A Convenient Excuse: Apartheid South Africa
and the "Soviet Menace" during the Cold War.
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The Soviet communist threat in southern Africa was greatly exaggerated by the apartheid South African government during the Cold War to internally and externally justify preserving white supremacist rule at all costs. There was some truth to their claims about the "Soviet menace," but not nearly to the extent that South Africans used to justify their aggressive national security strategies. South Africa resorted to unconventional warfare throughout the whole southern region of Africa, and built up clandestine chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons programs, all in the name of countering allegedly Soviet-directed black liberation threats to continued white rule.

While many other African nations became independent under black majority rule in 1960, the South African government moved in the opposite direction, increasing repression and tightening apartheid. Particularly after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the subsequent UN arms embargo against South Africa, the regime felt increasingly under siege and isolated. South Africa withdrew from the British Commonwealth in 1961 and politically distanced itself from the West (Purkitt and Burgess 2002, 231). During the 1960's "the ruling Afrikaner elite developed a 'laager' (or circle the wagons) complex," in which they saw themselves as "'God's chosen people,' surrounded by 'black heathens' and 'Godless communists' and betrayed by the West" (Ibid). One particular black opposition group, the ANC (African National Congress) was the regime's archenemy. The South African government banned the ANC after Sharpeville and

forced it into exile mostly in newly-independent Zambia and Tanzania, where it set up its armed

guerilla branch (Cooper 2002, 145).

The South African regime's natural response to black independence elsewhere was to

increase military and security cooperation with the other three remaining bastions of defiant and

repressive white rule in Africa: Angola and Mozambique under Portuguese colonial rule, and

Rhodesia (Purkitt and Burgess 2002, 232). The goal was to maintain South Africa as a fortress

with a buffer zone or a "cordon sanitaire" of white-ruled states to permanently hold back the

"tide" of black majority rule that had already swept the rest of the continent (Hanlon 1986, 15).

Thereafter, units of the South African Defense Forces (SADF) fought with the Portuguese forces

in their campaigns against communist-inspired guerilla movements in Angola and Mozambique

(Purkitt and Burgess 2002, 233). Simultaneously SADF detachments and up to 2,000 South

African policemen were sent to Rhodesia to train and assist the security and police forces of the

white regime; they jointly conducted counterinsurgency campaigns against the ANC and other

guerillas both in Rhodesia and in Zambia (Hanlon 1986, 15).

The unexpected army coup that overthrew the government in Portugal in 1974 changed

things drastically for South Africa's regional security. The new Portuguese government

negotiated an end to its African wars, and facing the imminent independence of Angola and

Mozambique, South Africa launched an invasion of Angola in 1975 with the objective of

"preventing a Soviet-allied government from coming to power" there (Ellis 1998, 270). It is true

that the MPLA faction that was about to assume power in Angola was avowedly Marxist and did

receive limited supplies from the Soviet Union (Shubin and Tokarev 2001, 611). However, this

action needs to be seen in the context of the Sino-Soviet rivalry to lead the developing world:

Soviet support to the MPLA was offered more to counter China's cynical support of a rival *anti-communist* faction (the FNLA) than out of Soviet ideological communist solidarity with the MPLA (Stevens 1976, 139). The MPLA was by no means directed from Moscow, and its leader had to plead in Moscow for any support at all (Shubin and Tokarev 2001, 611). In contrast to South African propaganda portraying all black liberation guerilla movements as uniformly communist and Soviet-directed, in reality they varied widely and often externally emphasized certain Cold War ideologies to attract foreign military aid from one side or the other while paying little heed to their own rhetoric in practice (Husain 1982, 45-46; Stevens 1976, 139). For example, UNITA flipped its "ideological stance from Maoism to Reaganism with scarcely the blink of an eye," and subsequently received the support of South Africa and the US (Cooper 2002, 141).

