

Global histories

a student
journal

Conference Review: Africa and the Global Cold War, University of Mekelle, March 2019

Author: Paul Sprute and Maximilian Vogel

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2019.314>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 5, No. 1 (May 2019), pp. 168-175

ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2019 Paul Sprute and Maximilian Vogel



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Publisher information:

'Global Histories: A Student Journal' is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. 'Global Histories' is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

Africa and the Global Cold War –
Conference at the University of Mekelle, March 2019

Reviewed by:

**PAUL SPRUTE
& MAXIMILIAN VOGEL**

Whether it is Addis Abeba's Tigrachin Monument to the Dergue rule in Ethiopia and the joint struggle of Cuban and Ethiopian soldiers or the only public statue of Karl Marx in Africa (Figure 1),¹ it is hard to avoid stumbling over marks of the Cold War in Ethiopia's capital. While the rapid growth of the economy and population, as well as a dizzying construction boom might have changed the outlook of the capital city and the country over the last decades, these spaces remind us that the "Global Cold War" had one of its main theatres in this region. If one looks underneath recently sealed asphalt roads and turns away from the ongoing construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, but instead looks at the so-called "China Road" of the 1970s, or explores the history of the Yugoslav-built hydrological power plant at the Blue Nile Falls, it becomes clear how much of the current Ethiopian infrastructure is connected to the Cold War as well, indeed holding a multitude of intriguing stories.²

Moreover, Ethiopia's current political system has been firmly rooted in the outcome of the Cold War. The ruling coalition of regional parties, led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), has come to power by waging an ultimately successful guerrilla war against the Dergue, finally ousting Mengistu's government in 1991—coinciding with the collapse of his sponsors in the Soviet Union. Beyond Addis, monuments are dedicated to this struggle in the capitals of Ethiopia's federal states. While these stelae in Amhara's capital Bahir Dar or Tigray's Mekelle commemorate the emergence of today's system of rule, the basic political set-up of Ethiopia's "ethnic federalism" has recently been shaken.³ With the coming into power of the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the unquestioned dominance of the TPLF now seems to belong to the past. At the same time, the prime minister has been able to cut through one of the most strongly and firmly tied Gordian knots that the interlinked forces of (anti-) imperialism and the dynamics of the Cold War have left: the bitter confrontation between the former comrades in arms of the Tigray and the Eritrean People's Liberation Fronts. Notwithstanding the recent détente between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Horn of Africa remains a hotbed of political upheaval and geopolitical rivalry to be linked to the entangled dynamics of colonialism and the Cold War. Djibouti's role as a safe haven for six different international navies, the lasting fragmentation of Somalia, but also the devastating war in Yemen and the recent fall of the regime in Sudan make us painfully aware of this fact.⁴ To put it shortly, there hardly seems to be a place from where it would be more crucial to explore the history of the Global Cold War than Ethiopia, at the center

1 Meskerem Assegued, Demeke Brehane, and Denis Pesut, *Public Monuments of Addis Ababa, 1930–2014* (Addis Abeba: Goethe-Institut, 2014), 36–41.

2 For contemporary impressions and some of these stories of Cold War encounters, for example refer to this travelogue of a Soviet engineer in Ethiopia: Georgi Galperin, *Äthiopische Reise* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1972).

3 Mahmood Mamdani, "The Trouble with Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/03/opinion/ethiopia-abiy-ahmed-reforms-ethnic-conflict-ethnic-federalism.html>.

4 Gérard Prunier, "Éthiopie-Érythrie, Fin des Hostilités," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2018, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2018/11/PRUNIER/59209>.

of the Horn of Africa. This thought must have been close to the organizers of the workshop series “Africa and the Global Cold War.” The two organizing parties, the Universities of Mekelle and Erfurt, had initiated their cooperation in 2014 with a focus on the cartographic history of the Abyssinian Empire based on the extensive Perthes collections housed in Gotha. This initial project triggered further cooperation in the field of international history.⁵ In July 2018, a first workshop on “Africa and the Global Cold War” was held at the University of Erfurt.⁶ Already focusing on the Horn of Africa, this exchange between scholars from Ethiopia and Germany turned out to be so productive that a second conference was organized in Mekelle on March 25 and 26, 2019. The stated goal of this workshop, convened by Aychegrew Hadera and Christian Methfessel, was to extend the opportunities for Ethiopian scholars to discuss their contributions. Moreover, the workshop sought to strengthen interdisciplinary approaches by including international relations. This change also meant that the workshop gave ample room for the discussion of the contemporary situation in the Horn of Africa. Throughout the conference, a number of core themes and topics emerged that were picked up in different presentations and panels. One central concern was the relationship of the Cold War and colonialism. While some participants suggested to understand the Cold War on the African continent as a form of colonization, others focused on the nuances that a close study of Ethiopia—as the only African country that was never colonized—can make visible. In regards to methodological approaches, there was strong agreement that collaborative research bridging different locales and scales would hold insights for the study of interlinkages and interdependencies in the Global Cold War. While no exemplary contributions were made by individual conference presentations, the overall conference discussion reflected this spirit quite well. Furthermore, the general emphasis of discussions lay in retracing the intricate power dynamics shaping the Cold War in the region and its geopolitical dynamics until today as straightforward international history rather than on post-colonial or deconstructivist approaches.

