

The Soviets in Africa: Fiction and Fact

by Susan Rogers and Kenneth Vickery

The spectre of a "Soviet Menace" in Africa has been raised anew by the U.S. Government and press in reaction to recent developments on the continent, especially in Angola, where over 400 years of Portuguese rule officially ended on November 11, 1975. As the Portuguese withdrew, a bloody civil war was fought between three rival African nationalist movements—MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA. For reasons that serve neither the interests of the peoples of Angola and southern Africa nor of Americans who wish to understand the critical conditions inherent in a region where increased conflict now seems likely, the Ford Administration has chosen to cast events in Angola in a framework of communist vs. anti-communist and more particularly, pro-Soviet vs. pro-western forces. Charges and warnings on the part of Secretary of State Kissinger that an MPLA victory in Angola would lead to a Soviet-controlled government threatening the freedom of the Angolan peoples, the stability and peace of the African continent, and western security were central to the argument for U.S. covert and/or overt intervention on behalf of FNLA and UNITA. The fact that MPLA did win a victory, with the help of significant Soviet military aid and Cuban troops (said by U.S. intelligence sources to number over 10,000), is held up as the leading example of Soviet aggression on the African continent. The facts that sizeable covert aid was extended by the U.S. and other western nations to FNLA and UNITA, and that most of the Soviet/Cuban assistance came in *response* to a full-scale invasion of Angola by the South African army, are now usually ignored by U.S. analysts.

From the general Angolan scenario, proponents of the "Soviet Menace" theory have elaborated and enlarged the picture, conjuring up such startling images as a string of Soviet "puppet states" from Angola across mid-continent to Somalia, or a Soviet naval attack against Brazil, launched presumably from Angola and other West African ports. The apartheid regime of South Africa has willingly chimed into the orchestration of high-pitched anti-Soviet propaganda, with resounding warnings of the dangerous presence of Soviet fleets in the Indian Ocean, poised to attack the West's "oil jugular" by intercepting tankers bound from the Middle east to fuel-hungry industries in Europe and America. Meanwhile, the U.S. Defense Department has contributed for public consumption maps showing the countries in Africa to which the Soviets have supplied military aid and/or military advisors, and has sounded the alarm over 16 ports and airfields on the continent

supposedly available to the USSR as military bases. With few exceptions, U.S. press coverage has dutifully reflected and reinforced the major features of the anti-Soviet scenario avoiding the more arduous task of concrete factual analysis.

Unfortunately, the alarms sounded by the U.S. military establishment are not mere talk. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld journeyed to Africa in June 1976—the first trip to the continent ever made by a Defense Secretary—and negotiated major arms sales agreements with the governments of Kenya and Zaire. Kenya is to buy \$70 million in fighter planes. Zaire will get \$50 million in ground equipment, probably on credit. In addition, direct U.S. military aid to sub-Saharan Africa topped \$70m. in fiscal 1975, and will doubtless be higher in 1976 and 1977; only three years ago there existed a statutory limit of \$40m. to this region. Meanwhile, the longstanding military relationship with Ethiopia has expanded dramatically; according to the *New York Times*, Ethiopia has purchased \$100m. in U.S. arms since October 1975, and a similar amount is yet to come.

In every case, the rationale given is growing Soviet arms supplies and influence in neighboring countries and in Africa generally. At no time has there been any effort to discuss restraints or consequences with the Soviets or the Organization of African Unity. Although, to its credit, the U.S. Congress refused to assume the role of "savior of the Angolan people against the Soviet menace" by barring covert aid to UNITA or FNLA, little Congressional opposition to these recent moves is visible. Thus the U.S. has plunged headlong into a tragic regional arms race, with no end in sight. It is, perhaps, naive to think the U.S. would long ignore the last great untapped market for our No. 1 industrial export—arms.

The spectre of a Soviet monster eating away at the African continent has been raised. Like most phantoms, it does not stand up very well to close or critical examination. It is imperative that we subject it to just such close examination. In so doing, we hope to clear the air for a better understanding of the real issues at stake throughout southern Africa, which may in turn lead to a critical evaluation of the U.S. commitment and role in that part of the continent.

It is not our objective here to put the case for African liberation in the remaining strongholds of white minority rule, but rather, to separate fiction from fact with regard to the Soviet presence on the continent, and the African attitudes toward that presence.

