7. Who did transnational anticommunist movements target as their enemies and why?

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Transnational anti-communist movements used the Cold War as framework to obscure decolonisation as a legitimate process in the 1970s and 1980s.[1] In Southwest Africa (Namibia) and Indonesia, anti-communist conspiracies were used to delegitimise nationalist groups and organise state violence.[2] Sukarno's perceived connection to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) justified the United States (US) in its cooperation with the killing of between half a million and one million people.[3] South Africa (SA) used "Total Strategy" to justify oppression of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) and retain occupation of Namibia.[4] SA and the US transferred rhetoric from other movements: Pretoria used preexisting logic from Indonesia, demonstrating how this was a transferable ideology where language of communist threat was applied to delegitimise anticolonial actors who challenged Western imperial interests.

Anticommunism was seen as 'a revolutionary creed that promised to liberate the world's peoples from a future of totalitarianism.'[5] Soviet–American rivalry shaped US and SA policy, according to Bradley.[6] This concern created 'a murky picture that relied more on speculation'.[7] Stone and Chamedes argue that transnational anti-communist movements shared an ideology built on a "communism/anti-communism" binary, designed to undermine mutual recognition or coexistence between competing political actors.[8] This framework made the communist label available for political use against actors who were nationalist rather than Soviet-directed.

In the 1960s, American policy shifted from 'broad anticolonialism' to anti-communism in Indonesia as a response to Sukarno's recognition.[9] Policymakers used a 'red versus non-red'

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[1] Mark Philip Bradley, 'Decolonization, the Global South, and the Cold War, 1919–1962', in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. by Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 464–485 (p. 465).
[2] Christopher J. Lee, 'Decolonization of a Special Type: Rethinking Cold War History in Southern Africa', *Kronos*, 37.1 (2011), pp. 6–11 (p. 6) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41502441> [Accessed 30 April 2026].
[3] Say Jye Quah, 'An Anatomy of Worldmaking: Sukarno and Anticolonialism from post-Bandung Indonesia', *American Journal of Political Science*, 70.2 (2026), pp. 571–586 (p. 582) <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12963>
[4] Tor Sellström, 'Cold War, Total Strategy and Expanded Assistance', *Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa*, (2002), pp. 338–366 (p. 341) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.naip100060> [Accessed 1 May 2026].
[5] Kyle Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018), p. 20.
[6] Bradley, 'Decolonization, the Global South, and the Cold War', p. 477.
[7] Frances Gouda, *American Visions of the Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia: US Foreign Policy and Indonesian Nationalism, 1920–1949* (Amsterdam University Press, 2002), p. 168.
[8] Marla Stone and Giuliana Chamedes, 'Naming the Enemy: Anti-communism in Transnational Perspective', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 53.1 (2018), pp. 4–11 (p. 5) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009417735165>
[9] Anne Booth, *Colonial Legacies: Economic and Social Development in East and Southeast Asia* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), p. 161.

perspective.[10] Sukarno's policies mirrored aspects of Chinese communism, which concerned the CIA.[11] Robert Murphy claimed Sukarno was "certainly a quasi-communist" – which organised unfamiliar anticolonial groups into an available Cold War category.[12] Officials labelled him a communist threat because he could 'lose control to the' PKI.[13] Sjahrir, Sukarno's collaborator, was denounced by Indonesian communists as a tool of British and Dutch imperialism.[14] Since Sukarno's closest ally was condemned by communists, it demonstrates the label described geopolitical convenience for anti-communists rather than an ideological allegiance. Additionally, Sukarno's policy reflected 'vigorous nationalism that could never knowingly brook interference even from its most anti-imperialist friend', which shows Sukarno resisted Soviet direction.[15] Sukarno was driven by colonial discontent, not communism.[16] Kuzmarov notes 'the Eisenhower administration opposed [Sukarno] because of his leadership in the nonaligned movement'.[17] The communist label was therefore applied to fill the gap between what he was and what Washington needed him to be.

