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

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7 WEAPONS NORTH KOREAN WAR EXPERIENCE

‘When we speak of Communism in Africa’, an American government official said in 1979, ‘we are speaking almost exclusively of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Cuba, and China’. The US worried about the ‘extensive flow of weaponry from Communist countries to Africa’ but overlooked North Korea as a possible player with influence. For many years, North Korea was able to gradually build up its military relations with African guerrilla groups and states without being noticed, up until the point it became impossible for the West to ignore.⁵⁶⁷

Why did African freedom fighters connect with the Korean People’s Army? The armed struggle for African decolonisation and the stalemate after the Korean War inspired the friendship between two sets of very different anti-imperial fighters, from Southern Africa and East Asia. The Korean War was the ‘first major military conflict of the Cold War’, one that would have reverberating effects across the entire world.⁵⁶⁸ This chapter argues that the Korean War was crucial for kickstarting the networks between Pyongyang and African capitals. Some African countries fought on behalf of South Korea, while other countries took inspiration from North Korea’s legacy of the war.

The first section considers the African-Korean connections that existed prior to the start of Korean diplomatic competition in the 1960s. Ethiopia and South Africa participated in the UN Command that defended South Korea during the Korean War. The second section describes how the arms industry was a key component in North Korea’s post-war reconstruction. Importantly, North Korea did not just export weapons to Africa, but also war experience. Especially the latter resonated with anti-imperial activists across the continent. The third section explores African motivations for cooperation with North Korea. Were they motivated by ideology or pragmatism? While Western actors were convinced that all Africans were communists, this chapter argues that it is imperative to move beyond the East-West binary as predicted by Harold Macmillan in his ‘winds of change’ speech.⁵⁶⁹

The Korean War

At the end of World War II, the Korean peninsula was the site of ‘intense great power competition’. Scholars have therefore highlighted the international dimensions of the Korean War, though this often entails geopolitical giants such as the United States, the Soviet Union, and China.⁵⁷⁰ The focus on great power competition obscures the fact that the Korean War had a distinct African dimension, years before both Koreas launched their diplomatic campaigns in the continent. Two of the 16 members of the UN coalition that defended South Korea were African: a South African air squadron and the Ethiopian Kagneb Battalion.

Both South Africa and Ethiopia were motivated to join the coalition by a desire to enhance their status within the UN system. South Africa aimed to ‘bolster its standing’ after it received widespread criticism of introducing apartheid legislation, while Ethiopia sought UN permission to incorporate neighbouring Eritrea.⁵⁷¹ The Ethiopian contingent were the only Black troops in the war and were therefore met with suspicion by American troops, but fought with distinction and quickly ‘earned the respect of their comrades after countless bloody, often hand-to hand battles’.⁵⁷²

⁵⁶⁷ [NAI] PC Socialism: Department of State, Current Policy No. 99, 18 October 1979.

⁵⁶⁸ Stueck 2002, p. 5.

⁵⁶⁹ Alexander et al. 2017.

⁵⁷⁰ Stueck 2002, p. 4.

⁵⁷¹ Stueck 1995, p. 74.

⁵⁷² Abebe 2019.

After the Korean War ended in a stalemate, the relations between both African states and the UN remained relevant. The Ethiopian army continued to serve in the UN Command that defended South Korea. This command – the first in the history of the UN – was tasked with defending the Korean armistice.⁵⁷³ The Ethiopian army questioned the usefulness of its continued presence in the command, but the Americans were determined to keep them in. Internally, the State Department agreed that the Ethiopian involvement was militarily insignificant. It did, however, contribute significantly to the multinational character of the mission. If the Ethiopians withdrew, others might be tempted to do so as well. Therefore, participation ‘even of a token nature’ was an ‘important symbol’.⁵⁷⁴

South Africa’s participation, however, was more of a headache for the Washington–Seoul axis. The South African government was ‘justifiably proud’ of its participation in the Korean War and used it as diplomatic currency. When, in 1961, an American government official criticised the apartheid policies of South Africa, the South African minister of foreign affairs met with the American ambassador to remind him that both countries ‘share the common aim of opposition to Communism’. As an example, the minister reiterated that South Africa ‘although having no political or economic interests in the Far East, was one [of the few countries worldwide] to fight side by side with the American airmen in Korea’. And the critique on apartheid was simply based on ‘distorted and often false press reports’.⁵⁷⁵

However, South Korea’s connection to South Africa became an obstacle for its diplomatic standing in the UN. In 1963, South Korean diplomats hoped that South Africa’s co-sponsorship of pro-South Korea resolutions could be avoided, ‘in light of their recent difficulties with Africans’. As apartheid came under increasing international scrutiny, South African appreciation of the UN also ‘declined markedly’ and Pretoria questioned why they would contribute to an organisation that might take action against them.⁵⁷⁶

The early African involvement in the Korean War on the side of South Korea is an interesting precursor to the events that are described in this book. It illustrates that before the eruption of diplomatic Korean competition in Africa, there were already diplomatic and military links between African countries and the peninsula.

