

South African Communist Party 1990

The Southern African Policy of the Soviet Union — with Specific Reference to South Africa. Some Notes.

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1. For purposes of scientific analysis the term “superpowers” is not very helpful, as it does not assist our understanding of the fundamental issues separating these powers nor does it offer any insight into the specifics of their internal structure, which determines their respective roles as actors on the world stage. Despite these strictures, for purposes of these notes, I shall conform to the terms our conference organisers have chosen.

2. Soviet Foreign Policy: The foreign policy of the USSR is in large measure determined by the circumstances under which the Soviet Union, as a nation state came into existence during the 1920s. The First World War (1914-18) had a devastating impact on the moribund Russian Empire resulting in revolution. That the revolution broke out in Europe’s least developed country demonstrated that the working classes of the most advanced capitalist countries had rejected revolutionary politics. As early as 1858 Friedrich Engels had drawn attention to the “embourgeoisement” of the proletariat, especially that of Britain. He had suggested that as long as the proletariat is not ready to make revolution in its own behalf, the majority of the class would regard the existing bourgeois order as the only possible one. Within it they would constitute themselves as the “tail of the capitalist class, its extreme left wing.”^[1] This planted the seed of the notion that only enduring economic tension would sustain the class consciousness of the proletariat as the negation of capital. Periods of relative stability, it was argued, would result in the working classes falling under the ideological influence of the bourgeoisie. Embourgeoisement entailed the working class leadership, pursuing its immediate economic interests, shelving the decisive historical interests of the class, to pursue palpable immediate and intermediate gains.

It was his grasp of such realities that underpinned Lenin’s scathing critique of the ‘economists’ and the right-wing of Social Democracy. If societal relations are class relations, Lenin argued, they determine the discrepancy between appearance and reality – i.e. between phenomena and their essence. Therefore, what the proletariat can be – the negation of the capitalist system – will not necessarily find reflection in the everyday activity of the class or in its actual consciousness.^[2]

The stabilization of capitalism, as a consequence of imperialism, persuaded numerous European socialists not only of the utility of the export of capital but also of the possibility of relying on the political weight of the working class vote to improve the class situation of the proletariat by incremental reforms. This was the position advanced by the right wing of international Social Democracy at both the Stuttgart and the Amsterdam Congresses of the Second International.

In opposition to this view, Lenin, Luxemburg, Liebknecht and other partisans of the left, held that stabilization was a temporary phenomenon which was bound to erupt in wars amongst the imperialist powers or in sharpening economic crisis within the respective capitalist countries. The task of revolutionaries, they argued, was not to attempt to improve the capitalist framework but rather to work to synchronise proletarian political consciousness with its historical mission. As Rosa Luxemburg emphasised in her famous pamphlet, 'The Mass Strike, The Political Party and the Trade Unions': “ ‘*And what it is, that should it dare to appear.*’” ^[3]

Her formulation, once again captures the classic construction of dialectical reasoning, appearance contradicts essence. In this case, the reformist appearance contradicts the revolutionary essence.

The events of August 1914 were the realisation of the worst fears of the revolutionaries. The working classes of Europe, ideologically dominated by their rulers and ill-served by their leaders, flocked to the banners of their respective bourgeois governments, each chanting 'Defence of the fatherland'. The revolution in Russia in historical fact turned out to be an exception, rather than the first spark of a continental conflagration. In spite of numerous valiant attempts in Berlin, Budapest, Munich and Hamburg, the revolution in the rest of Europe failed to take hold and the USSR came into being in 1924 as a lonely beach-head surrounded by hostile and powerful enemies.

3. The realities of the Tsarist Empire had compelled the Bolshevik Party to come to terms with the numerous pre-capitalist socio-economic formations that constituted the hinterland of the Empire and the greater part of the earth's surface. Lenin, building on Marx's own rather suggestive remarks in his correspondence with the Russian populists, ^[4] had theorised the bourgeois-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry to take account of this.

Before Lenin, Karl Kautsky, writing in 1902, had expressed the opinion that “... the revolutionary centre was shifting from the west to the east... the new century opens with events that induce us to think we are approaching a farther shifting of the revolutionary centre, namely to Russia. “ Lenin, in two articles on China written in 1909, had tentatively drawn similar conclusions.

These ideas were only fully theorised in Lenin's conclusion that the chain of imperialism must be broken at its weakest link. This 'weakest link' could, as has been noted, change its locus from one period to the next. However, the success scored in Tsarist Russia tended to shift the emphasis to the predominantly agrarian hinterland of capitalism where the weaknesses of imperialism offered greater chances of success.

The strength of reformism in the European working class movement resulted in the failure of what may be termed the first round of proletarian revolutions. When they initiated the founding of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1919 the Bolshevik leaders still anticipated a European revolution. Hence they regarded Moscow as the temporary headquarters of the world revolution. Its rightful place was Berlin, where it was hoped a successful revolution would soon enable the Comintern to move. Lenin and his colleagues, however, recognised that certain short-term expedients would be necessary to tide them over the transitional period. Before her death Rosa Luxemburg had directed some of her most critical barbs at them for this, while nonetheless recognising that these had been imposed on

the Bolsheviks by the failure of the world proletariat to come to the rescue of backward Soviet Russia.

