

ESAANZ ESSAY PRIZE WINNER-POSTGRADUATE SECTION

Intervention, ideology, strategic imperatives: An examination of fluctuating relations between Russia/USSR and sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Throughout the duration of the Cold War and its aftermath, sub-Saharan Africa has been a hotbed of geopolitical contestation. This article examines the role of the Soviet Union and its successor state, the Russian Federation, as a major regional actor. Beginning with Soviet intervention in the Congo in the 1950s, the article posits that sub-Saharan Africa was an initially marginal region for Soviet strategists which became increasingly significant as the Cold War progressed. Soviet strategy was driven by both raw questions of geopolitical clout and a broader attempt to export its ideology to the Third World. The article elucidates the consequences of intervention from both Soviet and local perspectives, emphasising the agency of African states who were able to leverage superpower competition in pursuit of their own interests. However, the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in a complete retreat from Africa as strategic priorities in Moscow changed rapidly. Recent Russian re-engagement with the region has continuities with Soviet strategy, but there are marked shifts in its underlying rationale. Under Putin, there has been a concerted attempt to form salutary economic and security relationships with regional autocracies, predicated on transactional realpolitik.

Keywords: Soviet Union; Russia; Cold War; intervention; superpower competition; sub-Saharan Africa

During and after the Cold War, relations between the Soviet Union and its successor state, the Russian Federation, on the one hand and sub-Saharan Africa on the other underwent significant transformations. While initially a peripheral region, sub-Saharan Africa became increasingly strategically significant to the Soviets as the Cold War progressed. The USSR was a central geopolitical player, intervening both covertly and actively in regional conflicts, fostering close military and economic ties with allies, and exporting its ideology and socialist model of development.¹ These policy initiatives were part of its broader Cold War struggle with the United States for supremacy in the Third World. In turn, states in the region profited substantially from this dynamic, leveraging superpower competition to extract aid, expertise, and security guarantees.² However, the collapse of the USSR upended existing relations as sub-Saharan Africa became a region of limited interest to Moscow. However, since the late-2000s, Russia has rebuilt economic and security ties with authoritarian regimes, based on

¹ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 207-287.

² Radolsav A. Yordanov, *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa during the Cold War: Between Ideology and Pragmatism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 120-187; Sergey Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo, 1956-1964* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 157-250; Keith Somerville, *Southern Africa and the Soviet Union: From Communist International to Commonwealth of Independent States* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 12-35.

transactional, quid pro quo exchanges.³ While the scope of Russian relations with the region are far more limited today, important continuities exist as sub-Saharan Africa remains a playground for geopolitical competition.

Before examining the fluctuating relations between Russia/USSR and sub-Saharan Africa, it is essential to remove definitional ambiguities. The notion of sub-Saharan Africa – the part of the African continent partially or fully south of the Sahara Desert – is itself an arbitrary concept. Sub-Saharan Africa is a large and diverse region with distinct sub-regional differences and cleavages, particularly of a socio-cultural and religious nature.⁴ However, it is a useful construction for the purposes of this analysis. For one, sub-Saharan Africa was shaped by its brutal experience of colonial rule. This directly shaped Soviet policy which was part of a broader strategy to assist anti-colonial movements in the Third World and encourage its model of development.⁵ Guided by the influential theories of Africa expert Karen Brutents and Cold War geopolitics, the CPSU foreign affairs apparat and KGB, conceptualised a vast, diverse area as one distinct region.⁶ Soviet perceptions were thus crucial to determining relations and Stalin's death in 1953 precipitated a dramatic perceptual shift. Stalin's ultimate successor, Khrushchev, did not see the world in terms of a purely "dualistic" class system and viewed anti-imperial forces, particularly post-Bandung Conference, as a potential ally.⁷ This heralded the beginning of Soviet strategy in Africa, aligning itself with anti-colonial forces across the continent.