The same framework as Indonesia is shown in the anti-communist movements in Southern Africa.[18] For Pretoria, alignment with Europe meant decolonisation 'was shaped by the politics of the Cold War'.[19] According to President Geingob, Pretoria was 'exploiting the communist threat card' to gain favour with Western states.[20] Cercle was a 'transnational institution' that connected Pretoria's funding to European anti-communist networks.[21] Botha deployed European logic in his 'Total Onslaught' framework.[22] Sellström records this policy as an ideological mobilisation against a "Communist onslaught" attributed to SWAPO.[23]

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[10] Gouda, *American Visions of the Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia*, p. 259.
[11] Frederick P. Bunnell, 'Guided Democracy Foreign Policy: 1960–1965 President Sukarno Moves from Non-Alignment to Confrontation', *Indonesia (Ithaca)*, 2.2 (1966), pp. 37–76 (p. 66) <https://doi.org/10.2307/3350755>
[12] Gouda, *American Visions of the Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia*, p. 168.
[13] H.W. Brands, 'The Limits of Manipulation: How the United States Didn't Topple Sukarno', *The Journal of American History*, 76.3 (1989), pp. 785–808 (p. 790) <https://doi.org/10.2307/2936421>
[14] Gouda, *American Visions of the Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia*, pp. 168–169.
[15] Bunnell, 'Guided Democracy Foreign Policy', p. 40.
[16] Gouda, *American Visions of the Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia*, p. 167.
[17] Jeremy Kuzmarov, 'Modernizing Repression: Police Training, Political Violence, and Nation-Building in the "American Century"', *Diplomatic History* (Oxford, UK), 33.2 (2009), pp. 191–221 (p. 197) <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00760.x>
[18] Kuzmarov, 'Modernizing Repression', p. 209.
[19] Lee, 'Decolonization of a Special Type', p. 9.
[20] Hage Gottfried Geingob, 'State Formation in Namibia: Promoting Democracy and Good Governance' (unpublished, University of Leeds, 2004), p. 70.
[21] Adrian Hänni, 'A Global Crusade against Communism: The Cercle in the "Second Cold War"', in *Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War: Agents, Activities, and Networks*, ed. by Stéphanie Roulin, Scott-Giles Smith, Kenneth A. Loparo and Luc van Dongen, (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), pp. 177–190 (p. 185).
[22] Jamie Miller, 'Yes, Minister: Reassessing South Africa's Intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975–1976', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 15.3 (2013), pp. 4–33 (p. 9) <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/522707> [Accessed 30 April 2026].
[23] Sellström, 'Cold War, Total Strategy and Expanded Assistance', p. 346.

Anticolonialism attracted the communist label because framing communism meant white elites could delegitimise liberation movements.[24] As a result, Davies and O'Meara note "Marxism" was defined broadly, stretching beyond communist-leaning parties.[25] They argue the strategy was to "halt the advance of communism", while it was instead protecting apartheid's legitimacy in a growing multi-racial world.[26] SWAPO was "a national liberation movement", fighting for independence.[27] Similar to how Sukarno's 'Marxist-inclined philosophy of history' was rooted in characterising colonialism as a 'relic of history', a position that attracted the communist label because it challenged Western interests, not because it followed Soviet doctrine.[28] Yet, it was labelled communist for its nationalist ideologies and equality goals.[29]

Sukarno and SWAPO, both anticolonial and nonaligned, attracted an enemy label because they were not Western oriented. Quah argues that Sukarno's New Emerging Forces (NEFO) and Old Established Forces (OLDEFO) framework challenged Western values by basing international legitimacy on non-aligned anticolonialism.[30] He reframed global politics around colonised versus colonial powers, rather than the East-West binary. In response, Western powers conditioned aid and asserted militant anti-communism was the only acceptable path for Asian nationalism.[31] SWAPO's international legitimacy was similarly decolonial, which allowed it to build administrative structures outside the Eastern Bloc.[32] SWAPO's legitimacy, as Geingob notes, derived from how it was 'national in its representation', rather than alignment with Moscow.[33] Yet, white governments used this nationalism to antagonise anticolonial agencies.[34] As Geingob notes, when Soviet representatives at the United Nations pushed for an immediate declaration of independence, SWAPO resisted.[35] SWAPO's international support was a demonstration of its independence from Soviet direction rather than proof of alignment with it. SWAPO even questioned if the Soviets would 'send the Red Army to