However, South Africa's 1975 invasion of Angola was a disaster that not only failed to install a pro-Western government there, but actually provoked the countering intervention of a Cuban military force over 11,000 strong, plus much more substantial Soviet support and direct involvement (Ellis 1998, 270; Stevens 1976, 144; Shubin and Tokarev 2001, 614-615). While exact numbers are unknown, at least a few thousand Soviet troops served in Angola, most with the Angolan army but some with the ANC and two other regional black liberation movements, SWAPO and ZAPU (Shubin and Tokarev 2001, 614-15). Feeling abandoned by the US (which had covertly encouraged South Africa to invade) and facing Cuban and Soviet troops along with their Marxist MPLA allies alone, South Africa found itself stuck in an outcome far worse than the initial fear its invasion had been meant to forestall (Purkitt and Burgess 2002, 235). Having categorically failed in its military intervention in Angola, the SADF withdrew in 1976. Faced

with revolutionary black "Marxist" regimes in both Angola and Mozambique, South Africa felt increasingly vulnerable and desperate, and in response, it became even more aggressive and stridently anti-communist in its rhetoric. It forcefully backed white Rhodesia to the end, but Ian Smith's regime there (under international sanctions too) succumbed to black majority rule in 1980, leaving South Africa all alone to fight for apartheid (Cooper 2002, 138).

The South African regime's perceptions of the Soviet threat and its anti-communist propaganda intensified during the Cold War, especially in the 1970s and 1980s as it became increasingly isolated regionally and despised internationally. In an official 1977 Defense White Paper, South Africa claimed it "faced a 'total Marxist onslaught,'" orchestrated by the Soviet Union, which provided military, economic, and diplomatic support to all movements that sought to overthrow white rule, and to the ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP) in particular (Hanlon 1986, 37). All other black liberation groups, both non-violent and violent, and critics of apartheid were seen as communist adversaries as well, acting together on multiple fronts against apartheid and white-rule in the wider region (Ibid).

These claims were not based in objective reality; they were shaped by racism, ignorance, and Cold War assumptions, and they were convenient excuses to discredit guerilla movements internationally. In part, these claims were useful internal propaganda, to justify expanding the military budget and "ever stronger security laws" (Ibid, 41). Yet at least some influential soldiers in the South African military really did believe that blacks were not intelligent enough to plan sabotage campaigns, so there must have been "white communist masters somewhere" (Ibid). South Africa did not know the secret inner workings of the varied relationships the USSR actually did have with these African liberation movements and revolutionary states, so they

assumed that it was all part of a Moscow-run plan. South Africa was hardly the only country to arrive at this conclusion during the Cold War; the US, especially under Reagan, viewed any national liberation movement or disruption of the global status quo as having been masterminded by the Soviet Union (Fatton 1984, 57). And by slapping the label of "communist" on outspoken critics of apartheid and rebel movements like the ANC, South Africa hoped to discredit them internationally and within South Africa's own black population. Yet it should be noted that there were a few kernels of truth in some of these greatly exaggerated claims: the ANC for example did become increasingly influenced by the SACP's orthodox Marxist analysis, considering the urban black proletariat to be the most important constituent of society, and believed its own guerilla actions would spark a people's revolution (Ellis 1998, 265). Additionally, several thousand Angolan MPLA fighters did receive military training in the USSR (Shubin and Tokarev 2001, 614).

South Africa actively worked to destabilize its black majority-ruled neighbors, by applying economic pressure on their fragile economies and by financially and militarily supporting rebel groups in these countries. South African commandos sabotaged infrastructure and oil facilities to make these neighbors even more dependent on the South African economy. The apartheid regime periodically cut off supplies of food, fuel, and electricity to keep these neighbors permanently unstable and under enormous strains (Hanlon 1986, 50, 97). At the minimum, South African commandos raided seven of the neighboring capitals and tried to assassinate two elected black leaders, including Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe who the SADF viewed as a Marxist enemy (Ibid, 61, 97). South African commandos also conducted many kidnappings and assassinations of ANC leaders and guerillas throughout southern Africa and

even bombed the ANC office in London in 1982 (Ibid, 65-67). To weaken and destabilize its

neighbors, South Africa sponsored and militarily assisted rebel movements fighting the

governments of Angola, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Zimbabwe (Ibid, 68). The South African

military re-invaded southern Angola and southwestern Zambia in 1979 to clear some room for

their sponsored Angolan faction UNITA to be militarily resurrected, in an intentional buffer zone

between the MPLA and South-African occupied Namibia (Ibid). In Mozambique, South Africa

set up and funded (until the 1990s) the guerilla group RENAMO to fight the Marxist FRELIMO

government (Cooper 2002, 144). From 1982-1983, South Africa worked through its proxy

RENAMO to deliberately exacerbate a local drought in southern Mozambique, which became a

horrific famine that killed over 100,000 people and greatly destabilized that war-torn country

even further (Hanlon 1986, 89-90).

