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**Review: Remembering African Labor Migration to the Second World: Socialist Mobilities between Angola, Mozambique, and East Germany. By Marcia C. Schenck**  
Linda Catharine Bowes

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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](http://www.globalhistories.com) or contact the editor at: [admin@globalhistories.com](mailto:admin@globalhistories.com).



**Remembering African Labor  
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By Marcia C. Schenck. Palgrave  
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REVIEWED BY

**Linda Catharine Bowes**

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Linda Catharine Bowes graduated from Leuphana University of Lüneburg with a BA in Cultural Studies and is currently enrolled in the European Master of Global Studies at the Universities of Leipzig and Vienna.

“They went to the future, came back to the present, expecting to help take their homes forward in time, but ended up stranded in the past.”<sup>1</sup>

A growing body of scholarship is examining labor migration between the Cold War’s Second Worlds and Third Worlds, specifically the Eastern European socialist states including the Soviet Union and newly independent states in what has later been called the Global South within the context of global history and the history of globalization(s).<sup>2</sup> These studies focus on a subset of actors within the broader category of “socialist mobilities,” a term Christina Schwenkel has conceptualized as the circulation of diverse people, goods and knowledge.<sup>3</sup> By pursuing the question of what qualified labor migration as “socialist,” key scholars such as Christina Schwenkel and Alena Alamgir have analysed the role of state(s) and state-socialist ideologies in shaping the flows of laborers.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the field has effectively challenged the perception of socialist states as geographies of stasis and immobility by disrupting Western-centric views of linear globalization in a post-Cold War chronology.

It is precisely the derailment of linearity that led Marcia C. Schenck, Professor of Global History at the University of Potsdam, to view the 21,000 Mozambican and 2,500 Angolan worker-trainees who migrated to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1979-1990 as “time travellers.”<sup>5</sup> In her book, *Remembering African Labor Migration to the Second World*, Schenck

1 Marcia C. Schenck, *Remembering African Labor Migration to the Second World: Socialist Mobilities between Angola, Mozambique, and East Germany* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 281.

2 Alena K. Alamgir and Christina Schwenkel, “From Socialist Assistance to National Self-Interest: Vietnamese Labor Migration into CMEA Countries,” in *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*, ed. Steffi Marung, Artemy M. Kalinovsky and James Mark, 100-125 (Indiana University Press, 2020); Alena K. Alamgir, “Mobility: Education and Labor,” in *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation*, ed. Paul Betts and James Mark, 290–317 (Oxford University Press, 2022).

3 Christina Schwenkel, “Rethinking Asian Mobilities: Socialist Migration and Post-Socialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany,” *Critical Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2014), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14672715.2014.898453> (accessed June 21, 2024). 236.

4 A non-exhaustive list of recent contributions could include: Alena K. Alamgir, “Labor and Labor Migration in State Socialism,” *Labor History* 59, no. 3 (2018), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0023656X.2018.1428721> (accessed June 21, 2024); Hana Bortlová-Vondráková and Mónika Szente-Varga, “Labor Migration Programs Within the Socialist Bloc. Cuban Guestworkers in Late Socialist Czechoslovakia and Hungary,” *Labor History* 62, no. 3 (2021), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0023656X.2021.1908972> (accessed June 21, 2024); Patrice G. Poutrus, “Ausländische Arbeitsmigrat\*innen im 'Arbeiter-Und-Bauernstaat'. Die Sogenannten Vertragsarbeiter in der DDR,” in *Gewerkschaften im Gedächtnis der Demokratie. Welche Rolle spielen soziale Kämpfe in der Erinnerungskultur?*, ed. Stefan Berger, Wolfgang Jäger and Ulf Teichmann, 227–46 (Transcript, 2022); Ulrich van der Heyden, *Das Gescheiterte Experiment: Vertragsarbeiter Aus Mosambik in Der DDR-Wirtschaft (1979-1990)* (Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2019).

5 Schenck, *Remembering African Labor Migration*, 281.

enriches the existing body of research on socialist mobilities by positioning the migrants themselves as the protagonists of her work. Having experienced life in East Germany, she argues, worker-trainees gained insight into the industrialized socialist futures envisioned for Angola and Mozambique. However, upon returning to their war-torn homelands they encountered profound loss both financially and emotionally.

Time shapes the structure of the book, which follows the journey of worker-trainees from their lives in Mozambique and Angola, through their experiences in the GDR, to the present. Following a prologue, chapter two establishes the book's argument and methodology. Schenck threads together an impressive source base of 268 interviews into a "collective biography" and aims to construct an interpretation around this oral history, building on secondary literature as well as sources beyond the institutional GDR archives.<sup>6</sup> While this unconventional methodological approach elevates the African migrants' perspectives, there is some ambiguity as to how the interviews are integrated with Schenck's additional sources. Schenck categorizes the interviews as primary source material, but simultaneously acknowledges that they serve an illustrative purpose, indicating that her narrative relies quite heavily on archival sources and existing scholarship.