“Everything that happens in Russia is comprehensible and represents an inevitable chain of causes and effects, the starting point and end term of which are: the failure of the German proletariat and the occupation of Russia by German imperialism, Luxemburg wrote in “The Russian Revolution.” *“It would be demanding something superhuman from Lenin and his comrades if we should expect of them that under such circumstances they should conjure forth the finest democracy, the most exemplary dictatorship of the proletariat and a flourishing socialist economy.* By their determined revolutionary stand, their exemplary strength in action, and their unbreakable loyalty to international socialism, they have contributed whatever could possibly be contributed under such devilishly hard conditions.” Yet she added the warning, “The danger begins only when they make a virtue of necessity and want to freeze into a complete theoretical system all the tactics forced upon them by these fatal circumstances, and want to recommend them to the international proletariat as a model of socialist tactics.”

The failure of the European revolution transformed the anticipated transition into a rigid status quo. Temporary expedients too had to be re-adapted and became long term policies.

The territorialisation of revolution and reformism – the one with its centre in the Soviet Union, the other in the advanced capitalist countries – compounded the division between these two trends in socialism. Underlying the evolution of Soviet foreign policy is the reluctant acceptance that revolution in the west has been effectively contained. The Seventh Congress of the Comintern (1935) signalled the acknowledgment that revolution was improbable by committing the Communist Parties in Europe and the Americas to a minimum programme of defence of the bourgeois democratic state. Consequently the international Communist movement, boxed in by these developments, was compelled to turn to the anti-colonial movement in its attempts to re-awaken the revolutionary potential of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries.

Socialist, or more correctly, Communist-led revolutions in fact were waged, not by the proletariat, but by peasants in the main. If the impact of the stabilization of capitalism in the late 19th century had led Lenin to argue that revolutionary theory must come to the proletariat from outside that class, the history of revolution in the 20th century tempted Mao Zedong to suggest that even revolutionary praxis will have to come from outside the proletariat. With the emergence of this second discrepancy – that between theory and praxis – matters reached an impasse. The geo-political division of the world between mutually hostile armed camps appeared to freeze the history of the 20th century into these contending blocs. Every struggle waged in the twentieth century was played out against its backdrop.

4. Intrinsic to the foreign policy of the USSR is an internal tension occasioned by its empirical existence as a nation state, which came into being and has survived despite the worst intentions of its imperialist counterparts, on the one hand, and its initial self-perception as the first bridgehead of the international proletarian revolution, on the other. The unmistakable threat of the enemy at the gate, moreover an enemy who has more than once actually breached the defences, has loomed large in the consciousness of all Soviet policy formulators. They have invariably been torn between two options – either to purchase time at the expense of the state’s revolutionary vocation, or to go over to the offensive by opening up a front in the enemy’s rear by assisting the revolutionary process. Though these are often

perceived as alternatives, reality has usually dictated that the USSR attempt a reconciliation of the two. *Raison d'état* and the demands of the world revolution have invariably collided in the evolution of Soviet Foreign Policy giving rise to charges of "selling out," "capitulationism," etc from allies and former supporters.

Our task as historians, however, is neither to pronounce anathemas nor to fabricate elaborate alibis. It is rather to attempt to understand the forces that have moulded this policy and, on the basis of that comprehension, to predict its probable future directions.

A number of writers have suggested that the only area in which there has been a consistent continuity between Bolshevik theory and Soviet foreign policy practice is on the issue of national liberation and the anti-colonial struggle. Helmut Gruber, for example, insists that though the spirit of Bolshevik nationalities policy was frequently violated, necessity compelled the Soviet government to de-colonise 'Great Russia' in order to win the support of the former subject peoples and thus maintain the traditional frontiers against the foreign interventionists. ^[5] Pragmatic appreciation of the value of allies in the colonial world, in the absence of reliable ones in the advanced capitalist countries, may be said to be a cardinal feature of Soviet foreign policy since the 1920s.

5. While Lenin and the Russian Marxists evolved a strategy for harnessing the national struggles of oppressed peoples to the cause of proletarian revolution, the Austro-Marxist Rudolph Hilferding, was developing his own theory regarding the evolution of the capitalist system. Hilferding held that under the leadership of finance capital, entire national economies would be mobilised for expansion, which would through the collusion of large scale monopolies tend towards international economic as well as political integration, under the control of the most powerful capitalist interests. According to Hilferding, a supra-national cartel, capable of manipulating the contradictions of the capitalist system by maintaining uniformly high wage levels within its own area of dominion at the expense of intensified exploitation of the markets and populations that fell outside it, would emerge. For its realisation, he contended, liberalism would be replaced by an aggressive, militarist nationalism and authoritarianism.

The views of Hilferding were echoed by Karl Kautsky, long regarded as the doyen of Marxism, in his theory of 'Ultra- Imperialism'. It was Kautsky's contention that the imperialist countries were evolving towards a mutually acceptable *modus vivendi* that would entail the peaceful resolution of their differences and enhanced levels of cooperation among themselves at the expense of the colonised peoples. According to Kautsky, this arrangement would result in all the imperialist states voluntarily submitting to the leadership of one of their number.

