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Poppy Cullen. "‘Playing Cold War Politics’: The Cold War in Anglo-Kenyan Relations in the 1960s." *Cold War History* 18:1 (2017): 37–54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2017.1387774>.

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Review by **Frank Gerits**, Utrecht University

Poppy Cullen’s article, based on research that has also led to an excellent book entitled *Kenya and Britain after Independence*, is a stimulating contribution to the burgeoning field of African international history.¹ With her focus on the relationship between the United Kingdom and Kenya, Cullen is part of a growing group of historians who are mining British and African archives for documents that can reveal the diplomatic strategies of newly independent countries in Commonwealth Africa.²

The United Kingdom’s imperial diplomacy has conventionally been approached as a monolithic entity, reflecting an implicit assumption that the British empire can only be fully understood if it is studied in its totality.³ One notable exception to this preference for a systemic analysis has been the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, which took hold of the British settler colony from 9 October 1952 onwards when Sir Evelyn Baring, governor of Kenya, declared a state of emergency. A disgruntled section of the Kikuyu lost their status and land in 1902 when the first Commissioner of the British East Africa Protectorate, Charles Eliot, decided to attract white settlers so the Uganda Railway Company could pay its debts. After World War II, returning veterans, including Jomo Kenyatta, turned that socio-economic conflict into a fight for independence.⁴

¹ Poppy Cullen, *Kenya and Britain after Independence Beyond Neo-Colonialism*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

² For instance: George Roberts, “The Assassination of Eduardo Mondlane: FRELIMO, Tanzania, and the Politics of Exile in Dar Es Salaam,” *Cold War History* 17:1 (November 2016): 1-19; Simon Stevens, “The External Struggle against Apartheid: New Perspectives,” *Humanity* 7:2 (2016): 295-314.

³ John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴ Caroline Elkins, *Britain’s Gulag* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 1-30.

Scholars have highlighted every aspect of the Mau Mau uprising as well as the counterinsurgency strategies that were developed by the British, but we know almost nothing about Kenya's post-independence diplomacy.⁵ Cullen fills this gap in our knowledge and in doing so, convincingly shows the value of studying the bilateral relations between the UK and its former colonies.

This article argues that the leader of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta and the top politicians in Nairobi, had substantially more room for manoeuvre than "has been previously suggested" (38). By exploiting the Cold War tensions, Cullen argues, Kenyans, were able to use the "Cold War rhetoric and rivalries to their advantage" and exert "significant influence over British choices and courses of action" (38). A dynamic emblematic of the Global Cold War–Third World leaders playing off different donors against each other—also played a role in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa. While detailed studies exist of the Cold War tactics that were deployed by Algeria, how the Cold War affected Sub Sahara Africa and how savvy African diplomats were able to exploit those tensions has only recently become a topic of interest.⁶

Cullen analyses how the Cold War shaped domestic power struggles as well as Nairobi's foreign policy. Kenya's arms deal with Great Britain and the purchase of jets in mid-1969 are the case studies selected to further substantiate the argument. The first section of the article focuses on how the Cold War fuelled the rivalry between Kenyatta and Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. Kenyatta was imprisoned as the leader of the Mau Mau in 1952 and became prime minister in 1963 two years after his release. Vice President Odinga was a Kenyan nationalist who worked towards a closer connection with the Communist regimes. Odinga's affinity for Communist ideas, however, has been viewed by scholars as a tool to amass more domestic power. Kenyatta's choice to work with the West was therefore partially motivated by the fact that his most important opponent had identified with the Communist bloc. As Cullen writes, the Cold War was "rarely the centrepiece" in Kenya's domestic and foreign affairs, but "did serve to complicate it" (52).

Foreign policy choices were also shaped by the Cold War. New states "had to engage with Cold War debates" and the choice to join the Non-Aligned Movement meant that states in the Global South were—in Cullen's reading – not only affected, but also constructed by "Cold War dynamics" (42). In that context African states

⁵ David A. Percox, *Britain, Kenya and the Cold War: Imperial Defence, Colonial Security and Decolonisation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); Robert L. Tignor, "The Cold War Dimension of Kenyan Decolonization," *Journal of African History* 46:2 (2005): 360-361; Susan Lisa Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds: British Governments, the Media and Colonial Counter-Insurgency, 1944-1960* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1995); Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, *Imperial Endgame: Britain's Dirty Wars and the End of Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Shamsul Alam, *Rethinking the Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Frederick Cooper, "Mau Mau and the Discourses of Decolonization," *Journal of African History* 29:2 (1988): 313-320; James H. Meriwether, "African Americans and the Mau Mau Rebellion: Militancy, Violence, and the Struggle for Freedom," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 17:4 (1998): 63-86; Gerald Horne, *Mau Mau in Harlem?: The U.S. and the Liberation of Kenya* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