Fiction

Africa has been a high-priority target for Soviet interest, as evidenced in massive Soviet economic aid to the continent.

Fact

When the Soviet Union first began to establish relations with independent African countries in the late 1950's, it was entering what had long been a "western preserve" controlled politically and economically by European colonial powers. Its arrival on the scene was therefore significant in the sense that it was completely new. Yet informed analysts of Soviet aid to the continent have invariably concluded that the magnitude of this aid has not been great in either absolute or relative terms. Between 1959 and 1965 the Soviet Union made aid commitments to fifteen African countries. New commitments during this period averaged 30% of the USSR's total annual commitment to what are termed Less Developed Countries (L.D.C.'S). Between 1965 and 1973, this figure dropped to 11%, reaching its lowest point in 1971.

In 1972, Soviet aid to L.D.C.'s generally fell 30% below 1971 levels, and no new aid was committed to any African state. Altogether, the Soviets pledged \$1.3 billion in economic assistance to African countries (excluding Egypt) between 1959 and 1973. \$400 million in project aid (the most important category of Soviet economic assistance) had actually been delivered by the end of the period. (See Tables I & II)

Looking at Table II, it could be argued that from the Soviet Union's standpoint, project aid to Guinea and Algeria totalling over \$120 million, was financially significant. Indeed, in the case of Guinea, where complete estrangement from France has occurred, Soviet project aid deliveries between 1959 and 1973 averaged around twice the value of net Western aid, and must therefore be regarded as relatively important. For Algeria, however, which received substantial French aid during the period, the same approximate Soviet figure was comparatively much less significant, equaling only 9% of western receipts. Soviet project aid to Ghana and Mali, much smaller in absolute terms, amounted to 15% and 12% of western receipts respectively, while for the 11 other Soviet-aided states, the totals ranged from less than 1% to 8% of western aid.

As of early 1976, the largest single Soviet aid project in sub-Saharan Africa was the Kindia bauxite-mining complex in Guinea, the contract for which was signed in 1972. In return for its aid, the Soviet Union will be sold 2.5 million tons of bauxite annually for thirty years, sales for the first twelve years constituting repayment of a \$92 million credit line. As the Soviet Union faces shortages of high-grade ores for aluminum, the Kindia supply will be of considerable significance to this country.

The idea that an aid arrangement should benefit the donor country as well as the recipient is hardly unique to the USSR; nor needless to say, is the Soviet Union the first or only industrialized country to seek reliable supplies of essential mineral resources from the African continent.

Fiction

The end of colonial rule in most of Africa left the newly independent nations of the continent ripe for Soviet domination and control.

Fact

The thrust and content of Soviet interest in Africa in the late 1950's and early '60's suggests that under Khrushchev, this simplistic and basically paternalistic view of independent Africa may have been accepted in the USSR. But Khrushchev's policy of investing most heavily in African countries which appeared to have the most radical political orientation (i.e., Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Algeria) and in prestige projects designed to win favor and direct influence, was a dismal failure. No "mirror states" emerged. Moreover, a series of critical blows to Soviet foreign policy in Africa were dealt by the expulsion of Soviet and East European diplomats from Guinea (1961), the expulsion of all Soviet and personnel from Ghana following the overthrow of Nkrumah (1966), the collapse of Keita's Soviet-aided Government in Mali (1968), and the execution of communists in the Sudan. By the early 1970's, Guinea was the only sub-Saharan country termed "progressive" by the USSR which remained under leadership to which the Soviets had initially extended diplomatic relations in the late 1950's.

Fiction

Even if it is true that the Soviets have as yet failed to gain a single "puppet" among African leaders, Soviet-centered communist doctrine has made deep and insidious inroads on the African continent.

Fact

To the delight of political scientists looking for new topics and to the dismay of doctrinaire advocates of the Soviet Socialist model, the nations of Africa have provided an amazingly rich variety of definitions of socialism and methods of application. Far from toeing a Soviet line in party policy, composition or practice, African leaders have invariably assumed independent philosophical and ideological positions—from Nkrumah's "Consciencism," Keita's version of "scientific socialism," Nyerere's *Ujamaa*, and Kaunda's "Humanism" to a host of other interpretations of Marxism-Leninism combined variously with religion, "African socialism," "Maoism," and/or populism. There has been no attempt to fit the Soviet Socialist mold. On the contrary, there has been much serious questioning of the adequacy of orthodox Marxist doctrine for dealing with Africa's basically agrarian conditions, cultures and populations.

