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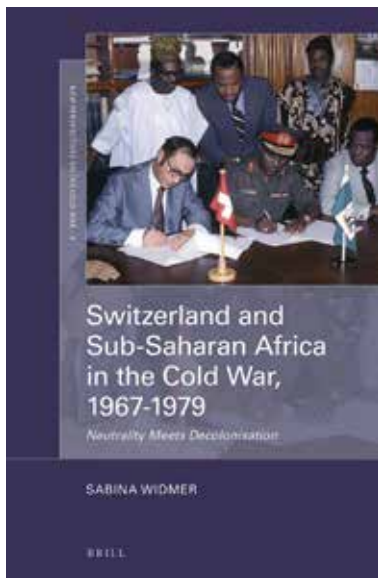
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Switzerland and Sub-Saharan Africa in the Cold War, 1967-1979: Neutrality Meets Decolonisation

*Reviewed by
Thomas Quinn Marabello*

Sabina Widmer, *Switzerland and Sub-Saharan Africa in the Cold War, 1967-1979: Neutrality Meets Decolonisation* (Leiden: Brill, 2021). 372 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-46402-5.

Switzerland and Sub-Saharan Africa in the Cold War, 1967-1979: Neutrality Meets Decolonisation was written as part of the series “New Perspectives on the Cold War,” which looks at different issues, events and regions impacted by the Cold War. While Switzerland was not a major power, nor did it have colonies in Africa or elsewhere, it had economic interests in the continent and a foreign policy that guided its decision making and values, centered around its historical tradition of neutrality. This well researched work of historiography gives readers new insights into Switzerland’s relations, especially with Portuguese colonies during and after decolonization. Those colonies included Angola and Mozambique, along with Ethiopia and Somalia, where Switzerland had strong economic ties. Like most Western nations, Switzerland was opposed to communism. The Swiss government came under pressure as Africa decolonized to take a stand against Apartheid in South Africa and human rights abuses that occurred throughout the continent. Some leaders did not believe that Switzerland was being neutral, since the government

refused to cut ties with white led regimes in Africa. The book looks at disagreements over Swiss neutrality, economic interests, and human rights, which dominated foreign policymaking in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s and 1970s.

During the time period of this book (1967 through 1979), Africa experienced a lot of change and turmoil as European powers left their colonies in the continent. Switzerland hoped they could increase their investment and export opportunities as European nations withdrew from Africa. The Swiss government sought good relations with new African rulers, but often faced criticism from them for not opposing colonization and white minority rule. To improve their image of neutrality in Africa, humanitarian aid was promoted and used by policymakers. Different activist groups in Switzerland tried to influence Swiss foreign policy by creating the Swiss Anti-Apartheid Movement and protesting at a Swiss trade fair in Lausanne in September 1973. In June 1969, the Federal Council prohibited exports of arms to specific African countries. This was followed by the Swiss parliament adopting a new law prohibiting arms exports to countries that compromised its policy on human rights. Switzerland did not want to get bad press or be pressured to not continue to do business with African countries that had governments that were engaging in human rights abuses or discrimination, or that were seeking support from the Soviet Union.

The coup against Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia in 1974 brought a lot of unwanted attention to Switzerland. The long time ruler who had a villa in Switzerland and money in Swiss banks was overthrown and replaced with the Derg, a military regime that was anti-West and sought an alliance with the USSR. Accusations in the Ethiopian press said that the deposed emperor had billions of francs in Swiss banks. As a result, Swiss embassy employees were verbally and physically attacked. Haile Selassie agreed to transfer his assets to famine-stricken areas in Ethiopia. The Swiss government's reaction was to smooth things over, hide behind a legal framework demanding proof and stressing their independence from Swiss banks. While the amount

of the emperor and his family's assets in Swiss banks is unknown, it was reported that he had over \$1 billion in secret accounts. This was not the first nor the last time that Swiss bank holdings with governments or unpopular rulers would be questioned.

Wars in Angola and Ogaden also impacted Swiss foreign policy and economics. Angola was an export market for Swiss machines and pharmaceutical companies. The intervention of Cuban and South African troops there turned it into a Cold War battleground. The first and major preoccupation of Swiss policymakers was maintaining neutrality. Humanitarian aid was channeled through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and this collaboration benefited the organization and the Swiss government. The Swiss were able to establish cordial relations with Angola's new leaders and were one of the first Western and neutral states to establish diplomatic relations with them in 1976. Ogaden, a region of Ethiopia invaded by Somalis in 1977, was of less interest to the Swiss. They had few investments or goods to export there, but provided contributions to the ICRC relief mission. The Soviet Union and Ethiopia signed a military cooperation agreement and the United States encouraged NATO allies to discreetly send arms to Somalia. This conflict became more about containing communism in Africa and thus part of the greater Cold War objective of the Western powers. The author points out that Swiss neutrality during the wars in both Angola and Ogaden were never called into question.

South Africa would be the country that gave Switzerland the biggest headache. Due to its system of Apartheid, many other countries and organizations started to oppose its government and boycott doing business there. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) wanted Switzerland to take a stand against white minority regimes and stop investing in them. This included South Africa, Rhodesia, and the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique. Foreign policymakers were accused of using neutrality as a smokescreen for Swiss economic interests. Up to 80% of South Africa's gold production was commercialized by Swiss banks. Leaders of Swiss companies wanted to tap into new markets in Africa

and lobbied the government not to restrict trade and investments in southern Africa. The majority of the Federal Council was not willing to curtail Switzerland's economic relations with South Africa. As is the case with most decisions by governments and businesses, money talks and overrode decisions on appearances and public opposition. However, the Swiss government knew this was not good for its image of neutrality and they decided to contribute francs to the United Nations Trust Fund for South Africa. As Ambassador Felix Schnyder once said, "the Swiss traditionally avoid problems instead of solving them." Money was often an acceptable solution, used to improve images and decrease scrutiny and unwanted attention.

Switzerland and Sub-Saharan Africa in the Cold War, 1967-1979: Neutrality Meets Decolonisation is a good new work of revisionist history that explores Swiss bilateral relations with four African states. This is not a topic that has been widely researched and written about. Ms. Widmer conducted voluminous amounts of research, but as she pointed out in the introduction, was unable to consult archives in Africa, due to linguistic reasons and difficulties of access. This could be seen as a weakness in the volume, as she relied on Swiss and Western archives, sources and scholars, along with news articles from the time period. Disagreements over neutrality, economic interests and human rights would divide some Swiss government officials and citizens. As this book shows, Switzerland was actively involved and present in sub-Saharan Africa during the height of the Cold War. It faced controversies such as trade with South Africa's Apartheid regime and its banks holding the assets of Ethiopia's emperor by seeking compromise, offering humanitarian aid through the ICRC, and appealing to its long tradition and policy of neutrality. As John Richard Wraight, the British ambassador to Switzerland said in 1973, "Switzerland may be small and often narrow in its outlook, but its assets as a stable, democratic and wealthy State, with solid views on world affairs, more solid one might say than any of the other European neutrals, are not to be underrated." This quote summarizes well how Switzerland operated and appeared as a powerful investor and trading partner in Africa during the 1960s and 1970s.