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[24] Sue Onslow, 'The Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Nationalism and External Intervention', in *Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Liberation*, ed. by Sue Onslow, (Taylor & Francis, 2009), pp. 9–34 (p. 9).
[25] Robert Davies, and Dan O'Meara, 'Total Strategy in Southern Africa: An Analysis of South African Regional Policy since 1978', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, (1985), pp. 183–211 (p. 190) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057078508708096>
[26] Davies and O'Meara, 'Total Strategy in Southern Africa', p. 201.
[27] Denis Herbstein and John Evenson, *The Devils are Among Us: The War for Namibia* (Zed Books Ltd, 1989), p. 49.
[28] Quah, 'An Anatomy of Worldmaking', p. 575.
[29] J. Sunde, 'Intelligence Report about SWAPO in Ovamboland', 16 March 1989, pp. 1–5 (p. 2) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.rep19890316.035.017.d1.18> [Accessed 30 April 2026].
[30] Quah, 'An Anatomy of Worldmaking', p. 576.
[31] Quah, 'An Anatomy of Worldmaking', p. 578.
[32] Werner Hillebrecht, 'The Namibian Liberation Struggle', *Anti-Apartheid Movement Collection*, (2006), pp. 1–5 (p. 3) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.ae000009> [Accessed 30 April 2026].
[33] Geingob, 'State Formation in Namibia: Promoting Democracy and Good Governance', p. 52.
[34] Onslow, 'The Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Nationalism and External Intervention', p. 9.
[35] Geingob, 'State Formation in Namibia: Promoting Democracy and Good Governance', pp. 52–53.

enforce independence', a challenge that shows SWAPO's awareness that Soviet support carried its own conditions.[36]

The communist label functioned as an instrument that could be applied to actors who challenged power structures.[37] Anticolonial philosophy collapsed into a single category.[38] This transformed legitimate political actors into perceived enemies of the state, which could provide justification for suppression.

By portraying anticolonial movements as a single entity, anti-communist governments rendered diverse liberation groups as a suppressible collective threat. Decolonisation was 'anti-imperial' and thus seen as a threat to national security.[39] According to Abramovici, anti-communism redirected nationalistic focus to the "internal enemy".[40] The aggregation was deliberate and the violence that followed was a calculated policy. This pattern was reproducible in different contexts because the US and SA could collapse broad groups into a single enemy. Thus, Pretoria used a framework which had been validated in Southeast Asia.[41]

The Anti-Communist League sought a "united anti-communist front" using US intelligence.[42] The purpose was to 'make it easier to murder' communists.[43] Brands claims this was 'in line with publicly stated American objectives.'[44] Hänni shows that this infrastructure transferred into Southern Africa via Cercle's 'transnational institution', showing Pretoria was deploying a framework validated elsewhere.[45] Thus, the transnational reproducibility of anti-communism reveals itself to devalue anticolonialism. By creating a unified enemy from movements that were diverse, Washington and Pretoria could create political conditions for mass violence and frame military escalation as security.

Onslow argues that labelling liberation movements communist 'removed the necessity of addressing the true impulses to radicalization: namely, domestic oppression, denial of civil or economic rights'.[46] This logic is accurately demonstrated through the Turnhalle constitutional conference about Namibia. As Geingob records, South Africa created a mandate which intended 'to

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[36] Geingob, 'State Formation in Namibia: Promoting Democracy and Good Governance', p. 53.
[37] Stone and Chamedes, 'Naming the Enemy', p. 5.
[38] Geingob, 'State Formation in Namibia: Promoting Democracy and Good Governance', p. 70.
[39] Stone and Chamedes, 'Naming the Enemy', p. 8.
[40] Pierre Abramovici, 'The World Anti-Communist League: Origins, Structures and Activities', in *Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War: Agents, Activities, and Networks*, ed. by Stéphanie Roulin, Scott-Giles Smith, Kenneth A. Loparo and Luc van Dongen, (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), pp. 129–145 (p. 139).
[41] Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right*, pp. 30–31.
[42] Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right*, p. 31.
[43] David Easter, '"Keep the Indonesian Pot Boiling": Western Covert Intervention in Indonesia, October 1965–March 1966', *Cold War History*, 5.1 (2005), pp. 55–73 (p. 68) <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468274042000283144>
[44] Brands, 'The Limits of Manipulation', p. 808.
[45] Hänni, 'A Global Crusade against Communism', p. 185.
[46] Onslow, 'The Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Nationalism and External Intervention', p. 9.

produce an interim constitution that would form the basis of an 'independent' client state in Namibia'.[47] SWAPO, SWANU, the Damara Advisory Council, and major church organisations were deliberately excluded because they were labelled as communist groups.[48] Pretoria justified this by claiming any organisation refusing to operate within SA-defined constitutional parameters was a communist.[49] By excluding the groups that refused to accept the terms of SA occupation, Pretoria ensured that legitimate political parties could be characterised as a unified radical threat.[50]

Ironically, Miller claims that in Namibia, the label was 'counterproductive and self-fulfilling' because opposition to revolutionary parties led communist states to support them more.[51] Cuba and the Soviet Union increased material support to SWAPO after Western-backed repression left it internationally isolated, this validates Miller's observation that the label manufactured the alignment it claimed to expose.[52] Ironically, the label helped produce the radicalisation it alleged to identify.