The political settlement after the conclusion of the Second World War, accompanied by the Cold War, produced an international situation that bears a striking resemblance to the predictions of Hilferding and Kautsky. During the last forty five years the imperialist powers appear to have composed their differences and by mutual consent have intensified the economic exploitation of the third world to sustain relative prosperity in their own countries.

The apparent resolution of inter-imperialist rivalries has placed an inordinate burden on post-revolutionary societies. They have been forced to face the combined might of the entire imperialist world - in the shape trade embargoes, the arms race, systematic covert campaigns

of subversion and overt attempts at counter-revolutionary invasions. As Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman have noted these policies are inspired by the hope that:

“The Soviet Union must be ‘deterred’; but it is from extending help to revolutionary movements that it must be ‘deterred’, rather than from launching a military attack on the West, an eventuality in which no serious politician truly believes.” ^[6]

6. South Africa and the Soviet Union: Soviet interpretations of the South African problem and apartheid derive from the Comintern and subsequent scholarly work on South Africa undertaken in that country. The manner in which the Comintern construed the political economy of South Africa has its roots in the second congress of the Comintern (1920) when under Lenin’s guidance, the world body adopted his “Theses on the National and Colonial Question.” Lenin’s based his theses on two considerations:

(a) that support of the bourgeois democratic movements in the colonies would expedite the disintegration of imperialism and thus bring nearer the day of the socialist revolution;

(b) that the revolution in the advanced capitalist countries and the struggle of the colonial peoples were mutually reinforcing because a socialist Europe would have no interest in subjugating other peoples.

In Lenin’s view, this made possible an alliance between these two struggles.

During the debates in Commission, serious differences of opinion had emerged between Lenin and an Indian Communist, M. N. Roy. Roy drew a sharp distinction between what he regarded as two autonomous streams in the colonial liberation movements. The one, he said, was a bourgeois-led movement for independence which sought to impose the hegemony of the indigenous propertied classes over the liberation movement. The other was the as yet inchoate movement of the peasants and nascent working class, striving for liberation from all exploitation. Roy argued that the task of the Communists in the colonies was to foster the independence of this second movement from the first. Though the report of the Commission sought to reconcile these divergent viewpoints, the tension remained to haunt the Comintern’s strategy in one anti-colonialist struggle after the other. Beginning with the Chiang Kai-shek’s notorious massacre of the Communists in 1927, the spectacle of bourgeois nationalists slaughtering Communists with arms provided by the Soviet Union has been repeated with terrifying regularity.

South Africa was unique among sub-saharan African countries because of its large, naturalised White population, spread across all classes, who had come to regard South Africa as their home. The classic colonial power relations in the South African instance were structured by this reality. Mining had set in motion an industrial revolution and given birth to a rapidly developing industrial proletariat. During the 1920s, South Africa was the only African country that had an organised Communist presence, even though it was located within the White labour movement.

7. In an essay written in May 1933, the words of Dr W. E. B. Du Bois resonate with the South African experience:

“The second influence on white labour – both in America and Europe – has been the fact that the extension of the world market by imperial expanding industry has established a world-

wide proletariat of coloured workers, toiling under the worst conditions of 19th century capitalism, herded as slaves and serfs and furnishing, by the lowest paid wage in modern history, a mass of raw material for industry. With this largesse the capitalists have consolidated their economic power, nullified universal suffrage and bribed the white workers by high wages, visions of wealth and the opportunity to drive 'niggers'. Soldiers and sailors from the white workers are used to keep the 'darkies' in their places, and white foremen and engineers have been established as irresponsible satraps in China and India, Africa and the West Indies backed by the organised and centralised ownership of machines, raw materials, finished commodities and land monopoly over the whole world." ^[7]

The Sixth congress of the Comintern adopted what has come to be regarded as the definitive Communist statement on the South African problem, 'The Black Republic Thesis'. It characterised South Africa as a British dominion of the colonial type, politically and economically dominated by a white settler bourgeoisie. It defined the principal feature of the South African regime as the dispossession of the indigenous people of their land. The two dominant political economic trends, it said, were the merging of white settler capital with British finance and industrial capital, which would lead to a growing affinity between Brit and Boer; the development of secondary industry, iron and steel production and the commercialisation of agriculture. All these, the thesis said, would result in the rapid proletarianisation of the Black majority.

These developments were of immediate relevance to the main tasks of the Communist Party, centred on three inter-related areas:

- (i) The national character of the Communist Party;
- (ii) The relationship between the Communist Party and the national movement;
- (iii) Trade union and agitational work.

The institutions of national oppression in South Africa, the thesis held, rested on the expropriation of the African people of the land and its wealth. To be meaningful, national liberation must necessarily entail the restoration of the land to the indigenous people. The chief agency for such a national revolution, it said, would be the African peasantry in alliance with and under the leadership of the working class.

It posed the principal strategic task for the Communist Party as the need to forge an alliance with the African National Congress. Such an alliance, it anticipated, would involve the quantitative and qualitative growth of the ANC. In order to be effective, the ANC would have to mobilise the peasants and the workers. But the influx of such an organised peasant and working class presence would in its turn transform the ANC, radicalise it and weaken the grip of the conservative petty bourgeois element then in its leadership.

