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## SOVIET POLITICAL EXPANSION IN AFRICA. DICTATORSHIPS AND DOUBLE STANDARDS

Búr, Gábor

Ryszard Kapuściński, the Polish journalist and writer of global reputation has called the Cold War in Africa as „one of the darkest, most disgraceful pages in contemporary history” and for that „everybody ought to be ashamed.”<sup>1</sup> For any case, Africa makes a special chapter in the history of the Cold War. According to popular belief, the Free World and the Communist Block battled in Africa by proxy, turning friendly countries into their allies who were fighting in the Cold War on their behalf. On these battlefields capitalism and communism sparked military coups and revolutions, fuelled rivalries with economic and in most cases military aid. Many would remember nearly half a century after the Second World War as the emergence of Africa in the world politics when „technical” and other kind of assistance assured a steady flow of cash to the ruling elites as they would try to extract money from all sides. Others would blame the Cold War even for the actual misery on the continent. Looking back from the 21st century, one can reveal with confidence that Africa was one of the major targets of the superpowers, the Africans were the victims of the Cold War and paid a high price during it and that the Cold War was a continuation of alien influence on the continent.

There is no doubt when the Cold War ended in Africa but opinions concerning its beginning diverge quite much. For some, it is a phenomenon linked to colonialism, i.e. they see it began just after the war, for others it is linked to neo-colonialism, clearly starting in the 1960s only. For any case, a milestone of major importance was the emergence of nationalism and of national liberation movements across the continent as a result of the Atlantic Charter’s third principal point, according to which all peoples had the right

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<sup>1</sup> The original sentence in Polish: „Zimna wojna w Afryce to jedna z najczarniejszych, najhaniańskich kart współczesnej historii i wszyscy powinni się jej wstydzić.” See: Jagielski, Wojciech: Idi Amin Dada i dyktatury afrykańskie. In: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, nr: 196/4407, 2003–08–23.

to self-determination.<sup>2</sup> In September 1941 Churchill stated that the Charter was only meant to apply to states under German occupation and not to colonies but it spread the idea of getting rid of colonial rule.

### **„The reds and the blacks”: the Soviet Union and Africa**

One would presume that the aim of the Soviet involvement in Africa was the spread of communism. Motives and effects of the Soviet penetration are still disputed by different scholars. The leading Soviet politicians during the Cold War era have little first-hand knowledge of Africa. For them the world consisted of oppressing and oppressed classes and nations, and anti-colonial struggles were considered as the first of the two stages of revolution: national-democratic and then socialist. Several events stimulated Soviet interest in Africa. From 1921 the Communist Party of South Africa actively participated in the work of the Comintern. During the 1920s, representatives of different African countries, first of all, South Africa, worked in various organizations of the Comintern, studied in its schools and participated in its meetings and congresses. In 1928 the Sixth Congress of the Comintern adopted the creation of an „independent Native republic” in the Union of South Africa as the main goal and the main slogan for the CPSA, thus attracting the attention of researchers to the problems of this country and that of the whole continent. From the late 1920s, one of the Comintern’s schools, the Communist University of Eastern Toilers (KUTV) began to enrol groups of students from Africa; some South Africans studied at the Lenin School – another Comintern educational institution. In 1929 a research wing of KUTV, the Academic Research Association for the Study of National and Colonial Problems (NIANKP) opened a study circle on African socio-economic problems.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The third principal point was formulated precisely: „they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them”. Source: Rosenman, Samuel (ed.): *Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, vol. 10. (1938–1950), p. 314.  
<http://usinfo.org/docs/democracy/53.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Filatova, Irina: *Soviet Historiography of Anti-Colonial Struggle (1920s–1960)*. In: Zeleza, P. T. (ed.): *The Study of Africa*. Vol. II: *Global and Transnational Engagements*, Dakar, Codesria, 2007, pp. 203–234.

***Endre Sík: establisher of the Soviet Africanistica?***

The Hungarian born internationalist, Endre Sík began his academic career in 1922 in Moscow and in 1926 he graduated from the Institute of Red Professors. Because of the overall lack of cadres while he was still only in the second year of his own studies, the party sent him to teach at the KUTV. His students were mainly blacks from the United States and later some from the African continent for whom he had to teach history showing the devastating effects of the imperialistic colonial policy with examples mainly taken from contemporary Africa.<sup>4</sup> They would be philosophers turned in that way into an Africanist, fulfilling the order of the party. Four years later he was charged with the chairmanship of a small department for African studies and at the same time of the „scientific cabinet”, a kind of a research institute.