According to Sunde intelligence reports in Namibia: church figures, regional politicians, and ethnic communities were read as a single enemy despite being 'completely divided politically.'[53] Similarly, a telegram from Surabaya (Indonesia) shows the killing of trade unionists, railway workers, Chinese, and relatives of suspected PKI members.[54] The state 'armed nationalist and Muslim groups […] and encouraged them to eliminate the communists.'[55] Officials blamed the PKI as enacting 'direct orders from Moscow […] against capitalist states'.[56] The mechanism operated differently in each case, but in both cases the "enemy" expanded beyond communism to encompass the entire political community associated with anticolonial politics. Hence, Pretoria's attempts to silence the revolutionary groups with a communist label influenced more support from communist leaning countries for them.

In both cases, anti-communist framing followed violence as a retrospective legitimation. Anticommunism was 'a label to legitimise state power against […] threats to social order', but the nature of order is crucial.[57] The order being protected was racial capitalism and neo-colonial occupation, meaning that anti-communism functioned as a defence of hierarchy. Through Botha's

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[47] Geingob, 'State Formation in Namibia: Promoting Democracy and Good Governance', p. 85.
[48] Geingob, 'State Formation in Namibia: Promoting Democracy and Good Governance', p. 85.
[49] Geingob, 'State Formation in Namibia: Promoting Democracy and Good Governance', p. 85.
[50] Hillebrecht, 'The Namibian Liberation Struggle', p. 4.
[51] Miller, 'Reassessing South Africa's Intervention in the Angolan Civil War', p. 16.
[52] Onslow, 'The Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Nationalism and External Intervention', p. 25.
[53] Sunde, 'Intelligence Report about SWAPO in Ovamboland', p. 3.
[54] Foreign Relations 1964–1968, Volume XXVI, Telegram from US Consulate in Surabaya to the US Embassy in Jakarta, 26 November 1965.
[55] Easter, '"Keep the Indonesian Pot Boiling', p. 60.
[56] John Roosa, 'Indonesian Communism: The Perils of the Parliamentary Path', from *The Cambridge History of Communism*, ed. by Norman Naimark, Silvio Pons, and Sophie Quinn-Judge, II (Cambridge University Press: 2017), pp. 467–490 (p. 471).
[57] Abramovici, 'The World Anti-Communist League', p. 134.

Strategy, the communist label secured Western tolerance and shielded domestic order from criticism.[58] Western states used anti-communism as a tool to 'assert hegemony over states'.[59] The 'communist conspiracy' was therefore 'a post hoc justification for violence' and terror from the state.[60]

Miller argues Pretoria changed 'its remit from a defensive posture to an offensive orientation'.[61] As a result of "Total Strategy", in eighteen months there was a sixty percent increase in defence.[62] According to scholars at the time, the communist label was used by Botha to justify offensive military action against actors.[63] Pretoria branded SWAPO as a terrorist organisation as a justification for leading an offensive.[64] Botha utilised this to combat 'Namibian independence and the take-over of the country by the "Marxist terrorist organization"'.[65] This expansion was militarist and a comprehensive political-economic strategy in which 'the survival of South African apartheid capitalism depend[ed] on the development of an adequate political response'.[66] Price notes that Pretoria used the anti-communist strategy because it guaranteed Western tolerance of apartheid.[67] For Pretoria, the Soviet and Cuban presence in the region was "considered Pretoria's best guarantee against hostile actions by the West." If a communist enemy could be pointed to, Western governments would support military operations that served their interests.[68] Anticommunism for Pretoria was hence not a policy for defeating communism but was a policy for sustaining the conditions which provided apartheid with backing.