Even so, one cannot dispense with this particular fiction without making one other observation. Serious differences may divide African leaders all along the economic and political spectrum from "most conservative" to "most radical." Ultimately, however, they share a central conviction in common: The nations of Africa—the peoples of Africa—are not interested in freeing themselves from the political and economic domination of Europe only to accept another form of foreign domination, be it Soviet, American, Chinese or any other.

In fact, the Soviet Union has not been able to buy African support in the UN or elsewhere with its economic and military aid. There have, of course, been particular issues, usually of a general nature, on which the non-aligned African nations' voting in the UN has corresponded with that of the USSR—for example, resolutions on disarmament, human rights, peace maintenance, etc. But even the most cursory glance at patterns

and records demonstrates that Soviet aid has not guaranteed votes for the USSR *vis a vis* the U.S. or China. When it comes to the struggle between the big powers, it is evident that African nations regard both the Soviet Union and the U.S. as rich industrialized giants, to be handled with caution. While it may gall the USSR for African states to equate "rich and communist" with "rich and capitalist" as if ideology and economics were secondary, this appears to be a common view on the African continent. In so far as the Soviet Union tends to vote with Black Africa regarding resolutions in support of the liberation of Southern Africa and against white minority rule, a coalescence of interests can be discerned, not regarding "communism" but regarding African liberation. That the U.S. is found abstaining or on the opposite side, taking stances that in effect support the status quo and white domination, is scarcely proof that Black Africa is pro-Soviet rather than pro-U.S.; rather, that the Soviet Union is pro-Black Africa and the U.S., pro-white interests.

Fiction

Recent statistics provided by the U.S. Defense Department are clear proof of a dangerous Soviet military thrust into Africa.

Fact

In February, 1976, the U.S. Defense Department released for use by the press a map of Africa showing Soviet military and economic aid figures and numbers of advisors for eleven African countries (including Egypt) for the period 1970-75. What are we to make of this rather startling map? To begin with, the map itself shows, in large part, not a "military thrust into Africa" but Soviet military aid related to the *Middle East*. Of a total military aid figure to the continent of \$2,187m. in 1971-75, no less than \$1,313m.—60 per cent—went to one country, Egypt. For next-door Libya, the figure is \$363m., another 17 per cent of the total. Now, it does not take a sophisticated analyst of world affairs to understand that this aid is much more related to the ongoing crisis in the Middle East—and to the billions in aid given to Israel by the U.S.—than it is to "making inroads" into Africa. (One might add that Egypt is perhaps the classic example of Soviet inability to buy "puppets"; despite the huge Soviet aid, Sadat threw most of the Soviet advisors out in 1972 and has moved closer to the West.)

Second, even if the figures for Soviet aid are not exaggerated, the map's use is limited because the Defense Department did not see fit to provide figures by which any useful comparisons could be made or meaningful conclusions drawn. As in Angola, our militarists are prepared to provide data in great detail on Soviet activities; only much later if at all do we realize what U.S. agencies have been up to. In this case, the U.S. Government when pressed says it has made military deliveries of \$164m. to Africa in 1971-75, to which must be added at least \$32m. in covert military assistance in Angola. This total of \$196m., compared to the Soviet figure of \$511m. (Africa total minus Egypt and Libya), yields a difference not so staggering as Defense likes to imply. Still, we need to know more. What, for example, are the corresponding U.S. figures for Ethiopia, Soviet-aided Somalia's neighbor? In 1972, when Soviet military personnel in Somalia totalled some 400, there were 3,500 Americans stationed at the huge U.S. telecommunications facility at Kagnew in Ethiopia. Between 1954 and 1973, when Soviet military aid to Somalia was \$55m., U.S. military aid to Ethiopia amounted to \$200m.

This is not the whole story either, however. For it would seem reasonable to include in the balance the very considerable military aid provided by ex-colonial powers, mainly France and Britain, to their ex-colonies since independence. France, for instance, has maintained numbers of troops in countries like Chad, and had defense agreements with most of its former territories. Britain has provided \$40m. in military aid to Kenya, for example, and is reportedly closing another major arms transaction there presently. (*New York Times*, July 18, 1976)

Finally, there is South Africa, whose military force dwarfs any other in sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa's military budget for 1975/76 is \$1,327m. Although Western powers try to put some distance between themselves and South Africa in public, there is no question that the Republic is aggressively pro-western and anti-Soviet.

