ignored and disregarded among political scientists, historians, and across the academic literature on Africa. Most of the existing literature consists of memoirs from former activists. However, most of the rank-and-file activists and even some of the leaders of these movements went to their graves without having an opportunity to tell their own stories.

The invisibility of the African revolutionary left in the existing literature contrasts with the situation prevailing on other continents, where we find a rich collection of books on the subject. In place of serious research on this issue, we find research and writing on related issues such as African revolutions and uprisings, invariably guerrilla warfare launched by liberation movements against colonial or neocolonial armies.<sup>[1]</sup> Other publications have focused on revolutionary regimes.<sup>[2]</sup> Still, more research can be found on prominent figures, not to say tragic revolutionary heroes, such as Amílcar Cabral or Thomas Sankara, who lost their lives in the struggle (and those like Patrice Lumumba, who lost their lives at the start of independence).<sup>[3]</sup> Finally, some contributions have shed light on the relations developed between African activists and revolutionaries and the former state socialist countries and the attraction exerted by this model of socialism, and more recently, on the relations between African liberation movements and Western communist parties.<sup>[4]</sup>

## **The obstacles to understanding the history of Africa's revolutionary movements**

In contrast to the rest of the world, where essays, monographs and histories have been written on radical left movements during their heyday, this is not the case for their African counterparts. [5] At first glance, the history of African revolutionary movements seems less epic. Compared to the Cuban revolution in Latin America or to the Vietnamese popular war that inspired revolutionary movements during the 1960s and 1970s, the African continent might appear unfavorable terrain for revolutionary struggles. [6]

Che Guevara, the most iconic figure of the 1960s, himself expressed reservations about the prospects of revolutionary victories in Africa. After his unsuccessful attempt in Congo, he wrote: 'Africa had a long way to go before it achieved real revolutionary maturity.' [7]

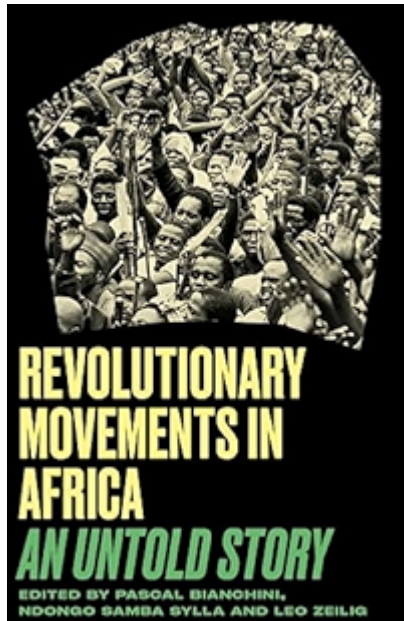
However, many revolutionary movements around the world during the 1960s and the 1970s, even if they have been able to challenge the state, were finally defeated – for example, the Naxalites in India and the Tupamaros in Uruguay, not to mention the Black Panthers in the USA. [8] Yet their experience influenced revolutionaries from other countries. The idea of a 'lack of maturity of the African people' imbued with localist traditional values is still an underlying prejudice about the revolutionary perspectives in Africa among many commentators, though it is a terrible misconception, especially when it is expressed in general for a whole continent.

Moreover, the extraordinary anti-colonial struggles and the creation of new independent states occurred during the Cold War. Anti-colonial movements and radical organizations within these movements were considered by mainstream observers as Soviet proxies rather than independent actors. In this way, a well-known American commentator could write:

“The Soviet Union has supported nationalist development in Africa as part of its global strategy to create situations of instability and weakness within the Western world, to train and indoctrinate Communist leadership cadres with the expectation that by manipulating mass discontent and nationalist symbols they could seize power in African Soviet Republics, and, in general, to carry out Lenin’s dictum to attack the West through its dependent territories.”[\[9\]](#)

For several decades, the reference to Marxism in these liberation movements was still considered as fundamental, and according to this view, radical movements and politics could not survive the collapse of the Eastern Bloc.[\[10\]](#) However, such conceptions ignore the ability of African activists and intellectuals to embrace, create and adapt revolutionary doctrines for their own sake. The idea that activists and revolutionaries simply imported ready-made doctrines from a Marxist-Leninist blueprint is at best a narrow point of view, at worst a deeply patronizing and colonial idea.

Of course, this position of principle must not lead us to ignore the numerous hurdles faced by left movements in Africa, whether from external or internal causes. During the twentieth century, the penetration of communist ideas in the contemporary sense of the word was linked to the establishment of colonial institutions and the labour force necessary for the colonial economy. Then, the major issue raised for the development of left-wing organizations (mainly communist) was the relationship with the emerging nationalist movements, though even when the colonial period came to an end, many areas remained out of reach for communist-inspired organizations.