In Indonesia, anti-communism became justification for a permanent military-political settlement.[69] Brands examines how American policy privately worked to align the Indonesian military against the PKI, instructing 'activities aimed at Indonesian military leaders' while avoiding anything that "would get back to Sukarno."[70] US assistance "contributed significantly to the Army's anti-communist, pro-U.S. orientation".[71] An Embassy telegram shows this, instructing officials to 'covertly

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[58] Davies and O'Meara, 'Total Strategy in Southern Africa', p. 201.
[59] Davies and O'Meara, 'Total Strategy in Southern Africa', p. 183.
[60] Matthew Galway, *Experiments with Marxism-Leninism in Cold War Southeast Asia* (ANU Press, 2022), p. 4.
[61] Miller, 'Reassessing South Africa's Intervention in the Angolan Civil War', p. 33.
[62] Miller, 'Reassessing South Africa's Intervention in the Angolan Civil War', p. 33.
[63] Robert B. Shepard and Christopher H. Goldman, 'P. W. Botha's Foreign Policy', *The National Interest*, 15 (April 1989), pp. 68–78 (p. 77) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42894613> [Accessed 4 May 2026].
[64] Chris Saunders, 'The Angola/Namibia Crisis of 1988 and its Resolution', in *Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Liberation*, ed. by Sue Onslow, (Taylor & Francis, 2009), pp. 225–240 (p. 227).
[65] Hänni, 'A Global Crusade against Communism', p. 184.
[66] Davies and O'Meara, 'Total Strategy in Southern Africa', p. 185.
[67] Robert M. Price, 'Pretoria's Southern African Strategy', *African Affairs (London)*, 83.330 (1984), pp. 11–32 (p. 31) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a097578>
[68] Price, 'Pretoria's Southern African Strategy', p. 31.
[69] Geoffrey C. Gunn, 'Ideology and the Concept of Government in the Indonesian New Order', *Asian Survey*, 19.8 (1979), pp. 751–769 (p. 767) <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643719>
[70] Brands, 'The Limits of Manipulation', p. 793.
[71] Brands, 'The Limits of Manipulation', p. 804.

[…] indicate clearly to key people in army such as Nasution and Suharto our desire to be of assistance' while maintaining the 'appearance' of non-involvement.[72]

Apologists for the 1965–66 massacres in Indonesia argued they were a collective self-defence against the PKI.[73] Officials claimed that the killings were 'preventive measures' after the fact.[74] These justifications isolated Suharto and the military from accountability by portraying execution as reasonable action.[75] These justifications worked because the anti-communist framing had established the PKI as a communist threat, making the scale of killing seem proportionate in retrospect. Kuzmarov argues American intelligence was essential in creating conditions for terror, noting American officials 'helped to set up an opportune climate in which [the killers] could flourish.'[76] Foreign Relations documents report one hundred suspected 'PKI members […] killed every night'.[77]

In Namibia and Indonesia, violence became acceptable because security policy justified it. The Namibian case followed the same logic across a longer arc. As Herbstein and Evenson argue, Pretoria sought to wean the Namibian population away from SWAPO through continued repression.[78] By the late 1980s, Pretoria even abandoned the pretence that the Soviet Union was a risk, revealing that framing a communist threat was used to justify oppressive policies.[79]

Violence was justified through anti-communist framing that masked it as security policy.[80] The threat legitimised violence and shielded perpetrators. Without mass killing or military campaigns, it would have remained abstract. Violence against a physical enemy gave the label its urgency and audience. Hence, anti-communism required violence to reproduce itself, rather than resorting to it.

Therefore, transnational anti-communism functioned as an instrument of political control by imperialists. By claiming that anticolonial actors were a single communist threat, it legitimised state violence and obscured motivations. SWAPO and Sukarno were targeted because they threatened Western supremacy. The retrospective justifications deployed in Indonesia and Namibia reveal how violence preceded, and justified, Cold War ideologies. In Indonesia, revolutionaries like Sukarno were targeted, using a communist accusation to justify it; and in Namibia, military offensives produced a

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[72] Foreign Relations 1964–1968, Volume XXVI, Telegram from Embassy in Indonesia to Department of State, 5 October 1965, Document 147.
[73] Jiwon Suh, 'The Suharto Case', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 44.1/2 (2016), pp. 214–245 (p. 233) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43953988> [Accessed 1 May 2026].
[74] Suh, 'The Suharto Case', p. 233.
[75] Suh, 'The Suharto Case', p. 233.
[76] Kuzmarov, 'Modernizing Repression', p. 207.
[77] Foreign Relations 1964–1968, Volume XXVI, Telegram from Embassy in Indonesia to Department of State, 13 November 1965, cited in Editorial Note, Document 162.
[78] Herbstein and Evenson, *The Devils are Among Us*, p. 45.
[79] Saunders, 'The Angola/Namibia Crisis of 1988 and its Resolution', p. 236.
[80] Sellström, 'Cold War, Total Strategy and Expanded Assistance', p. 348.

legal framework to retrospectively authorise suppression of independence groups. Ultimately, treating decolonisation as a communist conspiracy became a deliberate distortion of decolonial strategy.

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