Thematically, different emphases emerged throughout the panels, binding the conference discussion together. First of all, a number of presentations gave much needed broader historical context. Michael Pesek explored African perspectives on the Cold War by analyzing the alliances that African states knit after independence. Abraha Woldu focused more closely on Ethiopia’s shifting positions against the background of the Cold War and decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. Woldu highlighted how the Ethiopian Empire ultimately became

5 For general information on the Perthes collection, please see: “The Gotha Perthes Collection,” Universität Erfurt, accessed April 19, 2019, <https://www.uni-erfurt.de/en/the-gotha-perthes-collection/>; For an overview of the cooperation between the Universities of Mekelle and Erfurt, please see: “Research Cooperation with Mekelle University (Ethiopia),” Universität Erfurt, accessed April 19, 2019, <https://www.uni-erfurt.de/index.php?id=52752&L=1>.

6 For a conference report, please see: Philipp Metzler, “Africa and the Global Cold War,” H-Soz-Kult, January 22, 2019, <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-8061>.

a sponsor of the Non-Aligned Movement and host of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) having opened its political alliances with the Bandung conference. Both presentations were complemented nicely by Tewodros Hailemariam's contribution discussing the influence and changing focus of Marxist theory in Africa during the Global Cold War as a means to challenge dominant epistemic and political orders.

Other presentations dealt more closely with the international history of diplomacy in the Horn. Paul Skäbe explored the strategy of Jimmy Carter's administration in the Somali-Ethiopian confrontation which escalated in the Ogaden War. Skäbe highlighted the influence of the former station chief of the Central Intelligence Agency and journalist Paul Henze in shaping understandings of the political moment. Christian Methfessel analyzed the United Kingdom's role in the Ogaden War and the indirect influences that African states exercised in this geopolitical crisis as the British diplomats accounted for possible African responses to British action. Highlighting the obstacles to a concerted response by other African states or the United Nations Security Council, Methfessel's presentation related directly to Thomas Spielbüchler's earlier contribution on the failed conflict management mechanism of the OAU. Spielbüchler located the causes of its failure in the structuring impact of the Cold War and the preoccupation of African states on their recently gained national sovereignty. Again, taking a closer look at the repercussions of long-lasting conflict in Ethiopia on the social and political development in specific locales, Dessalegn Bizuneh examined the effects of the Ethiopian revolution of 1974 and Cold War rivalry in the town of Metama at the Ethiopian-Sudanese border. Aychegrew Hadera explored the course of "development interventions" by international actors in the Kobo-Alamata Valley in Southern Tigray since the 1960s. Both presentations assessed the opportunities of local actors in relation to external influences in time of armed conflicts.

A key focus of the conference was the rise of a new global humanitarian discourse and activism in 1970s and 1980s in the context of the devastating famines in Ethiopia. Florian Wagner showed, for example, how arguments of humanitarian repatriation and resettlement were deployed in a functionalist and situationist manner by the TPLF in Northern Ethiopia who moved refugees back to their war-torn homelands in Tigray. Wagner compared their strategy to the 'mission' of Jewish activists in the United States of America to 'save' the Ethiopian Beta Israel by airlifting them to the Jewish state. Iris Schröder examined the 1980s as a turning point in international responses to humanitarian crises, such as the Ethiopian famine, fuelled by the activism of international non-governmental organizations. Schröder highlighted the impact of Western media coverage, notably a report by the British Broadcasting Corporation in raising global attention. This focus was further pursued by Franziska Rantzsch's discussion of East German media depictions of the Ethiopian famine, exploring the role of public opinion between Cold War rhetorics and the humanitarian turn of the 1980s

in a socialist state.

In fact, the relations between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Africa—the influences of their formative interests, ideas, and institutions—were another key concern of the conference. Ned Richardson-Little took up a popular focus of recent scholarship by discussing the entanglements between Africa and East Germany in human rights and international law. Richardson-Little showed how the emphasis of the GDR shifted from the promotion of self-determination in tune with African states to the protection of Europe from the Third World. Our, Maximilian's and Paul's joint presentation, suggested a more integrated understanding of East German 'International Solidarity' as the key concept of the GDR's relations with the decolonizing world. Paul continued the reflection on the possible meanings of 'solidarity' in his presentation on the little politicized understanding that young East Germans assumed for their deployment as solidarity workers in African states. Maximilian's presentation showcased another group of actors, the organizations of African students in the GDR as part of transnational networks. Criss-crossing the Iron Curtain to an unexpected degree these students enjoyed their liberties due to the desire of the East German leadership to sway post-colonial African elites in their favor.