If we go back to Karl Marx himself, we know that he was among the few European theorists of his generation who did not try to conceal his ‘debt’ to Africa, but celebrated such knowledge as foundational. Recent work by the Nigerian scholar Biko Agozino shows how people of African descent were central to the theory, practice and writings of Marx, including in *Capital*.<sup>[11]</sup> In addition to his major writings were the letters he wrote from Algeria at the end of his life, or more significantly, the articles on African-Americans during the Civil War in the United States.<sup>[12]</sup> Although it has been considered Eurocentric, his work was inspirational for many African-American and African thinkers, so that Marxist ideas have deeply influenced the ‘making of a Black radical tradition.’<sup>[13]</sup>

Even more unexpected, if we take a closer look at such an iconic figure as Cheikh Anta Diop, often associated with ‘Afro-centricity’, we note that his writings did not ignore Marxist analysis and that his own involvement in Senegalese politics with the Rassemblement national démocratique (National Democratic Rally) during the late 1970s occurred in relation with Marxist activists from the Parti Africain de l’Indépendance (PAI, African Independence Party) and from Maoist groups which joined the party he had created.<sup>[14]</sup>



In Africa, the 'boom' of Marxist revolutionary ideas occurred, especially during the decades examined in this book. Later on, these ideas retreated from the continent, which can give the utterly false impression that it was mainly a Western fad. However, this ideological decline of Marxism is not unique to Africa, rather it was a more general and global phenomenon that goes beyond the scope of this introduction and volume.

### **A chronological framework for the history of the revolutionary left in Africa**

In order to give an outline of the historical development of revolutionary movements in Africa, we propose a division into three periods. First, we identify pioneers who challenged triumphant colonialism in calling for Pan-Africanist solidarity (from London in 1900 to Manchester in 1944) and also for some of them in developing connections with Communist organizations during the interwar period, especially since the creation of the Soviet Union and the Third International. This early period of the revolutionary left embodied by activists often based in Europe, in the colonial metropolis, such as Lamine Senghor or Tiemoko Garang Kouyate for the French colonies or Wallace Johnson for the British colonies, is not within the scope of this book. However, these figures have been rediscovered and celebrated by the generations that followed, especially in the 1970s. The main debate for this generation was 'Panafrikanism or Communism?', as suggested by a famous book written in the late 1950s as a reassessment of this period.[\[15\]](#) However, if tension has existed between the two orientations, they were not always in contradiction.[\[16\]](#)

We then identify a second period, which is shorter and more difficult to delineate, during the late colonial era and the aftermath of the struggle for independent states. During this time, anti-colonial movements became more radicalized, especially when confronted with delaying tactics from colonial powers. In parallel, during this period, the influence of communist and progressive forces grew to the point that the center of gravity shifted from the diaspora to African territories, even when they were not

yet mass parties. At the same time, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the People's Republic of China began to appear as attractive counter-models to Western capitalism.

Finally, we see in the 1960s and the 1970s a third wave of activism sweeping across Africa, as it did throughout the whole world and the Global South. These 'anti-systemic' movements were not only directed against Western imperialist domination but also against 'bureaucratized' states claiming to stand for socialism.[\[17\]](#) In Africa, this New Left developed during and after 1968 and jostled with the 'old left,' still aligned with the USSR. Clandestine movements were burgeoning in every part of the continent, and a spirit of rebellion was challenging the political order.[\[18\]](#) This historical development has remained largely ignored for decades. However, recent publications have emphasized the role played during these years by certain 'capitals of the revolution' where emblematic revolutionary figures such as Che Guevara, Stokely Carmichael, Elridge Cleaver, and others traveled or settled, for example, in Algiers, Brazzaville, Conakry or Dar es Salaam.[\[19\]](#)

These countries became new bases or refuge sanctuaries for freedom fighters against the apartheid system, counter-insurgency campaigns and assassinations launched against the Black Power movement in the United States, Portuguese colonialism, and exiled nationalist activists and revolutionaries from struggles in Southern Africa. This solidarity frequently exposed these states to attacks from the South African or Portuguese armies or secret services, which were waging a dirty war against their opponents, as was shown with the assassination of Eduardo Mondlane in Tanzania in 1969 and of Amílcar Cabral in Conakry in 1973.[\[20\]](#)

However, beside these 'spectacular' headline developments, less noticeable radical experiences are to be found in every African country. This book will shed light on these forgotten realities, with most of our chapters centered on this third revolutionary age.

**[Revolutionary Movements in Africa: An Untold Story](#) will be published by Pluto Press in December 2023 (to pre-order the book please click [here](#)).**

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**Featured Photograph: The mass of assembled strikers from Coronation Brick works, during the Durban Strikes in 1973 (David Hemson, David Hemson Collection, UCT Libraries).**

## **Notes**

**[1]** Françoise Blum, *Révolutions africaines: Congo-Brazzaville, Sénégal, Madagascar, années 1960-1970*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014; Willow J. Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan: The 'Khartoum Springs' of 1964 and 1985*, London: Bloomsbury Press, 2015. Gérard Chaliand, *Armed Struggle in Africa: With the Guerrillas in 'Portuguese' Guinea*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969; Basil Davidson, *No Fist Is Big Enough to Hide the Sky: The Liberation of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, 1963-74*, London: Zed Books, 1974.