To achieve all this, the Comintern document argued, the Communists would have to constitute themselves as the core of a radical bloc within the ANC, while maintaining their independence as the party of the working class.

"... the basic question in the agrarian situation in South Africa is the land hunger of the blacks and that their interest is of prior importance in the solution of the national question." ^[8]

The Black Republic itself was conceived of as the apex of revolutionary struggle waged by the African peasantry. Among the first items on its agenda would be addressing the resolution of the land question.

The Comintern thus set out a strategic approach to the South African problem that underscored the colonial character of the system of White domination based on five inter-related features.

- (a) The system was based on the colonial conquest of the indigenous people, who were explicitly ruled as a conquered and colonised people who could claim no rights other than those the dominant white minority conceded.
- (b) The dominant White minority enjoyed an undisguised monopoly over political, economic and social power legitimated in terms of race. All Blacks, irrespective of class status, were statutorily excluded from the exercise of political power, they were non-citizens.
- (c) The seizure of the land and its wealth through conquest has resulted in an extremely inequitable economic situation in which the decisive centres of productive property – in land, mining, industry and commerce – were the exclusive monopoly of the White minority.
- (d) It was a system of labour coercion in which a multiplicity of extra-economic devices were deployed with the specific purpose of compelling the indigenous people to make themselves readily available as a source of cheap labour power.
- (e) The system required a highly repressive state, directed against the conquered people whom it regarded as a rightless mass to be held down by force of arms.

Since the colonial state (the White minority state) and the conquered people shared the same land mass, there was logically no way in which the two could co-exist. One would have to give way to the other. A Communist Party pamphlet published in 1934, characterized the Independent Black Republic as:

“... first and foremost means the anti-imperialist revolution, i. e. the driving out of the imperialists and the national liberation of the country.... But the revolution against the imperialists, the anti-imperialist revolution ... will not be a socialist, but a bourgeois-democratic revolution, as it is usually called. Not the immediate building of socialism but the liberation of the country from the imperialist yoke – this is the essence and the task of the anti-imperialist revolution.” ^[9]

As an essentially national democratic revolution, the Black Republic would not address issues of class conflict – latent or actual – among the oppressed. It would, however, entail the seizure of economic assets, such as the land and its wealth, from the incumbent (white) ruling class. Thus, though it would have a very distinctly national character – a revolution by the oppressed Black majority – the Black republic would also have its distinct social character -a revolution of those deprived of property and power by the incumbent rulers. “The bourgeois democratic revolution” projected here would be more far-reaching than a conventional one. The 1928 Black Republic Thesis of the Comintern, with slight modifications at various points in time, has formed the basis of both Soviet understanding of the South Africa struggle and the strategic thinking of South African Communists until recently.

8. Perestroika and the New Thinking on South Africa: Perestroika was the option chosen by the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, identified with the ascendancy of Mikhail Gorbachev to the post of General-Secretary. Gorbachev and his supporters chose Perestroika in order to break the Soviet system out of a profound socio-economic crisis, occasioned not so much by stagnation, but by the phenomenal development of the USSR over the previous thirty years (1955 to 1985). As Moshe Lewin has stated it:

“Since the 1950s the country has continued to become increasingly urbanised, educated, professionally differentiated, and politically, ideologically and culturally diversified. The political facade of monolithic uniformity can no longer be taken seriously by anyone. Complex urban networks shape individuals, filter official views, and create an infinite welter of spontaneities.” [\[10\]](#)

During the Brezhnev years the Soviet Union achieved military parity with the USA and its influence in the world, especially among the developing countries, grew. These developments reached their peak during the mid-1970s. With specific reference to Southern Africa, it was the impact of Soviet policy in this region that brought an end to Portuguese colonialism and Ian Smith’s UDI. [\[11\]](#)

Despite such advances the Soviet Union still remained a minor player in the world economy. Though it was undoubtedly an industrial society, like the countries of the third world, the Soviet Union earned its foreign exchange reserves by the export of minerals, oil, natural gas and other raw materials. This paradox was expressive of the internal crisis that became increasingly evident during the 1980s, a decade of stagnation. The recognition that thoroughgoing change was necessary in order to stimulate the creative energies of the population came to the CPSU leadership rather late.. “Democratization was to be the instrument of reform.” [\[12\]](#)

The New Thinking, associated with the reformist policies of the Gorbachev leadership, has been applied in the main to the area of foreign policy. They executed a dramatic change of direction from the Brezhnev leadership who had contested the USA’s strategic-military ascendancy and sometimes registered a few successes. The Brezhnev leadership corps’s tack was to employ Soviet military parity to extract certain recognitions from the USA during the 1970s. Firstly, the Soviet Union’s status as a world power, with an equal claim to a recognised role on global issues. Second, and derivative from the first, was the need to reduce the risks involved in this Soviet-US rivalry by reaching ad hoc agreements and the policy of detente.