A deceptive and one-sided "scare-map" must be understood precisely for what it is. It is a propaganda tool which obscures rather than illuminates truth.

Fiction

The Soviet Union now has 16 air and naval bases strategically located around the rim of the African continent. These bases will enable them to control the Indian Ocean, disrupt vital sea lanes from the Middle East around the Cape to the U.S. and Europe, and threaten western security generally.

Fact

Even the U.S. Defense Department, which published this figure of 16 bases on the African continent, felt constrained to note these were *not* all bases permanently occupied by the Soviets or even available *automatically* to Soviet ships and planes. However, the impression given was that it could be assumed that the African countries in which these bases are located would almost automatically grant permission for Soviet military use if such use was requested by the USSR. To make this assumption is to grossly overestimate the degree of leverage the USSR has in determining policy in any African country and to simultaneously underestimate the extent to which African governments have proven themselves able to make independent decisions based primarily on the requirements and interests of their own countries and of the African continent. For example, although the USSR assisted Guinea in expanding its airport at Conakry at a time when the country had very limited prospects for other sources of external aid, Guinea denied the Soviets permission to land planes en route to Cuba during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Eleven years later, in 1973, after the Soviets had helped to protect the Guinea coast against Portuguese incursions from Guinea-Bissau for two years, and had provided steady economic assistance without political interference or attempts at manipulation, they were granted permission to fly naval reconnaissance missions out of Conakry airport; but Guinea determined and continues to determine the conditions under which Soviet use of the airport will or will not occur.

Again, we hear very little about U.S. or Western access to ports and airfields. A State Department official replied when asked directly: "On the question of U.S. access to military facilities and relative to Soviet access, we have none that are comparable." This is nothing less than deception. In fact, the *New York Times* reported May 19 that two U.S. warships were visiting four West African ports. One of them, interestingly, was Conakry, Guinea—the supposed Soviet "base"! Apparently, when the Soviets visit a facility it becomes a "base," whereas if the U.S. does so it is not even "access" worth mentioning.

The U.S. has communications facilities in Morocco and Ethiopia. Most recently, during renewed Kenya-Uganda tension, the U.S. made a show of dispatching warships to Mombasa port and landing warplanes at Nairobi. Mombasa is one of the Soviet "access facilities" listed on the Defense Department map—which underscores the point that most African countries will grant access to whom they please, when they please.

In the last few years, Soviet naval penetration into the Indian Ocean—like the African continent itself, long a "western preserve"—and the establishment of a significant Soviet presence in Somalia, has created conditions for particularly noisy speculation about the new potential for Russian aggression. Interestingly, however, the Soviets have neither received nor insisted upon the acquisition of base rights from the Somali Government in return for assistance. Nor have they insisted upon Somali rejection of U.S. or Chinese aid as a condition for continued Soviet assistance. In any case, the Soviet Indian Ocean "threat" has already been met by the construction of a full-fledged U.S. Naval Base on the island of Diego Garcia. The ships and planes which went to Kenya were sent from this base. Add to the Diego Garcia base the U.S. Naval Facility at Bahrain, our tracking stations in South Africa and on Mahe Island, our Military Base in Ethiopia, the British facilities at Masirah, Gan and Mauritius, and French Military bases at Djibouti, at Diego Suarez in Madagascar, and at La Reunion—add all these to the picture for a realistic perspective on the Soviet "threat".

The argument that the Soviets intend to disrupt western shipping lanes to the Middle East is mainly voiced by and in the interests of apartheid South Africa. The crucial corollary to the argument is that N.A.T.O. and the western powers need the present South African regime to insure protection of the Cape route. By insinuating themselves into a South Atlantic alliance with the west against the "Soviet-communist threat," the white minority regime hopes to bind western allies in the fight against African majority rule.

Fiction

Acceptance of Soviet financial and military aid on the part of African liberation movements seeking to dislodge white minority regimes from control of Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa will inevitably lead to Soviet domination of southern Africa.