„Since the establishment of the African department of the Eastern University, I have considered the history of Africa as my narrower profession”

– wrote Sík decades later in his autobiographical work.<sup>5</sup>

In 1929 Sík presented a paper, *Establishing Marxist Study of the Socio-Economic Problems of Black Africa*, trying to provide an agenda for a Marxist study of Africa. „It was essentially the first attempt to systematize African studies on Marxist terms.”<sup>6</sup> His role in the establishment of the African studies in the Soviet Union still needs further investigation but in the relevant literature we can read some exaggerated sentences about his person, like: „Sík had been regarded as something of an authority on the general questions on Negroes”<sup>7</sup> His official position was however not very solid, in 1930

<sup>4</sup> McClellan, Woodford: Africans and Black Americans in the Comintern Schools, 1925–1934. In: *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 26., No. 2., 1993, pp. 371–390.

<sup>5</sup> Sík, Endre: *Vihar a levelet... (Like storm the leaf...)* Budapest, 1970, 62. old.

<sup>6</sup> The paper was delivered by Sík on 13 April 1929 to an organized gathering of a scientific research circle. It was printed in 1930 for the „purposes of discussion” which meant that the editorial board was not necessarily approving it. See: Darch, Colin – Littlejohn, Gary: Endre Sík and the Development of African Studies in the USSR: A Study Agenda from 1929. In: *History in Africa*, Vol. 10, 1983, pp. 79–108.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, Edward. T.: *Russia and Black Africa Before World War II*, London–New York, 1974, p. 186., cited by: Darch, Colin – Littlejohn, Gary: Endre Sík and the Development of African Studies in the USSR: A Study Agenda from 1929. In: *History in Africa*, Vol. 10, 1983, pp. 79–108. This article was also published in Por-

he had to change to the International Agrarian Institute and then to the International Lenin Institute. Only from 1932 on he was able to give lectures again at the African department but in the next year he became a full time fellow of the Comintern. Here, at the congress of the Comintern in 1935, the future leaders of the Africa department, Potekhin and Zusmanowich took the wrong position regarding the policy of the South African Communist Party and this small scandal helped Sík back to chair the department.<sup>8</sup> But this new-old position he held for not long again, first he was put into the Institute of History and from 1943 on into the Institute of Ethnography of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. At the same time he gave lectures at the Moscow University. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Sík produced a series of articles, chapters, reviews and a book on such themes as the agrarian question in Africa, the general history of tropical and southern Africa, the race question and Marxism.<sup>9</sup> During the war Sík became an editor of Radio Moscow and soon after the war he returned to Hungary and made his career in diplomacy.

### *Soviet involvement in Africa: weakening the West?*

Russia never had colonial possessions in Africa but both the Czarist and Soviet Russia attempted to influence events on the continent. After the Second World War, Stalin did not develop a coherent policy concerning the colonial areas of Asia and Africa.<sup>10</sup> Soviet policy during the Early Cold War (1947–1951) focused on attacking colonialism, harming the reputation of the West, and seeping into local nationalist parties in unstable states. The USSR did not consider Africa high on the Soviet list of priorities. On 18 September 1945, the Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov surprised the other members of the „Big Five” by proposing to divide Libya into four separate

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tugese: Endre Sik e o desenvolvimento dos estudos africanos na URSS: uma agenda de estudos a partir de 1929. / Darch, Colin – Littlejohn, Gary. In: *Cadernos de História*. Maputo, no. 6. November, 1987, pp. 65–102.

<sup>8</sup> For this issue see: Darch, Colin: „Catalyst, Stake, Pretext, Symbol, Mask”: On the History of Relations between the Comintern, the Soviet Union and Southern Africa. In: *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Volume 31., Number 4, Number 4/December 2005, pp. 883–893.

<sup>9</sup> Sík, Endre: *Rasovaia Problema i Marksizm (The Race Problem and Marxism)*, Moscow, 1930. In Hungarian: *Faji kérdés és marxizmus*, 1971, Budapest.

<sup>10</sup> Gati, Charles: The Stalinist Legacy in Soviet Foreign Policy. In: *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, Vol. 35., No. 3., 1984, pp. 214–226.

trusteeships, claiming Tripolitania for the USSR and assigning Cyrenaica to Britain and Fezzan to France. Molotov, in addition, was saying that the USSR needed a base in the Mediterranean for its merchant ships, and he declared that the

„Soviet Union was extremely interested in the future development of the Mediterranean and Africa and believed that ... it was fully qualified to undertake the job”.<sup>11</sup>

The USSR put in a bid for bases in Eritrea, as well.