The New Thinking relinquished the use of the Soviet Union’s immense military power as a lever in dealings with the USA. In its place the new approach posited the inter-dependency of the international community, which required enhanced levels of cooperation among nations, despite their differences. From this first premise it derived three related principles:

(i) The survival of the human species transcended all considerations of class, nationality, region or state. Therefore it was the responsibility of the powers to do everything possible to eliminate the threat of nuclear war.

(ii) Given the mutual dependence of the planet, no single nation, no matter what its size or military capability, could any longer seek to impose its own decisions on the rest of the world. Due consideration had to be given to the larger global picture, even at the expense of

self-interest. In other words, real security would not be achieved by pursuing it at the expense of the other side's interests.

(iii) Given the immense capacity of the industrial powers, Soviet and Western, a reduction of international tensions in earnest would release resources that were currently being wasted on arms and defence systems, for the general upliftment of the common people in every part of the world.

The cardinal aim of this new thinking was the creation of a new framework for international relations. ^[13] The United Nations, as the one world forum where every nation is represented, assumed a new significance in this context because of its potential in multilateral negotiations. ^[14] It is in the context of these principles that the settlement of regional disputes by political means assumes significance as one more measure to ensure the reduction of tensions.

Speaking at the 27th Congress of the CPSU, Mikhail Gorbachev had identified four components as essential to the creation a new system of international security. These were:

- (a) respect for the right of all peoples to choose the political and economic system under which they wished to live;
- (b) just political settlement of international and regional conflicts;
- (c) confidence building between and among nations and the creation of effective guarantees against foreign invasion; and
- (d) effective means to combat international terrorism and ensuring the security of land, air and sea travel and communications.

These concepts were directly applied to Southern Africa on two separate occasions after the 27th Congress. The first was in a joint Soviet-Angolan Statement in May 1986; the second was during President Chissano's state visit to the Soviet Union in August 1987, when explicit reference was made to South Africa.

9. In examining the 'new thinking' in its application to South Africa one has to be careful to separate out official Soviet views from the views expressed by various scholars, commentators and journalists. Recent visitors to the Soviet Union have noted that there is a wide spectrum of opinions, ranging from those close to the ideas of the ruling National Party to the opposite extreme, exponents of the view of the national liberation movement. ^[15] Partly because we have become accustomed to a conformist repetition of the official view by scholars and journalists, many have been tempted to read new directions and approaches into the pronouncements of persons who do not necessarily have that authority. It is proper, however, also to remind ourselves that the differing opinions one hears expressed from various quarters within the policy formulating institutions of the Soviet Union today probably reflect processes previously hidden from public view. The major difference is that they now take place more publicly and no longer behind closed doors.

One can therefore legitimately speculate that though the varying opinions of academics and commentators do not bear the authority of official policy, they nonetheless echo bodies of

opinion within the foreign policy formulating community in the Soviet Union. They shall be treated in that light in this paper.

For purposes of simplification I divide the Soviet foreign policy formulating community into three groups, whom I characterise as :

- globalists – those who emphasise securing a *modus vivendi* with the US as the key to a lasting peace and new international system of security.
- regionalists – those who insist that each regional conflict has its own specificity and as such should be treated case by case taking account of these specifics. International peace, by this account, can be attained by the piecemeal resolution of each individual case of conflict.
- internationalists – those who are persuaded that there are overarching international considerations that shape local and regional conflicts and that such conflicts cannot be addressed except in that context. Reduced to their essentials, these over-arching considerations are the divergent political economies of the capitalist west and the socialist countries.

In the case of South Africa, as in others, these discrete categories lend themselves to much smearing at the edges. There is therefore no pure and simple internationalist, just as there is no pure and simple globalist. All three these broad groups subscribe to the new thinking, though offering divergent counsels on how its objectives are to be attained.

10. The Globalist View: The proponents of this view are in the main academics associated with American Studies in the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Among their number may be counted Yakovlev, Arbatov, Vasilikov and Utkin. All four are linked to Institute on the USA and Canada of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.

Broadly speaking the globalists regard both the USA and the Soviet Union as global powers whose actions and options impact on the rest of humanity . As such. they would say, a special responsibility devolves on these two to so conduct themselves that the pursuance of their self-interest does not inadvertently result in an exacerbation of tensions whose consequences extend far beyond these respective countries. With specific reference to South Africa, they would argue that both the USSR and the USA have an interest in the resolution of the problem, but neither one has a vital interest in the region.

This was the view stated by Dr Vitaley Vasilikov at conference in Vienna in May 1989. In a paper, titled “Possible Soviet-American Cooperative Efforts in Southern Africa,” Vasilikov argued:

“It follows that the USA is sincerely interested in changing the apartheid regime, and proceeds from the assumption that apartheid politically discredits the capitalist system in the eyes of the whole world, has become an obstacle to South African economic progress, hence of the Transnational corporations’ profits, radicalises the regional situation and is fraught with social outburst which may result in the protracted wrecking of the RSA’s economy, and in this way, deny the West reliable access to the region’s raw materials, complicate relations with its allies, provoke public indignation throughout the world, contribute to the sharpening of ethnic relations and human rights problems in the Western countries and so on. A considerable role for the USA (is) also (its) concern that the USSR can use the crises situation for gaining unilateral benefits.”

