

Book review

The White Redoubt, the Great Powers and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1960–1980

Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses and Robert McNamara

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In their book, *The White Redoubt, the Great Powers and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1960–1980*, Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses and Robert McNamara, from Maynooth University and the University of Ulster respectively, explore the efforts by the white settler regimes of Portugal, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and South Africa to resist the wave of African independence movements during the 1960s and 1970s. They also examine how the international community responded to these efforts. Throughout the period from 1961 to 1974, Portugal, Rhodesia, and South Africa collaborated in their endeavours to maintain white settler minority rule in their respective territories. Despite facing challenges from several newly independent African states and major world powers, these countries provided mutual economic, political, and military support to one another during this period. Moreover, through these actions, they succeeded in transforming Southern Africa into a significant diplomatic concern during the Cold War. De Meneses and McNamara delve into the origins of this collaboration, analyse the reactions of the international community, and focus on the evolving security situations in each country – principally Portugal and Rhodesia, and by inference, Mozambique, and Angola. They show that the Portuguese Revolution in April 1974 started the process of dismantling the so-called “white redoubt” in Southern Africa, and that the subsequent diplomatic policy adopted by apartheid South Africa – more especially John Vorster’s détente policy – resulted in the abandonment of Rhodesia in exchange for the illusion of securing lasting stability in the region. The book builds on some earlier works by De Meneses and McNamara,⁵⁸² and offers a transnational perspective on the complex defence, political, and security landscape of Southern Africa during the late colonial era.

The book follows a clear chronological order, and is divided into three core sections. In the conclusion, De Meneses and McNamara draw together the central themes of the book and discuss some points worth considering for future research. The sections and their chapters build on each other to provide the reader with an all-encompassing picture of the political build-up, the envisaged and actual military cooperation, and the eventual dismantling of the ostensible defence and security alliance between Portugal, Rhodesia, and South Africa. From a distinctly South African perspective, the second section – aptly called and dealing with ‘The Rise and Fall of the Unholy Alliance’ – along with its three chapters, is the most interesting section. This section has to do with the nuts and bolts of the so-called ALCORA exercise (the codename for cooperation between the

military forces of South Africa, Rhodesia, and Portugal from 1970–1974). The section succeeds in filling a definite gap in the Southern African historiography dealing with these events,⁵⁸³ which to date remains sparse. However, there are some areas that deserve further historical attention. For instance, it is a fact that the Department of Defence Archives in Pretoria, South Africa, preserves copious primary archival material detailing the nature and organisation of ALCORA in minute detail. Of these numerous documents, De Meneses and McNamara only consulted approximately thirteen archival boxes worth of information, which is but a drop in the ocean in terms of the actual or related material dealing with ALCORA. Possible reasons why the authors only consulted limited archival sources at the Department of Defence Archives could be the over-classification of archival documents, and a challenging declassification process.⁵⁸⁴ Nevertheless, while the authors succeeded in giving a strategic overview of the nature and functioning of ALCORA, several themes dealing with operations and administration, intelligence collection and sharing, and the human experience for instance deserve further historical attention.

The book further includes a comprehensive list of abbreviations and acronyms, as well as a detailed bibliography and handy index for a work of this expansive nature. It would have been ideal if at least a few maps and some photographs of the key role players in the book had been included.

The depth of research that went into the book is impressive. De Meneses and McNamara conducted primary archival research in Portugal, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, Ireland, and the United State of America. They also consulted several leading newspapers from the era, specifically from Portugal, South Africa, and Rhodesia. The primary sources were supplemented by a wealth of secondary sources, including contemporary reports and surveys, and books and articles. In doing so, they succeeded in marshalling together a host of primary and secondary sources, which allowed them to reconstruct the complex defence, political, and security landscape of Southern Africa during the late colonial era.

All in all, *The White Redoubt, the Great Powers and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1960–1980* makes for an informative read from start to finish, and is a welcome addition to the historiography of the broader war for Southern Africa. By helping readers to understand the intricate dynamics that underpinned the mutual economic, political, and military support between Portugal, Rhodesia, and South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s, De Meneses and McNamara help us to move beyond our perceived understanding of this intricate and complex period in the history of Southern Africa. By doing so, they make a distinct and valuable contribution to the historiography of the area. Their book thus comes highly recommended, and can be considered for inclusion in university course material, particularly postgraduate modules that deal with the political and military history and related aspects of the war for Southern Africa and the broader liberation wars in the region.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁵⁸² See FR de Meneses & R McNamara, 'The Last Throw of the Dice: Portugal, Rhodesia and South Africa, 1970–74', *Portuguese Studies*, 28, 2 (2012), 201–215; FR de Meneses & R McNamara, 'Exercise ALCORA: Expansion and Demise', *International History Review*, 36, 1 (2014), 89–111; FR de Meneses & R McNamara, 'Parallel Diplomacy, Parallel War: The PIDE/DGS's Dealings with Rhodesia and South Africa, 1961–1974', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 49, 2 (2014), 366–389.
- ⁵⁸³ See for instance P Correia & G Verhoef, 'Portugal and South Africa: Close Allies or Unwilling Partners in Southern Africa during the Cold War?', *Scientia Militaria*, 37, 1 (2009), 50–72; A Esterhuyse, 'The Strategic Contours of the South African Military Involvement in Namibia and Angola during the 1970/1980s', *Journal for Contemporary History*, 34, 1 (2009), 16–35; K Larsdotter, 'Fighting Transnational Insurgents: The South African Defence Force in Namibia, 1966–1989', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37, 12 (2014), 1024–1038; AM Gossmann, 'Lost in Transition: The South African Military and Counterinsurgency', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 19, 4 (2008), 541–572; K O'Brien, 'Special Forces for Counter Revolutionary Warfare: The South African Case', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 12, 2 (2001), 79–109; L Barroso, 'The Origins of Exercise ALCORA: South Africa and the Portuguese Counterinsurgency Strategy in Southern Angola', *South African Historical Journal*, 69, 3 (2017), 468–485; M Evans, 'The Wretched of the Empire: Politics, Ideology and Counterinsurgency in Rhodesia, 1965–80', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 18, 2 (2007), 175–195; J Miller, 'Things Fall Apart: South Africa and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire, 1973–1974', *Cold War History*, 12, 2 (2012), 183–204.
- ⁵⁸⁴ See E Kleynhans & W Gordon, 'Legislative Disconnect or Institutional Gatekeeping? Challenges of Researching South Africa's Military Past', *Scientia Militaria* 48, 1 (2020), 97–114 for a discussion of the challenges of research into post-1970s topics.