In the post-Stalin years the new Soviet leadership initiated a revised policy towards developing countries, also towards Africa. Many researchers have maintained the conventional wisdom that the USSR did not „discover” Africa until 1956 with the rise of Khrushchev.<sup>12</sup> Khrushchev envisaged a fairly rapid transition by postcolonial states toward socialism, i.e., toward Soviet-type societies and close association with the Soviet international bloc. In any case the newly independent African countries have experienced rising Soviet interest and involvement in their internal affairs. The focus of the policy was on the development of economic contacts as a prelude to broader political contacts.<sup>13</sup> In 1956 the Soviet Government sent a delegation to the inauguration of Liberia’s new president. It was the first visit of an official Soviet delegation to tropical Africa and a vivid manifestation of Khrushchev’s new activist approach to developing countries. The Soviets tried to get their foot in Ghana, which became independent in 1957. For many historians the beginning of the Cold War in Tropical Africa started in reality only in October 1958 when Guinea became independent or in July 1960 when the Congo crisis broke out. A Policy paper of the State Department’s African Bureau in 1960 considered the „Soviet Penetration of Africa” to be dangerous. It stated:

„A clear distinction must be drawn between ordinary diplomatic, commercial, and cultural contacts, which cannot be prevented by the West and Soviet Bloc ef-

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<sup>11</sup> Sulzberger, C. L.: „Soviet Seeks Hold in North Africa by a Trusteeship, Asks Tripolitania” *The New York Times*, 19 Sept. 1945, See: <http://www.zum.de/whkmla/sp/0607/jiyoonyeeyoon.html#2>

<sup>12</sup> Gorman, Robert F.: Soviet perspectives on the prospects for socialist development in Africa. In: *African Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 331, April 1984, pp. 163–187.

<sup>13</sup> Kanet, Roger E.: The Soviet Union and the developing countries: policy or policies. In: *The World Today*, Vol. 31, No. 8, Aug., 1975, pp. 338–346.

forts as propaganda and subversion, which must be countered promptly and effectively.”<sup>14</sup>

There was a consensus in Washington that any increase in Soviet contacts would result almost automatically in a reduction of the American influence in Africa.<sup>15</sup>

Soviet archives revealed that in the summer of 1961

„One Komsomol leader approached the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party with the plan of creating a counterweight to the American Peace Corps.”<sup>16</sup>

The idea was to send „specially trained groups” of young Soviet volunteers to Ghana, Guinea and Mali – the three main targets of Soviet penetration in Africa. Their mission was

„...to spread propaganda about Soviet achievements, to help with the construction of industrial installations, schools, hospitals and also with teaching and the medical treatment of the native population.”<sup>17</sup>

The three targeted African countries „agreed to receive these groups” but the plan was eventually turned down by the Politburo of the Soviet Communist Party because of its financial burdens. It would have cost \$200,000, the approximate sum spent by the U.S. Government to provide only one year’s activity for Peace Corps volunteers in Ghana alone.

Since the mid-1950s, the most significant instruments of Soviet influence-building in the Third World have been military and economic assistance. The Soviet Union however failed in the race with the West to assist financially and technically the newly independent countries. Most Soviet aid to African countries was of the „White Elephant” variety, big unmaintained projects of shoddy workmanship and poorly manufactured equipment. There was an obvious imbalance between military and civilian aid. Between 1954 and 1981 the Soviet Union delivered the equivalent of \$ 49.4 billion in mili-

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<sup>14</sup> Fisher, Jim: *A Soviet Peace Corps for Africa? Washington File: Russia may have planned it's own Peace Corps in Africa in early 1960's.*

<http://peacecorpsonline.org/messages/messages/2629/2013575.html>

<sup>15</sup> Kanet, Roger E.: The Soviet Union and the developing countries: policy or policies. In: *The World Today*, Vol. 31, No. 8, Aug., 1975, pp. 338–346.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



tary assistance and \$ 9.8 billion in economic assistance to the developing countries.<sup>18</sup>