He continues:

“The USSR indeed remains committed to the support of the people’s struggle for independence and sovereignty but this interest may not always be so diametrically opposite to the respective interests of the West, as it has been considered for a long time.... The new political thinking, while not ignoring differences, sometimes serious ones, which may occur among national states in the international arena, as distinct from ideological differences, suggests some more enlightened vision of the Third World. It’s high time to admit, for instance, that nationalism may well be the principal ideology in the majority of developing countries, thus making a contest for gaining Eastern or Western ideological ‘allies’ counter-productive and unworthy. It is also true, that the development of capitalist relations may often be more historically justified and thus progressive in these countries, than artificial and premature imposing of pseudo- socialist models, which only discredit real socialism. That way of thinking, instead of striving against capitalism, (places before us) the task of encouraging its development in more civilized, democratic and moral forms (and opposing) the reactionary ones, such as apartheid, for example.”

By this account, since the USSR and the West, for differing reasons, both recognise the need to get rid of apartheid, cooperation between them on this score should be possible. What is perhaps more interesting are the conclusions Vasilkov derives from his analysis.

“... the main national interest of the USSR now seems to be a regime of ‘non-apartheid’ (sic!) in the RSA, i. e. a democratic, non- racial and steady (stable?) government, with which the Soviet Union will be able to establish mutually advantageous diplomatic and economic relations without harming the rest of its foreign policy interests. This embraces a sensible view on the white community’s legal interests, real power and contribution to South African development.”

Then comes a statement laden with implications:

“That is why, the single active element in the Soviet approach toward South Africa until recently – support of the ANC – means unilateral and narrow Soviet dependence on this organisation’s policy, to the same , if not to the larger extent as the United States policy means dependence on Pretoria’s position. More than that, the ANC’s monopoly on Soviet support can lead the ANC to an orientation on complete and uncompromised victory, that can give rise to dogmatism and scare away both the whites and the blacks.” [\[16\]](#)

We can glean a number of notions from these two passages.

- (i) Vaslikov envisages a post-apartheid state that takes account of the ‘interests’ of the Whites.
- (ii) That he wishes the Soviet Union to move away from exclusive support to the ANC-led liberation alliance.
- (iii) Such a move away from the ANC will compel it to be less ‘uncompromising’ and orient it away from pursuit of ‘complete victory’. This then will be the basis, as Vasilikov sees it, on which the “USSR and the USA may be expected to find a common ground...”

Though they do not exclude unilateral actions, the Globalists underscore the need for multilateral action. According to them, the over-riding need to avoid global conflict, detonated by a regional war, makes multi-lateralism necessary.

One of their number, V. Kazakov, writing in "International Affairs" saw the problem in these terms:

"Regional conflicts have become most dangerous today, especially because they occur amidst the global arms race and the general growth of international tensions. The inter-relationship is obvious here, all the more so since the art of warfare has been developed to the point where, as was predicted by Lenin, 'not only would a war between advanced countries be an enormous crime, but would inevitably undermine the very foundations of human society.'" [\[17\]](#)

The implications of the globalist view are that not only should the two great powers act with restraint, but that the principal players (the ANC and the White Racist regime) too should find ways of accommodating their opponents, and in the instance that they cannot do this on their own account, the Soviet Union and USA should find ways of assisting them in that direction. The Soviet Union could, they contend, by the judicious application of its moral authority in such circles, nudge the ANC towards moderating its demands, they would argue.

11. The Regionalists: This is a body of thought which comprises a number of academics, journalists and foreign ministry specialists. The most prolific among them is perhaps Boris Asoyan, Deputy Chief of the African Department in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Asoyan first took issue with the conventional Soviet approach to Africa in a series of articles, the most significant of which was titled "Africa Is Not So Far Away: How We Looked at That Continent Yesterday and What We See There Today. "

The main thrust of Asoyan's argument was that Soviet journalists based their work on Africa on threadbare dogmas derived from a faulty understanding of the continent, its peoples and its problems. Proceeding from dogma, rather than facts about the continent, these journalists did their reading public a grave disservice.

"A serious and, more importantly, a sober attitude toward socio- economic and political processes in developing countries has been replaced by a bureaucratic approach that concealed the truth, shamelessly glossed over unpleasant realities, passed off wishes for reality, and bent the facts to fit theories and models as short as the Procrustean bed."

In a passionate appeal for honesty and truthfulness he concluded:

"The Africans themselves speak of these mistakes and miscalculations honestly and frankly. We, for some reason, find it awkward – might they take offense? They will not take offense. On the contrary, they will be grateful, if the criticism is accurate and the reasons are correctly indicated. They may be offended by sugary pictures having nothing in common with reality and by formless images created with the help of inner or external censors." [\[18\]](#)

The thrust of the regionalists' position is that conflicts in the Third World have their roots in very specific regional conditions that cannot be derived from a single source. They de-emphasise the role of external forces, focusing rather on internal factors. Asoyan, in particular, has stressed that Soviet analyses in the past under-estimated the complexity of

Third World countries and the relative autonomy from international currents, of political processes in these countries .