Under Khrushchev, the Soviets began to develop close ties and provide economic and, in some cases, covert military aid to revolutionary movements and regimes such as Nkrumah's Ghana, Touré's Guinea, and Lumumba's MNC in the Congo.⁸ This generation of charismatic left-wing nationalists were enthusiastic about the Soviet Union, particularly its avowed commitment to anti-imperialism and alternative development model to the capitalism. The Soviets, meanwhile, readily provided aid in the region and engaged in a concerted campaign of ideological penetration, broadcasting weekly radio programs in major languages such as English, Swahili, and Portuguese, disseminating works of Marxist theory, and opening the Patrice Lumumba University to educate Africa's new political elite.⁹ However, a pragmatic sheen continued to overlay Moscow's policies towards the region which were predicated on "limited but strategically important alliances with nationalist forces".¹⁰ These became increasingly uneasy as Moscow grew wary of leaders such as Nkrumah and Touré who were perceived as ideologically unsound given their outspoken Pan-Africanism.¹¹ Soviet policymakers displayed a certain naivete about their allies, typically viewing them through the narrow prism of Marxist theory and as instruments which could be

³ Kimberley Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no.3 (2019): 181-204.

⁴ Robert O. Collins and James M. Burns, *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 40-51.

⁵ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 205-206.

⁶ Jan S. Adams, "International Activism in Soviet Third World Policy: The Role of the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee," *Slavic Review* 48, no. 4 (1989): 614-630.

⁷ Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War*, 12; Radoslav A. Yordanov, *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa during the Cold War: Between Ideology and Pragmatism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 36-65.

⁸ Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War*, 28-85.

⁹ Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War*, 20-22.

¹⁰ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 108.

¹¹ Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 278-286.

easily manipulated. Developments throughout the 1960s increasingly exposed the shortcomings of this approach beginning with outbreak of the Congo Crisis.

The Congo Crisis was a pivotal moment in the history of Soviet relations with sub-Saharan Africa and for the region in general. It was a salient episode because it forced the Soviets to “re-examine [their] optimistic perspectives” and “take a more realistic look at African realities”.¹² With its richly endowed resources, particularly uranium, the Congo was a valuable strategic prize.¹³ The Crisis exploded in mid-1960 during the botched decolonisation process as Belgium rapidly withdrew, leaving the state without a functioning administration. Lumumba was named Prime Minister, but, despite his pleas, the Soviets were cautious and slow to act, failing to provide him with essential material support in a timely fashion.¹⁴ The ensuing civil war was the first major proxy war of the Cold War in Africa. Lumumba was ousted and executed, replaced by right-wing anti-communist, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu. Lise Namikas has convincingly argued that the Crisis demonstrated the malleable correlation between security and ideology in Soviet foreign policy.¹⁵ As such, Soviet policy rested on an unresolved tension between backing ideologically palatable regimes and strategically viable ones. However, the Crisis also represented an outright policy failure as the Soviets were outmanoeuvred by the US which acted decisively, channelled military assistance more effectively, and better leveraged complex dynamics within the Congo itself.

The bruising lesson in the Congo was an important one for Soviet policymakers. Throughout the late 60s and early 70s, several factors coalesced which altered Soviet policy in the region. For one, the influence of Pan-Africanism receded. Instead, movements across the region embraced Marxism-Leninism because it was perceived to be “structured, defined and... scientific”.¹⁶ These movements were natural allies of the USSR which was more willing to assist movements with favourable ideological bona fides. Meanwhile, under Leonid Brezhnev, tectonic shifts were taking place within the Soviet foreign policy establishment.¹⁷ While Andrei Gromyko’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs oversaw Détente and the European theatre, a separate power centre comprised of intellectuals within the CPSU and KGB began to wield outsize influence on Third World policy.¹⁸ Led by Brutents, activist policymakers gradually abandoned the orthodox Marxist position of waiting for societies to progress through social stages towards socialism and began actively supporting vanguard parties.¹⁹ This set the stage for heightened intervention in sub-Saharan Africa as the Soviets allied themselves to movements committed to radical social reform.

Throughout the 1970s, the locus of the Cold War in Africa shifted south. One of these fronts was against the white-minority regimes, tacitly supported by the West, in Rhodesia and South Africa.²⁰ The Soviets sought to position themselves as the primary ally of liberation movements and actively influence their ideological trajectory,

¹² Mozov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War*, 77.

¹³ Elizabeth Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa: From the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 57.

¹⁴ Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa*, 57-78.