The book is organized around the dualities of the state and the individual, work and consumption, integration and exclusion, loss and gain, and past and present. In chapter three, Schenck contrasts state-centric conceptions of the Mozambican and Angolan labor migration schemes to the GDR with the expectations of the migrants themselves. The East German regime intended to bolster the East German economy by training young African workers and simultaneously benefit their home countries by sending back skilled professionals needed for industrial development. However, as Schenck argues, these official ambitions were challenged by migrants' diverse motivations which ranged from economic opportunities and educational prospects to personal desires to live abroad and escape civil wars in their home countries. Additionally, the GDR's proclaimed objectives rarely reflected reality, as only a minority of migrants received training that would have allowed them to make an immediate economic impact upon their return. The migrants' experiences are also central to the following chapter, which sheds light on their life in the GDR. Schenck emphasizes that while migrants were trained as workers, they also lived as consumers. Contrary to the paradigm of limited consumerism in socialist societies, which assumes comparison to a Western capitalist subject position, the GDR offered relative abundance to migrants who had experienced scarcity in their conflict-ridden homelands.

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6 Schenck, *Remembering African Labor Migration*, 29.

In the fifth chapter, the social lives of the migrants are explored. Schenck portrays them as “intimate strangers” who integrated into East German society while simultaneously facing policies designed to discourage long-lasting bonds, the eviction of pregnant worker-trainees before 1989, serving as one particularly restrictive example.<sup>7</sup> Even though socialist rhetoric proclaimed equal brotherhood, racism and xenophobia existed and further grew after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Facing German policies aimed at preventing the permanent settlement of migrants, this was one key reason for Angolans and Mozambicans to leave the GDR.

The abrupt end to the migration scheme resulted in a loss of transnational ties, as Schenck demonstrates in chapter six. However, she challenges narratives of victimhood, portraying the return of the worker-trainees not solely as an experience of social exclusion, but also as a transformative process that constituted a strong group identity. This is especially apparent in the case of Mozambican “madjermans,” who still fight today for the disbursement of unpaid wages, which they earned during their employment in the GDR, but the wages were appropriated by the Mozambican government.<sup>8</sup> Schenck argues that many returnees lost their roles as actors in global mobility and cultural exchange, only to become “spectators of twenty-first-century globalization from the sidelines.”<sup>9</sup> The final chapter brings the African worker-trainees into the conversation about post-socialist nostalgia, or what Schenck terms “eastalgia.”<sup>10</sup> This longing for certain aspects of life in the GDR, Schenck concludes, serves as a vehicle for criticism of the present and the imagination of a better future.

While labor migrants did not become the “New Men” driving socialist modernization that their socialist governments initially envisioned, they did return to Africa as new individuals, armed with different expectations of their governments. Schenck’s nuanced and empathetic study manages to shift the discourse away from simplistic narratives that deem socialist migration schemes as a failure and migrants as their victims towards a more balanced understanding of complex outcomes. One of the book’s notable strengths lies in its exploration of several under-researched areas. First of all, Schenck demonstrates the productivity of adopting a bottom-up rather than top-down perspective within migration studies, hence adding to our understanding of the lived experience of Mozambican and Angolan worker-trainees. Readers will moreover encounter a compelling argument for diversifying the study

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7 Schenck, *Remembering African Labor Migration*, 160.

8 Schenck, *Remembering African Labor Migration*, 170.

9 Schenck, *Remembering African Labor Migration*, 300.

10 Schenck, *Remembering African Labor Migration*, 283.

of globalization(s) in Schenck’s work. She successfully does so herself by characterizing socialist migration as multidirectional and acknowledging African societies as active contributors to globalization. In addition to these broader insights, Schenck nuances our understanding of life in East Germany by analysing it through the eyes of Black African migrants—a viewpoint given scant attention in the past. Lastly, she highlights the reciprocal effect of transnational migration by asserting that the migrant’s experience of life in the GDR caused migrants to view Mozambican and Angolan society and politics from a different perspective.

This innovative and rich book has some weaknesses that offer starting points for further developing avenues of research. I am not convinced that Schenck successfully parallels and intertwines the distinct, yet similar migration schemes of Angola and Mozambique. Although the author acknowledges constraints in thoroughly examining the Angolan case due to its smaller scale and limited academic discussion, the Mozambican narrative consistently overshadows that of Angola. Specifically, the depiction of the “madjermans” community, which is compellingly portrayed and arguably the most captivating aspect of the book, pertains solely to Mozambique.<sup>11</sup> Angola lacks a comparable community and has indeed provided financial compensation to worker-trainees. Moreover, in analysing the afterlives of migrants, Schenck places a strict focus on those migrants who returned to Mozambique and Angola, leaving little space for how Africans that stayed in the united Federal Republic of Germany would retrospectively view their experience.

Overall, *Remembering African Labor Migration to the Second World*, is an inspiring read for those interested in alternative accounts of globalization, the history of socialist labor migration, the experiences of migrants in East Germany, and contemporary activism in Mozambique. Schenck’s study effectively challenges dichotomies of global East-West and East-South relations. She analyzes the labor migrations programmes within their unique social and historical context, resisting a comparison between capitalist and socialist forms of labor that uses the former as the benchmark against which the latter is assessed. Furthermore, she situates the worker-trainees not as passive recipients of a state-organised project, but successfully demonstrates how individuals themselves evaluated and navigated their experiences between the Third, Second, and against the background of the First Worlds.

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11 Following their return from East Germany, Mozambican workers earned the moniker “madjerman.” Originating from the Changana language spoken in southern Mozambique, this word translates to, “those from Germany.” While often used derogatorily in Portuguese-speaking media, many workers proudly adopt it as a self-identifier, as evidenced by the madjerman activist group. See Schenck, *Remembering African Labor Migration*, 6, 41, and 221.

Readers eager for more of Schenck's work can anticipate her forthcoming manuscript *Decolonization, Development, and the Organization of African Unity: The creation of the African refugee regime in global perspective, 1963-1984*.