While he continuously stresses the specificities of each region, Asoyan too seems unmindful of these when he gets down to cases. In an article of his carried in Pravda on 20th August 1989, Asoyan, borne on the wings of his own enthusiasm speaks of:

“The reforms (Botha’s) have, for the last 11 years fundamentally changed the political situation in the country.”

Later he detects important shifts in the Black population which he claims have led to the “emergence of a relatively numerically strong middle class which is interested in stability (and) peaceful means of resolving the existing conflict. The colour of one’s skin is losing significance as a determinant of economic life.” [\[19\]](#)

None of these bald assertions is substantiated with a single fact! The specifics of the place and situation of the Black middle class Asoyan has so belatedly discovered would have revealed that skin colour has everything to do with economic life. Despite its growing numbers, this stratum of Blacks contribute less than 1% to South Africa’s GDP! They do not manage, let alone own, a single company listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange! They are still systematically excluded from meaningful participation in South Africa’s managerial staffs! But perhaps the demands of space precluded such critical examination of the facts.

More startling however are his claims for the bona fides of the South African regime.

“Of principal importance in this regard was the unexpected (for many) decision by Pretoria to sit at the negotiating table with Angola and Cuba, The very fact that efforts are being continued to untangle other sources of tension in Southern Africa bears testimony to Pretoria’s realisation of the futility of forceful military methods in (dealing with) controversial situations (and to) the emergence of a real possibility of peace in this part of the globe.” [\[20\]](#)

Here the man who insists on facts ignores his own very sound advice and substitutes his wishes for reality. He ignores or down-plays the loss of air-superiority, the over- extension of the SADF’s lines, the heavy losses in personnel, the projected human cost (in White personnel) of a concerted infantry assault – in short, he discounts all the factors that weighed so heavily in the Pretoria regime’s reluctant acceptance of the need to negotiate. It appears he thinks that goodwill and common-sense alone determined their decision.

A more balanced regionalist approach is that of V. I. Tikhomirov, attached to the Institute for African Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. In a short article, titled “South Africa: Is A Political Settlement Possible?” Tikhomirov begins with an analysis of the particular features that have made the South African problem so intractable.

“Racial and national discrimination is only an outward manifestation of the entire complex of South African problems. The crux of the matter lies in the social and economic structures which are the pillars of apartheid. Historically, the social and class division of South African society coincided with its racial and national division. As a result, the anti-apartheid struggle aims at putting an end to discrimination and racism and, simultaneously, at substantially changing the social and economic order. The overwhelming majority of South African

political leaders, including representatives of the ruling quarters, are aware of the fact that the former objective cannot be attained without the latter and that even the formal achievement of the former goal will raise basic questions about fulfilling the latter task.” [\[21\]](#)

Despite these problems, Tikhomirov detects the possibilities of a political settlement because of the overwhelming support for change from among the Black majority and a growing number of Whites. In the context of this development, he predicts, an opportunity for Soviet-US cooperation to speed the process of change by taking a number of limited steps can arise. These could include:

“... a joint Soviet-US declaration outlining the basic principles and objectives of the two powers in southern Africa...” [\[22\]](#)

At the end of the day both globalists and regionalists concur that agreements between the Soviet Union and the USA are crucial to solving the problems of the region and only such cooperation offers any prospect of success. This has inevitably led many observers and people in South Africa to speculate about the dangers of a Soviet-US con-dominion over South Africa.

12. The Internationalists: The Internationalists among the Soviet foreign policy community, though equally committed to the new thinking, tend to view international relations from the perspective of partisans of an economic system that stands in fundamental contradiction to the world capitalist system. They are very cognisant of the intrinsic instability of Third World countries in general, occasioned by their poverty and the impact of imperialism. This being the case, they have sought to define a role for the Soviet Union, which while not seeking to take advantage of such instability, accepts it as a reality which will neither be wished away nor suppressed by arms or diplomacy.

Concerning the relative autonomy of processes in the Third World, the internationalists are closer to the regionalists but, with greater consistency, insist that solutions should derive not from the possible role of the great powers, but rather from the actual balance of socio-political forces on the ground in each specific case. As distinct from the regionalists, they do however see imperialism as a major factor in instigating and compounding conflicts whose primary sources are regional or local. The role of the US and Pretoria in the Angolan conflict being a case in point.

13. The conflicting and divergent counsels emerging from the foreign policy community in the Soviet Union are rooted in the paradox of a nation state which is ideologically committed to the transformation of the existing international economic order but is nonetheless compelled to conform to the norms of international relations. This is a tension I refer to earlier in these notes.

As a nation state, the Soviet Union has certain interests which are accepted and can be recognised even by its worst enemies. On the other hand, as a proletarian state committed to Marxism-Leninism, it can be no respecter of an international status quo built on the exploitation of the majority of humankind by a handful of powerful western nations. In a context when, for their own reasons, leading statesmen and politicians from these very western nations have recognised that the inequities of the existing international economic order pose a danger not merely to the peoples of the Third World but to the human race itself, apparent acceptance of the status quo by the Soviet Union would be untenable.