¹⁵ Lise Namikas, *Battleground Africa: Cold War in the Congo, 1960-1965* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 1-23.

¹⁶ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 108.

¹⁷ Celeste A. Wallander, “Third-World Conflict in Soviet Military Thought: Does the “New Thinking” Grow Prematurely Grey,” *World Politics* 42, no. 1 (1989): 35-36.

¹⁸ Adams, “International Activism in Soviet Third World Policy,” 614-630.

¹⁹ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 202-206.

²⁰ Somerville, *Southern Africa and the Soviet Union*, 1-11.

regarding the ANC as its most salient regional ally and fostering ties between its leadership and senior echelons of the KGB.²¹ Covert military assistance and training was provided to the ANC, whose military wing, uMkhonto we Sizwe, maintained bases in Zambia and later Angola and Mozambique while money and arms were also channelled to guerrillas in Rhodesia.²² However, despite their tangible support and the Brutents led policy evolution, covert Soviet intervention was generally inefficacious. Indeed, for both the white-minority governments and the liberation movements, the struggle affirmed their agency as actors capable of leveraging the Cold War dynamic to advance their interests. As Sue Onslow has comprehensively elucidated, the struggle in South Africa and Rhodesia was peculiarised by the “residual strength” of the settler-colonial governments who adeptly used the “perceived threat of communism” to “demonise... liberation movements” and “divert attention from the... causes of opposition to racist rule”.²³ Similarly, liberation groups, exemplified by the Robert Mugabe-led ZANU, masterfully deployed the rhetoric of socialism and pivoted between China and the Soviets to extract maximal support while maintaining geopolitical agency.²⁴ Ultimately, it was the Soviets who emerged from these struggles as losers, failing to draw Zimbabwe, the successor to Rhodesia, into its camp as Mugabe became a close ally of China and receding as the major backer of the ANC which distanced itself from the socialist bloc altogether.²⁵

Interlinked with these struggles were the wars of independence in the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique. Critically, these conflicts, protracted and messy as they were, came to be high points of Soviet intervention in terms of accomplishing geostrategic objectives in sub-Saharan Africa. In Mozambique, the struggle for independence lasted more than a decade, pitting the revolutionary nationalist and later Marxist-Leninist FRELIMO against colonial authorities. Logistically, FRELIMO was heavily supported by the Soviets who supplied guerrillas with state-of-the-art anti-air weaponry and surface-to-air missiles along with training from crack Soviet commandos.²⁶ Yet, despite its inherent socialist orientation, FRELIMO was defined by its ideological malleability, emphasising a united front within the anticolonial movement above all else.²⁷ Its leadership, particularly following the ascent of Samora Machel, proved adept at leveraging great power interests. This allowed it to maintain genial ties with both China and the USSR, officially adopting Marxism-Leninism and Soviet models of development while emphasising its agricultural basis and peasant cadres which more closely aligned with the Maoist revolutionary model.²⁸ Following the dramatic collapse of the Portuguese Empire in the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution, FRELIMO filled the power vacuum with relative ease. For the Soviets, this was an unqualified success and vindicated Brutents’ blueprint, transforming a reactionary colonial regime into a reliable member of the socialist bloc with a resilient vanguard party. Critically, for pragmatic policymakers in organisations like the KGB, it also represented a remarkably large payoff for a very limited investment of resources,

²¹ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 215-216.

²² Vladimir Shubin, “Unsung Heroes: The Soviet Military and the Liberation of Southern Africa,” in *The Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Liberation*, ed. Sue Onslow (London: Routledge, 2009), 154-176.

²³ Sue Onslow, “The Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Nationalism, and External Intervention,” in *The Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Liberation*, ed. Sue Onslow (London: Routledge, 2009), 9.

²⁴ Onslow, “The Cold War in Southern Africa,” 11-14.

²⁵ Somerville, *Southern Africa and the Soviet Union*, 251-253.

²⁶ Shubin, “Unsung Heroes,” 163-164.

²⁷ Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa*, 80.

²⁸ Onslow, “The Cold War in Southern Africa,” 26-28.

affirming the value of the Soviets as both an ideological and strategic partner for liberation movements in sub-Saharan Africa.

