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North Korea and the liberation of Southern Africa, 1960-2020

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PROLOGUE

THE BARREL OF A GUN

Blood, the first theme of this book, not only symbolises comradeship, but it also signifies the willingness to fight, to shed blood on the battlefield. The decision to pick up arms set certain African anticolonial movements apart from those – often domestic rivals – that stuck with non-violent resistance. The Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong famously said that ‘political power grows out of the barrel of a gun’ – a statement that widely resonated in Southern Africa and North Korea.

The gun appeared in ANC propaganda, SWAPO speeches, ZANU education, and was repeated by FRELIMO and UNIP officials, among other examples.⁴⁹⁸ The signature tune of Radio Freedom, the exiled radio station of the ANC, included the sound of an AK-47 rifle. The tune ‘was intended to inspire defiance and insurgency’ and signalled ‘the ANC’s determination to employ violent means to end apartheid’.⁴⁹⁹ The South African musician Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand) sang the words ‘freedom comes from the barrel of a gun’ at the funeral of Ruth First, an anti-apartheid activist who was murdered by the South African secret police.⁵⁰⁰ Jorge Rebelo’s poem captured the feelings of many when he wrote that ‘My rifle / will break the chains ... Beauty is to fight for freedom / Justice rings in my every shot’.⁵⁰¹

Guns, and the AK-47 in particular, featured prominently in the aesthetics of liberation propaganda.⁵⁰² The ANC periodicals and ZANU posters often displayed guns in their designs, and the logo of the exiled Namibia Press Agency combined a Kalashnikov with a pen. Its motto, ‘Fighting for Truth’ underlined the importance of the information war alongside the actual war. There is not much difference between a bullet and a bulletin.

North Korea similarly believed that ‘armed struggle was the supreme form of struggle for national independence’. According to North Korean mythology, Kim Il Sung received two pistols from his father when he was just 14 years old – ‘the gift of the gun’ would become a major theme in Kim’s transformation from exiled guerrilla fighter to esteemed state leader. Many years later, Kim Il Sung would gift his ten-year-old son, Kim Jong Il, a gun to symbolically designate him as his successor. The gun, according to North Korean propaganda, embodies ‘the destiny of the nation and the revolution’. As this book will discuss in further detail, the country became guided by the ‘philosophy of the barrel of a gun’ (*ch’ongdae*), which seeks to create a unity between the military and society.⁵⁰³

The gun holds a sacred place in North Korean political culture. Many North Korean education materials include the guns of the Kim family to exemplify their moral leadership in the revolutionary struggle.⁵⁰⁴ When the poet Jang Jin Sung composed the epic poem ‘Spring Rests on the Gun Barrel of the Lord’ in 1999, Kim Jong Il (the lord in question) was so delighted that he made Jang part of the ‘Admitted’, the inner circle of North Korea’s elite. Jang, who later defected to South Korea, said this honour changed his life ‘in the way that winning the lottery might do in a capitalist nation’.⁵⁰⁵

⁴⁹⁸ [NAI] PC South Africa NLM ANC: The African Nationalist, November 1976; [NAI] PC Namibia NLM SWAPO: statement by Hishongwa; [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZANU: Conference on the Development of Zimbabwe, 23-24 February 1979; [NAI] PC Mozambique Foreign Relations: meeting between Samora and Military and Security Delegation of Zimbabwe; [MA] Sechaba, April 1972.

⁴⁹⁹ Lekgoathi and Mukonde 2024, p. 32.

⁵⁰⁰ Holtland 2021.

⁵⁰¹ ‘Poem for a Militant’, by Jorge Rebelo. See Moore and Beier 2007.

⁵⁰² White 2009, p. 238.

⁵⁰³ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 83-84; 87-88; 101-102.

⁵⁰⁴ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 84.

⁵⁰⁵ Jang 2014, p. 19.

Most of the victorious liberation governments that are in power today in Southern Africa resorted to violent resistance. They fought against minority rule and established guerrilla armies in the process. The armed wings of these liberation movements were in dire need of military hardware and training. North Korea offered exactly this and gradually became ‘an exceptional player’ in Africa, the continent ‘that witnessed the DPRK’s greatest overall success and involvement’ in terms of military support.⁵⁰⁶ Several liberation movements, including FNL, FRELIMO, MPLA, SWAPO, TANU, ZANU, and ZAPU, benefited from North Korean military training.⁵⁰⁷

‘Bullets’, the second theme of this book, symbolise the military cooperation between African liberation governments and North Korea. Kim Il Sung had listened to Mao’s advice and supplied African liberation armies with cheap reverse-engineered guns and copious quantities of bullets.⁵⁰⁸ With hardware came the goose-stepping: North Korean military advisors travelled to Africa or invited African guerrilla fighters to North Korea for extensive training in the art of war.⁵⁰⁹

The military mindsets of African liberation governments that were shaped during the wars of liberation continue to influence contemporary political culture in Southern Africa. Again, North Korea is never far away – illicit military cooperation between African states and North Korea is ongoing despite United Nations sanctions.

Today, the Kalashnikov features proudly on the flag of Mozambique and Zimbabwe’s coat of arms. Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, accommodates a cemetery shaped in the form of two AK-47s lying back-to-back, where each grave represents a bullet. The monument was designed by a North Korean art studio and is a copy of a cemetery in Pyongyang.

This second part of the book provides a brief account of why African liberation governments depended, in part, upon North Korean military support. Chapters 6 and 7 explain how some African nationalists came to view the armed struggle as inevitable and looked to Pyongyang for arms and training. The final chapters, 8 through 10, cover the three eras during which liberation movements and subsequent governments profited from relations with North Korea: the eras of achieving power (1960–80); consolidating power (1980–2000); and maintaining power (2000–present).

⁵⁰⁶ Bermudez 1990.

⁵⁰⁷ Temu and Temba 2014, Vol. 2, Vol. 3, Vol. 5, Vol. 6, Vol. 8.

⁵⁰⁸ On the relationship between Kim and Mao, see Shen and Xia 2018.

⁵⁰⁹ Park 1983, p. 92.