Viewed exclusively from a pragmatic assessment of its own nation state interests, there is an obvious advantage to the Soviet Union in assisting aspirant nations and oppressed peoples to achieve their national freedom and independence. In the first instance, the struggles for independence waged during this century have been directed at imperialist countries – the principal antagonists of the Soviet Union. Consequently, in the assessment of even the most short-sighted policy-maker, the Soviet Union stood to gain to the extent that it won one more region away from the sphere of domination of its adversaries. Secondly, the Soviet Union developed isolated from the outside world during its first thirty years. It only stood to gain by the break-up of the old colonial empires and the emergence of independent states.

But the advances made by Third World countries have at the same time been a mixed blessing for the Soviet Union. In many parts of the ex-colonial world the Soviet Union is perceived as an important counter-weight to the dominance of the Western powers, especially the US, and its assistance is inevitably sought in all instances of confrontation with the West. It is a matter of record that the Cuban revolutionary government could not have survived except for the assistance of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Soviet assistance to the Vietnamese war effort during the US aerial war and in the period of reconstruction afterwards is also well-known; as is the debt this region owes to Soviet military equipment for its defence against South African aggression.

Third World governments and countries have ironically become an additional burden on the stretched resources of the Soviet Union, contributing to, rather than alleviating its economic problems. Because the Soviet Union's principal exports are, like those of Third World countries, raw materials, minerals and oil, opportunities for trade between the Soviets and new allies in the Third World are extremely limited. The Soviet Union has to compete for western markets with its friends in the Third World, since neither of the parties to this relationship can export to the other. Global political considerations, rather than economics, tend to determine the trade and terms of trade between the Soviet Union and Third World countries. Though this might be more equitable by ethical standards, by world market standards, this can often prove uneconomic.

The aggressive, interventionist posture assumed by US imperialism with the arrival of three successive Republican administrations in Washington made matters worse by imposing additional costs on the Soviet economy through the wasteful arms race.

This paradox is compounded by the virtual extinction of the revolutionary politics among the working class in the advanced countries which is attributable, in part, to the unattractiveness of 'existing socialism' as it was constructed in the Soviet Union, China and other countries. The 'new thinking' evolved as one more attempt to thaw the frozen history of the 20th century.

Southern Africa in general, and South Africa in particular, is but one arena of this global terrain. If today it appears that a negotiated settlement is likely, this owes more to the struggles waged by the South African people than to the strategies devised by policy makers in either Moscow or in Washington. Doubtless the de-demonisation of the Soviet Union has assisted the process as has the strength of the anti-apartheid lobby in the US and other western countries. To that extent we may say 'new thinking' has been one, among many factors, that have contributed to the breakthrough everyone hopes for.

Notes

1. Friederich Engels; "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" in *Selected Works* (Moscow) 1986. p. 579.

2. V. I. Lenin. *Collected Works*. Volume 5. (Moscow) 1961. P. 383. Lenin *inter alia* quotes Kautsky to the effect that:

"But socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other, each arises under different conditions. Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. Indeed, modern economic science is as much a condition for socialist production as, say, modern technology, and the proletariat can create neither the one nor the other, ... The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia, it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, ..."

3. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions." in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*. (New York)1986. P. 218.

4. Cf. [Ed. E. J. Hobsbawm] Karl Marx, "Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations." Letter to Vera Zasulich. (London) 1978. P. 142-145.

5. Helmut Gruber, "International Communism in the Era of Lenin." New York. 1967.

6. Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman. "Reflections on Anti- Communism" in *Socialist Register*. 1984. (London) 1984.

7. W. E. B. Du Bois. "Marxism and the Negro Problem. " in [Ed. Julius Lester.] "The Seventh Son"(New York) 1971. P. 294.

8. Resolution on the 'The South African Question' adopted by the Executive Committee of the Communist International following the Sixth Comintern Congress. in "South African Communists Speak – 1915-1980. " (London) 1981.

9. Communist Party of South Africa. "What is the Native Republic?" (Johannesburg) 1934 Mimeograph.

10. Moshe Lewin. "The Gorbachev Phenomenon." (London.) 1988. P. 147.

11. Boris Kagalitsky. "Perstroika: The Dialectic of Change." in *New Left Review*. No. 169. May-June 1988.

12. Ibid.

13. M. Gorbachev. "Political Report of the CPSU Central Committee to the 27th Party Congress." (Moscow) 1986. P. 94.

14. A Utkin. "Broadening Multilateral Approach: Prospects for Soviet Policy Flexibility." (Moscow) 1989. Mimeograph.

15. Steven Friedman and Monty Narsoo. "A New Mood in Moscow: Soviet Attitudes To South Africa." (Johannesburg) 1989.
16. Vitaley Vasilikov. "Soviet-American Cooperative Efforts in Southern Africa." (Moscow) 1989. Mimeograph.
17. In International Affairs, No. 2. 1987. P. 46.
18. Boris Asoyan. "Africa is Not So Far Away" in Literaturnaya Gazeta. 7, October 1987. (translation by Lucky Mabasa)
19. Boris Asoyan. "The South African Experience." in *Pravda*, 20, August 1989. (Translation by Lucky Mabasa)
20. Ibid.
21. V. I. Tikhimirov. "South Africa: Is a Political Settlement Possible?" in SAPEM , May 1989.
22. Ibid.

<http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/sacp/1990/soviet-union.htm>