Meanwhile, in Angola, the independence struggle which morphed into a Civil War was one of the most brutal and complicated proxy conflicts of the Cold War.²⁹ During the War of Independence, the Soviets had been nominal backers of the MPLA – one of the conflict's three major factions – as part of the united front against the Portuguese colonial forces. However, Soviet policymakers had serious ideological reservations about its maverick leader, Agostinho Neto, even following his declaration of a one-party state and adoption of Marxism-Leninism following independence in 1975.³⁰ The outbreak of civil strife transformed this calculus, precipitating one of the most ambitious Soviet interventions of the Cold War. Collaborating with Cuba, Moscow assumed responsibility for “building a vanguard party” and arms supply while Cuba supplied much of the manpower.³¹ Soviet jets airlifted thousands of Cuban troops into Luanda with Cuban artillery playing a pivotal role in stabilising MPLA positions around the capital at the 1975 Battle of Quifangondo.³² Over the next decade and in spite of sometime tensions with their Cuban allies, a minimum of 11,000 Soviet troops would serve in anti-insurgency operations in Angola while emergence of Moscow-aligned José Eduardo dos Santos' saw billions of dollars of aid pour into Angola. This support would eventually enable Angolan and Cuban troops to inflict a decisive defeat on UNITA-rebels at the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale.³³ For the Soviets, this gave rise to “unprecedented optimism in Third World policy” and demonstrated their tangible capacity as a geopolitical actor with ideological and military credibility in sub-Saharan Africa.³⁴

In light of these successes, Soviet policy became increasingly ambitious, concentrating on the Horn of Africa following the Ethiopian Revolution. The Soviets had long maintained a geostrategic interest in the region through their pragmatic relationship with Siad Barre's leftist regime in Somalia.³⁵ However, the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution transformed policy approaches. The Derg regime's radical socio-economic reforms were the most significant “Marxist-inspired transformation of the Cold War in Africa” and, for the Politburo, became symbolic of the Third World's turn to socialism.³⁶ Under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam, terror was unleashed in which an estimated 500,000 Ethiopians died, major industries were nationalised, and agriculture was collectivised.³⁷ As such, when Somalia invaded in 1977, the Politburo was intent on preventing war between two progressive African states.³⁸ Consequently, it initiated its largest Cold War intervention in Africa, immediately deploying aerial power and thousands of advisors while airlifting tens of thousands of East German and Cuban troops which turned the tide of the conflict. In the aftermath of Ethiopia's victory, the Soviets also launched the largest foreign assistance program since its technology

²⁹ Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa*, 92-98.

³⁰ Vladimir Shubin and Andrei Tokarev, “War in Angola: A Soviet Dimension,” *Review of African Political Economy* 28, no. 90 (2001): 607-618.

³¹ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 239.

³² Shubin and Tokarev, “War in Angola,” 614-615.

³³ Shubin and Tokarev, “War in Angola,” 615-618.

³⁴ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 241.

³⁵ Yordanov, *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa*, 66-153.

³⁶ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 251.

³⁷ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (London: Basic Books, 2006), 457.

³⁸ Yordanov, *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa*, 217-220.

transfer to China in the 1950s.³⁹ However, Mengistu's domestic policies, particularly the collectivisation of agriculture, which were hurriedly and haphazardly implemented in an attempt to demonstrate his ideological bona fides to the Kremlin had disastrous consequences, precipitating the devastating 1984 Famine and amplifying support for secessionist movements which eventually plunged the country into civil war.⁴⁰

Mikhail Gorbachev's emergence as leader of the USSR resulted in drastic changes in its relations with not only sub-Saharan Africa, but the world at large. For the Soviet Union, the 1980s was a tumultuous decade, characterised by mounting political and economic sclerosis and the disastrous fallout from the War in Afghanistan. By 1986, economic and political circumstances forced Gorbachev's hand as he sought to lower tensions with the West and, as a lower priority strategic region, sub-Saharan Africa was one of the first from which the Soviets began to withdraw.⁴¹ However, two factors accelerated this process. On one hand, the KGB played an important role in transforming Politburo perceptions of sub-Saharan Africa as classified information they gathered exposed erstwhile allies as morally depraved turncoats.⁴² More significantly though, critiques within the USSR itself called the effectiveness of policy into question. The critiques were contextually powerful because they were "fundamentally Marxist", arguing that Soviet policymakers had often "misperceived the class content of revolutions" and mistakenly allied themselves with regimes who merely paid lip service to socialism.⁴³ Nowhere was this more apparent than in Ethiopia where the brutishness and ineptitude of Mengistu's regime and its chaotic socialist experiments alienated reformers in Moscow.⁴⁴ Ethiopia became the most conspicuous example of a growing trend as Moscow abandoned sub-Saharan African regimes who were increasingly viewed as costly, ideologically dubious burdens who offered little tangible return.