**[2]** David Ottaway and Marina Ottaway, *Afrocommunism*, New York: Africana Publishing House, 1981.

**[3]** Patrick Chabal, Amílcar Cabral: Revolutionary Leadership and People's War, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003. For a broader scope than Chabal's views, see Antonio Tomas, Amílcar Cabral: The Life of a Reluctant Nationalist, London: Hurst, 2021. Bruno Jaffré, *Biographie de Thomas Sankara: la patrie ou la mort ...*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007; Ernest Harsch, *Thomas Sankara: An African Revolutionary*,



Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014.

[4] Maxim Matusevich, 'Revisiting the Soviet Moment in Sub-Saharan Africa', *History Compass*, 7(5), 2009, 1,259-1,268. Eric Burton and Constantin Katsakioris, 'Africans and the Socialist World: Aspirations, Experiences, and Trajectories: An Introduction', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 54(3), 2021, 269-278. Françoise Blum, Marco Di Maggio, Gabriele Siracusano and Serge Wolikow (eds), *Les partis communistes occidentaux et l'Afrique: une histoire mineure?*, Paris: Hémisphères, 2021.

[5] For the United States, see Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*, London: Verso, 2002, and for a synthetic view on the revolutionary left in Latin America, see Verónica Oikión, Solano Eduardo Rey and Tristán Martín López ávalos (eds), *El Estudio de las Luchas Revolucionarias en América Latina (1959-1996), Estado de la Cuestión*, Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacan, 2013.

[6] Two books in particular were bedtime reading for the generation of the 1960s: Che Guevara, *Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare*, New York: Praeger, 1961, and Nguyen Vo Giap, *People's War People's Army: The Viet Cong Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries*, New York: Praeger, 1962.

[7] Che Guevara, *The Congo Diary: Episodes of the Revolutionary War in Congo*, Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2011.

[8] Prakash Singh, *The Naxalite Movement in India*, New Delhi: Rupa, 2006. Lindsey Churchill, *Becoming the Tupamaros: Solidarity and Transnational Revolutionaries in Uruguay and the United States*, Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014.

[9] James S. Coleman, 'Contemporary Africa Trends and Issues', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 298, 1955, 96.

[10] Allison Drew, 'Comparing African Experiences of Communism', in Norman Naimark, Silvio Pons and Sophie Quinn-Judge, *The Cambridge History of Communism, Vol. II: The Socialist Camp and World Power, 1941-1960s*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 519.

[11] Biko Agozino, 'The Africana Paradigm in *Capital*: The Debts of Karl Marx to People of African Descent'', *Review of African Political Economy*, 41(140), 2014, 172-184.

[12] Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1992.

[13] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, London: Zed Books, 1983.

[14] Thierno Diop, 'Cheikh Anta Diop et le matérialisme historique', in *Marxisme et critique de la modernité en Afrique*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007, 145-175. Pascal Bianchini, 'Cheikh Anta Diop et les marxistes au Sénégal: des relations ambivalentes entre démarcations et rapprochements, entre intégrations et scissions', *Revue d'histoire contemporaine de l'Afrique*, 4, forthcoming, 2023.

[15] George Padmore, *Panafricanisme ou communisme? La prochaine lutte pour l'Afrique*, Paris: Présence africaine, 1962.

[16] On this period and the relation between Pan-Africanism, Pan-Negrism and communism in the African diasporas, see: Philippe Dewitte, *Les mouvements nègres en France, 1919-1939*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985; Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators': Militant Anti-Colonialism*, London: Hurst, 2008; Hakim Adi, *Panafricanism and Communism: The Communist International and the African Diaspora*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013.

[17] Immanuel Wallerstein, 'New Revolts against the System'', *New Left Review*, 18,

2002, 33-34.

[18] Heike Becker and David Seddon, [‘Africa’s 1968: Protests and Uprisings across the Continent’](#).

[19] Elaine Mokhtefi, *Algiers, Third World Capital: Black Panthers, Freedom Fighters, Revolutionaries*, London: Verso, 2018. See Chapter 8. Amandla Thomas-Johnson, *Becoming Kwame Ture*, Cape Town: Chimurenganyana Series, 2020. George Roberts, *Revolutionary State-Making in Dar es Salaam: African Liberation and the Global Cold War, 1961-1974*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. See also Chapters 12 and 13.

[20] George Roberts, ‘The Assassination of Eduardo Mondlane: Mozambican Revolutionaries in Dar es Salaam’, in *Revolutionary State-Making in Dar es Salaam*, 135-172. Peter Karibe Mendy, ‘The “Cancer of Betrayal”: The Assassination of Amílcar Cabral, 20 January 1973’, in *Amílcar Cabral: A Nationalist and Pan-Africanist Revolutionary*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019, 166-182.

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