### ***The pragmatic phase***

In the 1970s national liberation movements racked up a string of victories. The years between 1974 and 1979 saw eleven countries fall within the Soviet orbit. By promoting proxy forces, Moscow was able to engineer or bolster pro-Soviet regimes in Africa: Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Ethiopia. Using a strategy that was at once low cost and low risk and offered a high payoff, Moscow took advantage of social discontent in target countries by enlisting others to achieve its aims. The East Germans, Bulgarians and Czechs supplied munitions and trained the revolutionaries. But it was Cuba that became Moscow's archetype proxy state, instigating or supporting insurgencies in Africa. Havana first sent Ernesto „Che” Guevara to lead a failed rural insurgency in the Congo and then to his fatal effort in Bolivia. It dispatched arms and instructors to Ethiopia. It even deployed thousands of ground troops in Angola during the mid-1970s to take part in the Soviet-sponsored military intervention.<sup>19</sup> But as the Soviet Union put priority on the advancement of socialist and revolutionary vanguard parties, there was little external incentive for African states to undertake democratizing reforms. Angola, Benin, Cape Verde, Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mozambique, Seychelles, and Tanzania were registered as „revolutionary democracies”, Mali and Zambia as „socialist-oriented states”. Guinea became a „capitalist-oriented” country by the Soviet standpoint in 1984, but for more than two and a half decades it was a typical Cold War client state of the Soviet Union. Somalia, on the other hand, was a „revolutionary democracy” in favour of the Soviet Union before 1977, but the Soviets categorized it as „capitalist-oriented” after the beginning of the Ogaden war.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Roeder, Philip G.: The ties that bind: Aid, trade, and political compliance in Soviet-third world relations. In: *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Jun., 1985, pp. 191–216.

<sup>19</sup> Henriksen Thomas H.: The Rise and Decline of Rogue States. In: *Journal of International Affairs*, 54(2), 2001, pp. 349–373.

<sup>20</sup> Dunning, Thad: Conditioning the Effects of Aid: Cold War Politics, Donor Credibility, and Democracy in Africa. In: *International Organization* 58, Spring 2004, pp. 409–423.

Western researchers and politicians maintained that the Soviet leadership had elaborated and persistently implemented comprehensive and detailed strategy aimed at „communizing Africa” and its eventual taking over. Soviet senior Government and Communist Party officials in memoirs issued after the collapse of the Soviet Union claimed that there was neither a special African strategy nor any document containing even endeavours to create it. The Soviet Union did not aim to exclude the West from Africa but sought to stimulate the national liberation movement so that Western economic as well as political interests were reduced and to prevent the United States from replacing metropolitan powers as a stabilizing Western influence. The Soviet Union attempted to exploit the West's dependence on critical minerals. The Soviets had the only major deposits of platinum and manganese outside Southern Africa and possessed large reserves of chromium and cobalt. Soviet actions into several African countries endangered the stability of the entire continent.

„The situation regarding supplies of strategic minerals can be expected to deteriorate as world supplies dwindle unless steps are taken to counterbalance the expected shortages.”<sup>21</sup>

But such fears from the western side were unfounded as the Soviet engagement in Africa had waned by the mid-1980s, with the emergence of a „new thinking” in Soviet foreign policy associated with Mikhail Gorbachev, Eduard Shevardnadze, and others, and the Soviet elite had distanced itself from Leonid Brezhnev’s foreign policy doctrines. By 1986, the period of extensive and expensive military support for radical regimes in Angola, Ethiopia, and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa during the 1970s had come to an end. The demise of the Soviet Union produced a particularly dramatic shift among formerly Marxist–Leninist countries. The greatest gains in political liberalization in the last years of the Cold War and in the early 1990s were made by governments that started from a very low base of rights observance and that abandoned an ideological commitment to Marxism–Leninism e.g. Bénin, Cape Verde, Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Angola. If the East–West stalemate in Europe had forced the Soviets to shift the field of competition from Europe to the so called Third World, they have to abandon it years before the collapse of communism. Until the end of the Cold War, more than 30 years later, the two superpowers viewed the coloni-

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<sup>21</sup> Wiggins, Rudy: *U.S. Reliance On Africa For Strategic Minerals*.  
<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1984/HRA.htm>

al and postcolonial world as a field of battle in which the competition had all the characteristics of a zero-sum game, in which even the slightest gain in presence or influence for one side was seen as transforming immediately into a comparable loss of presence or influence for the other.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kanet, Roger E.: The Superpower Quest for Empire: The Cold War and Soviet Support for „Wars of National Liberation.” In: *Cold War History*, Vol. 6, No. 3, August 2006, pp. 331–352.