Fact

Elaborating further on this fiction, South African Prime Minister Vorster has said, "If South Africa is lost to the Western world it will be the West which is to blame, and should that happen they will merely have enabled the Russians to cut one of their biggest lifelines at will. It stands to reason that in an international war he who controls the southern tip of Africa, or has access to it, has a terrific advantage." (*The Sunday Telegraph*, March 14, 1976)

It is easy to understand why the white minority government of South Africa wishes to equate African liberation and Russian communism. In so doing, South Africa hopes to secure western support in defense of apartheid against Africans committed to the struggle for majority rule.

In this regard, South African propaganda fits perfectly with the myopic view into which our own administration seems locked—a vision which ignores specific African realities and African aspirations, and grossly underestimated the extent to which African liberation movements and governments are agents of their own will.

If the U.S. now finds itself handicapped in southern Africa, it is not because of Black Africa's commitment to the USSR or even because of Soviet support of African liberation movements. It is because far from supporting African liberation to date, the U.S. was committed to support of the former fascist Portuguese regime in its wars against the peoples of Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau. It is because even today, the U.S. bolsters the Smith regime in Rhodesia by importing chrome in violation of UN sanctions the U.S. voted for. It is because the U.S. commitment to apartheid, in the form of \$1.5 billion in investment, over 300 companies that do business there, the sales of planes, electronic equipment and numerous other items that strengthen white minority rule in South Africa, all give the lie to official pronouncements regarding U.S. "abhorrence" of apartheid.

Table I+			
African Countries Ranked by Cumulative Soviet Aid Commitments, 1959-68 (in millions of U.S. dollars)			
Algeria	232*	Sierra Leone	28
Ethiopia	102	Sudan	22
Ghana	93*	Tanzania	20
Guinea	76*	Uganda	16
Somalia	64	Congo-Brazzaville	10*
Mali	59*	Cameroon	8
Kenya	48	Senegal	7
Morocco	44	Zambia	6
Tunisia	34	Mauritania	3

*Countries classified by Soviet commentators in the years 1960-68 as "national democratic states."

Table II+			
Non-Communist Recipients of Soviet Project Aid Ranked by Cumulative Deliveries, 1955-73 (in millions of U.S. dollars)*			
India	1,182.0	Ceylon	17.7
Egypt	832.0	Greece	14.0
Iran	486.0	Sudan	13.4
Afghanistan	346.0	Ethiopia	13.3
Turkey	316.0	Uganda	8.5
Iraq	196.0	Tunisia	7.6
Syria	195.0	Burma	4.9
Guinea	125.7	Congo-Brazzaville	3.8
Algeria	121.8	Yemen People's Republic	3.8
Indonesia	66.3	Nigeria	1.5
Pakistan	65.6	Tanzania	1.5
Yemen Arab Republic	34.6	Senegal	1.4
Mali	31.0	Cameroon	1.2
Morocco	25.9	Cambodia	1.0
Somalia	22.6	Bangladesh	.9
China	20.6		

*Converted from roubles at the rate of one rouble equals \$1.11.

TABLE III-	
Soviet Military Aid Extended to Less Developed Countries, 1955-72 (in millions of U.S. dollars)	
Total	8,475
Africa	620
Algeria	400
Burundi	negligible
Congo	15
Equatorial Guinea	negligible
Ghana	10
Guinea	25
Mali	5
Morocco	15
Nigeria	15
Sierra Leone	negligible
Somalia	55
Sudan	65
Tanzania	5
Uganda	10
East Asia	1,115
Near East and South Asia (including \$2,700 to Egypt)	6,740

TABLE IV+	
Soviet Military Personnel Present for More Than One Month in Less Developed Countries, 1972	
Country	Number of Military Personnel
Afghanistan	200
Algeria	1,000
Egypt	5,500*
India	200
Iraq	500
Somalia	400
Sudan	100
Syria	1,100
Yemen (Aden)	200
Yemen (Sana)	100
Other	150
Total	9,450

*This number does not include an estimated 7,500 Soviet military personnel who were assigned to Soviet operational units in Egypt. These troops were withdrawn at Egypt's request in mid-1972, along with most Soviet military advisers and technicians.

TABLE V	
Current Soviet Union Military Advisors in Africa	
Country	Number of Advisors
Algeria	600
Angola	170
Egypt	200
Guinea	110
Libya	300
Mali	33
Mozambique	25
Nigeria	50
Somalia	1,000
Sudan	80
Uganda	300
TOTAL	2,868

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Defense as quoted in the *Washington Post*, February 18, 1976.

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ANGOLA ■

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