Lastly, more presentations dealt with the question how our times were made from Third World interventions. Meressa Tsehay focused on the connected cases of Eritrea and Ethiopia, paying special attention to dynamics of "mutual interventionist" nation building, while Gerezihe Haftu emphasized the implications of the Cold War for the current militarization in the Horn of Africa. Scrutinizing the possibility of a new Cold War, Solomon Abraha attested the end of liberal internationalism seeing it replaced by the influence of new global powers, religious or ethnic sectarianism, and the dominance of strongmen. In the final discussion of the conference, the predominance of quite conventional approaches to political history was noted. Participants called for the cultural dimensions of politics to be integrated more comprehensively in future discussions. Furthermore, it was pointed out that the relations between the state and civil society was a persistent theme of the conference that would warrant more systematic inspection. Other participants called for economic perspectives to be integrated more thoroughly in order to adequately understand the factors shaping the trajectory of the Cold War in the Horn. It was also noted how many contributions to the conference showcased the multiplicity of factors influencing seemingly small issues and re-connecting them to broader developments. Many participants pointed to quite concrete inspirations to be taken from this conference's discussion for their own work. Examples included the opportunities to focus on specific groups of actors, such as student organizations or the socialist Asian-African People's Solidarity Organization. Others suggested to emphasize the persisting importance of the "global colour line"⁷ or to consider

7 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the*

institutionalized alternatives, such as the New International Economic Order, as well as the importance of Chinese alliances after the Sino-Soviet split. Overall, it was a great experience to have participated in this conference.⁸ All contributions were discussed in a cordial and cooperative spirit. We benefited greatly from the reflections of more seasoned scholars on our work and the conference's topic in general. Furthermore, it was enriching to learn from Ethiopian scholars and discuss their approaches to studying the Global Cold War and its continuing ramifications in the region. We were most impressed by presentations that closely focused on the entangled histories of specific locales within the wider political context and would have welcomed an even greater number of such approaches on the topic. In our view, it is vital to understand how specific local events had repercussions way beyond their immediate impact. Yet, it has to be acknowledged as well that the presentations of wider perspective were just as important to set the coordinates for the overall discussion. This conference should be appreciated as an exemplary and quite successful attempt to facilitate dialogue between historians from Germany and Ethiopia. In that respect, we were especially glad to learn in how far the processes of the Global Cold War continue to inform the Ethiopian colleagues' perspectives on recent developments in the region. Still, we would have hoped for even more opportunities on the conference's margins to get to know the Ethiopian researchers and to further discuss their work in a more informal setting. Although we acknowledge the difficulties and sometimes unintended effects of splitting questions of organization between different cooperating partners, it is regrettable that the conference turned out to be such a male affair, with only two female presenters present.

Gladly, there are many plans to continue the cooperation between both sides. In our opinion, it would for example be useful to further integrate political science perspectives to account for demands to explain the current dramatic changes in the region without neglecting the contributions that historians make to the understanding of their trajectory. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to discuss aspects of the Cold War's memorization more explicitly. Overall, this conference confirmed us in our view that the Horn of Africa's role in the Global Cold War warrants much more attention in scholarship. Such research could explore the role of development concepts in their socialist or capitalist forms, but also of an emerging global public with humanitarian and human rights concerns as meaningful changes in a region's geopolitics. The Ethiopian case also highlights the many contradictions or counter-intuitive dynamics within the Global Cold War, underlining how myopic standard accounts are that simplistically assume a world neatly divided between Soviet and American ideology. After all,

International Challenge of Racial Equality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁸ Our participation was kindly supported by the Freie Universität Berlin's Ernst-Reuter-Gesellschaft through a travel stipend.

the governments of Somalia and Ethiopia were both pro-Soviet and somewhat socialist while they were fiercely fighting each other in the Ogaden War—both seeking Soviet assistance. At the same time, the TPLF emerged in Northern Ethiopia as armed and decidedly left-wing opposition against the Dergue government in Addis, seeking its support in Albanian socialism,⁹ as well as the works of Lenin or Marx. Led by Meles Zenawi, the TPLF would take control of the Ethiopian government in 1991, nowadays confusingly denouncing the rule of the Dergue as the “Red Terror” of “Fascists.”¹⁰ This being merely a glimpse into the perplexing history of this world region during and after the Cold War, we came to our own perspective on the personality cult around the late Meles Zenawi that has gripped Tigray. Seeing the black-and-white image of the young Meles in decidedly Guevar-esque style all around Mekelle (Figure 2), we thought that the Cold War struggle in which he played such a prominent role would indeed deserve to be lifted out of its relative obscurity. In its interlinkages to central processes around the world, it should receive some of the continuing attention for the iconic Cuban struggle. For us, the conference in Mekelle served as an excellent starting point in this quest.

9 Surprisingly, these Albanian relations are not picked up in: Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

10 This is done in the “Red Terror” Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Addis Ababa.



Figure 1: Caption: The Karl Marx Statue in Addis Ababa. Photo: Maximilian Zinke.

Figure 2: Meles' Image at the TPLF Victory Monument in Mekelle. Photo: Maximilian Zinke.