The collapse of the Soviet Union heralded a near 20-year absence in the region. The rapidity with which Moscow withdrew triggered profound changes in the region as allied Marxist-Leninist regimes such as the Derg collapsed while others such as the MPLA and FRELIMO underwent pronounced ideological transformations.⁴⁵ Without the ideological overlay of the Cold War, geopolitics in Africa was dominated by raw questions of power and it was this context that the USSR's successor, Russia, stepped in the late-2000s. The defining feature of Russian policy towards the region under Putin has been its limited but highly pragmatic investment in strategically important relationships. Russian engagement in the region is predicated transactional partnerships, characterised by security cooperation and arms sales in exchange for mining rights and diplomatic support for its foreign policy, particularly its aggression in Ukraine.⁴⁶ However, it is a relationship based on paradox as Russia has a vested interest in destabilising the continent so it can continue to deploy private military companies (PMCs) and sell arms en masse. It has explicitly targeted the political elites

³⁹ Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa*, 153-154.

⁴⁰ Yordanov, *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa*, 240-268.

⁴¹ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 452-484.

⁴² Westad, *The Cold War: A World History*, 540-552.

⁴³ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 380.

⁴⁴ Yordanov, *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa*, 268-271.

⁴⁵ Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, "The Struggle for the State and the Politics of Belonging in Contemporary Angola, 1975-2015," *Social Dynamics* 42, no. 1 (2016): 69-84; Jason Sumich, "The Party and the State: Frelimo and Social Stratification in Post-Socialist Mozambique," *Development & Change* 41, no. 4 (2020): 679-698.

⁴⁶ Roger E. Kanet and Dina Moulioukova, "A Comparison of Soviet and Russian Foreign Policy: Ontological Security and Policy Toward Africa," in *Russia and the World in the Putin Era: From Theory to Reality in Russian Global Strategy*, eds. Roger E. Kanet and Dina Moulioukova (London: Routledge, 2021), 240-259.

in states without existing great-power partnerships including the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, and Mali where mercenary companies such as the Wagner Group act as semi-state security forces controlled by the Kremlin to prop up fragile authoritarian regimes.⁴⁷ Consequently, while Russian re-engagement with sub-Saharan Africa bespeaks its “renewed self-confidence”, it represents a profound threat to the stability of the region which, to Putin, is little more than an arena for geopolitical competition.⁴⁸

Relations between the USSR/Russia and sub-Saharan Africa have been characterised by an ebbing pattern of intense cooperation and intervention, withdrawal, and subsequent re-engagement. Soviet patterns of intervention in the region largely mirror those in the Third World at large, beginning in an age of intense great power competition in the 1960s and reaching a high point in the 1970s when policymakers sought mutually beneficial relationships with Marxist-Leninist vanguard parties who possessed radical agendas for socio-political reform. However, as Brutents noted in the aftermath of the Union’s collapse, Soviet policy in sub-Saharan Africa was chaotic and lacked any single coherent concept as policymakers struggled, outside of Angola and Mozambique, to adequately balance ideological and geopolitical concerns.⁴⁹ The 1980s heralded the Soviet Union’s gradual decline and, with it, their withdrawal from Africa. However, since the late 2000s, Putin has fostered transactional relationships with authoritarian regimes in which Russia solicits mining rights and diplomatic favours in exchange for security cooperation with authoritarian elites.

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⁴⁷ Marten, “Russia’s Use of Semi-State Security Forces,” 181-204.

⁴⁸ Kanet and Moulioukova, “A Comparison of Soviet and Russian Foreign Policy,” 254.

⁴⁹ Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War*, 251.

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