⁶ Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Andy DeRoche, "Asserting African Agency: Kenneth Kaunda and the USA, 1964-1980," *Diplomatic History* 40:5 (November 2016): 975-1001; Frank Gerits, "'When the Bull Elephants Fight': Kwame Nkrumah, Non-Alignment, and Pan-Africanism as an Interventionist Ideology in the Global Cold War (1957–66)," *International History Review* 37:5 (2015): 1-19.

were able to “assert agency and an independent course of action in their international relationships” (43). With embassies in Nairobi from the Communist bloc as well as the Capitalist world and a commitment to a public policy of non-alignment that was often ambiguous, Kenyatta’s government could make a range of choices about the relationships it wanted to pursue.

That diplomatic flexibility was on full display during the negotiation about arms sales. Much like Zambian leader Kenneth Kaunda, Kenyatta tried to use his independent position to get a good arms deal. Arms—as Cullen points out – were important, because a purchase implied a long-standing relationship. Weapons require training personal on the ground, spare parts and follow-up. The British were successful in establishing and maintaining that relationship, but also understood that the Kenyans bluffed at the negotiating table. Kenyan diplomats constantly brought up the fact that they had alternatives open to them and British diplomats did not “feel able to ignore it.” (51).

This article and the book with which it is connected are essential reading. Cullen’s article is particularly compelling because it brings into focus two methodological challenges for the field of African international history.

First, this article is based on British government sources. The limitations of the African archive impose certain limitations on what Cullen is able to prove. “Odinga’s political opponents were unlikely,” we read, “to align themselves with foreign allies.... It is probable that he would have followed alternative policies, but whilst Kenyatta remained in power, this was highly unlikely” (41). Without the Kenyan sources these ideas remain difficult to verify. It remains ambiguous if the Kenyan motivations that emerge from the papers at Kew genuinely reflect what drove Kenyan diplomacy or if those archives contain a British misinterpretation of what Kenyan diplomacy was about. The author is rigorous in her methodology and pays attention to these limitations. *Kenya and Britain After Independence* does work with sources from the Kenya National Archives, but this article on African agency in international affairs has to rely on the statements from “British planners” who complained about Kenyatta’s attitude which was “designed to leave all options open” (50).

Second, a closer discussion of the applicability of the Cold War lens to understand African diplomacy would have been interesting. From the spectre of the Cold War, Kenyatta’s commitment to ‘African Socialism’ appears as a tactical move, rather than an ideological tenant of Kenya’s foreign and domestic policy. “Much of the motivation” to adopt African Socialism “was intended to bypass Odinga’s ideas” (44), Cullen argues. Referring to an article written by Donald Savage in 1970, Cullen sees Kenyatta’s adoption of the term as a genius move because it limited the left leaning Odinga in his ability to oppose Kenyatta. However, the adoption of Savage’s conclusion by Cullen is not entirely unproblematic, since scholars in the 1970s were primarily interested in figuring out how authentically ‘Marxist’ African socialist regimes were. That historiographical discussion steered Savage’s interpretation of Kenyatta. Moreover—as noted in Cullen’s own book—with Joseph Murumbi, Kenya had a Minister of State for Pan-African affairs, raising the question as to where tactical decisions end and ideological commitment begins.⁷

In short, this article should be read by students of African international history, not only because it breaks new ground, but also for the questions it raises about the way in which international historians should

⁷ Cullen, *Kenya and Britain after Independence Beyond Neo-Colonialism*, 114.

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approach the important topic of African leaders who attempted to reconfigure their relationship with former colonisers.

Frank Gerits is a Lecturer in the History of International Relations at Utrecht University and a research fellow at the International Studies Group of the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein. He will be a visiting fellow at the Center for the History of Global Development at Shanghai University in the Fall of 2018. He has published articles in *Cold War History*, the *International History Review* and *Diplomatic History*. He is currently working on his book: “The Ideological Scramble for Africa: How the Dream of African Modernity Shaped a Continental Cold War (1945-1966).”

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