South Africa's top-secret nuclear weapons program also had very weak anti-communist

justification. Collaborating with Israel in research and development, South Africa had built six

and a half Hiroshima-strength nuclear bombs by the early 1990s, after which the program was

dismantled (Harris, Hatang, and Liberman 2004, 458; Hunter 1986, 13). The origins of the

program trace back to a key memorandum written in March of 1975 by the Chief of the Defense

Staff General Armstrong, arguing that a "significant nuclear threat to South Africa" had emerged

in the form of Red China possibly giving a nuclear weapon to a hostile African nation or

liberation army, and that the US then engaged in détente could not be relied on to aid South

Africa (Harris, Hatang, and Liberman 2004, 461-63). Yet the memorandum never addressed why

China would even take such an action in the first place, and it also neglected to mention how

South African nuclear weapons would deter these elusive communist "terrorists" (Ibid, 463).

This foundation-setting memo was representative of the logical incoherence, questionable

assumptions, and overall flimsy top-level anti-communist justifications of the South African

regime's national security policies. The official justification later switched into deterring "a

Soviet-backed attack from Angola or Mozambique," but South African strategists really meant to

"induce a Soviet nuclear threat" and then blackmail the US into intervening on South Africa's

side by "progressively threatening to disclose, test, or use on enemy targets, its nuclear

capability" (Harris, Hatang, and Liberman 2004, 463; Purkitt and Burgess 2002, 235). Thus,

leverage with the West was the main purpose of their nuclear weapons program, not anti-

communist deterrence.

Likewise, South Africa's secret chemical and biological weapons (CBW) program was

officially claimed to counter the "total communist onslaught," especially as the Soviet Union was

publicly known to have CBW (Purkitt and Burgess 2002, 235). First proposed in 1979, "Project

Coast" operated from 1981 to 1993 and was very advanced; its acquisitions included anthrax,

plague, cholera, ricin, and gas gangrene, as well as the Ebola, Marburg, and Rift Valley viruses

(Ibid, 242). There was very dubious and inconclusive evidence that the Soviets, Cubans, and

their alleged proxy guerilla groups like the ANC and SWAPO had used CBW in southern Africa

in the 1970s and 1980s, but South African officials widely cited it internally as justification for

their own CBW development (Ibid, 235). It is telling that the South African CBW program went

beyond defensive measures (like vaccines and preventive equipment) into aggressive battlefield

use in external counter-insurgency campaigns, domestic security use to assassinate regime

opponents and disperse large crowds of protesters, and even attempts to control and reduce the

growth of the black population (Ibid, 242). These apartheid-defending purposes were by far the ones most important to the regime.

South Africa's greatly exaggerated claims of the Soviet menace found receptive ears in the West. The US and its allies, particularly during the Reagan administration in the 1980s, also overestimated the prospects of Soviet threats to the region, and viewed South Africa as a crucial geostrategic country to have in the Western camp during the Cold War (Fatton 1984, 57). The West's vested economic interests in both South Africa's enormous amounts of vital minerals and its very favorable market for multinational corporations also played a central role in its continued Ibid, 65-66). As a result, the West only half-heartedly applied loophole-laden sanctions against the regime to save face in reaction to pressure from international human rights movements and global public outcry (Cooper 2002, 152-53; Hanlon 1986, 112-13).

In conclusion, the Soviet communist threat to southern Africa was highly exaggerated by South Africa to internally and externally justify its aggressive and destabilizing actions aimed to preserve apartheid rule at all costs. There were some small elements of truth in the South African claims, in the sense that some black liberation guerillas adopted Marxist rhetoric and the Soviet Union provided some money and arms to such groups. However, the reality was nothing like the alleged total communist onslaught directed by the Soviet Union, an idea which pervaded the South African regime's rhetoric. As the Cold War ended, these claims rang increasingly hollow and the regime lost what limited external support it had. Combined with increasing domestic upheaval and violence, the apartheid regime became unsustainable, and it negotiated a transition to genuine inclusive liberal democracy in the early 1990s.

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