Post-War Reconstruction

It is hard to overstate how utterly destructive the Korean War was. North Korea lost 8700 industrial plants, 600,000 homes were destroyed, and 10% of its population was killed, wounded, or went missing. The Korean War utterly changed the fabric of society and became a foundational myth of the North Korean state, just as the African wars of independence became the origin myths of African liberation governments (see Chapter 11). The North Korean leadership internalised ‘the bitter lessons of national ruin’ and turned this into an advantage.⁵⁷⁷ The miraculous post-war reconstruction inspired awe in the African continent and beyond.⁵⁷⁸ The North Korean state believed that ‘history shows that national sovereignty and independence is guaranteed by the strength of arms, military strength’.⁵⁷⁹ A key aspect of the reconstruction of North Korea was the development of a military industry.

⁵⁷³ Park 2009.

⁵⁷⁴ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2259, POL KENYA-SOMALI -- POL 27-14 KOR: Addis Ababa to Washington DC, December 1968; Department of State to Addis Ababa, 22 January 1969.

⁵⁷⁵ [UFS] M.B.4/750. I wish to thank Brooks Marmon for sharing this file with me.

⁵⁷⁶ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# A1 1613-A, Box# 3964, POL 17 Korea -- POL Kuwait: Pretoria to Secretary of State, 26 June 1963; New York to Seoul, 14 September 1963.

⁵⁷⁷ Ri 2012, p. 4.

⁵⁷⁸ Van der Hoog 2022d.

⁵⁷⁹ Ri 2012, p. 7. Interestingly, South Korea did the same. The difference between both Koreas, however, is the fact that North Korea actively reached out to African states while South Korea did not. See Kwon 2020.

The basis for the North Korean arms industry was established in the early Cold War, when China and the Soviet Union granted licence agreements to North Korea for the production of small arms, light weapons, and munitions. Both communist states were also involved in the establishment of arms factories in North Korea. Around the late 1960s or early 1970s, North Korea's arms industry entered a new phase when it began to modify and update existing communist weapons technologies. Around the same time, the export of weapons and training services to foreign allies began.⁵⁸⁰

North Korea modified, updated, and reverse-engineered military technology until it maintained a 'vast catalogue' of hardware and services. The analyst Andrea Berger estimates that this catalogue includes:

... complete off-the-shelf weapons systems and so-called 'knock-down kits'; spare parts for those systems and for supporting infrastructure; weapons designs and technology; whole arms manufacturing lines and complexes; repair, maintenance and upgrade services; military training in a wide variety of disciplines; and brokering, procurement and logistical services.⁵⁸¹

Military exports became a key component of North Korea's foreign policy during the Cold War. In a bid to improve its standing in the Non-Aligned Movement and to marginalise South Korea, it offered military instructors and weapons to trusted partners.⁵⁸² As such, Pyongyang emerged as an 'important player' in the global arms market. More than sixty state and non-state actors across the world benefited from this form of assistance between 1960 and 1990.⁵⁸³ The majority of its customers were located in Africa.⁵⁸⁴ A CIA report from 1984 estimated that North Korea earned around \$300 million per year through the sale of arms.⁵⁸⁵ Increasingly, military exports became a means to earn hard foreign currency.⁵⁸⁶

North Korea's value to African liberation movements went beyond the export of reverse-engineered Kalashnikovs or instructions for goose-stepping: it shared an experience of anti-imperial revolution. North Korean political thought is infused with references to anticolonial partisan fighting against Japanese colonisation and the Korean War, which was envisaged as an anti-imperial struggle against the United States. Kim Il Sung received two guns from his father and became the liberator of the North Korean people – years later, Kim Il Sung allegedly gifted his own gun to Kim Jong Il to ordain him as his successor, another symbolic moment that 'took place in the fog of the Korean War'.⁵⁸⁷

The Korean struggle credentials resonated with African liberation movements under siege. When Andreas Shipanga visited Pyongyang for the first time in 1965, one year before the start of SWAPO's armed struggle, he recalled that 'North Korea was a country permanently prepared for war'. It was his first official foreign mission for the liberation movement. He admired the monuments dedicated to Kim Il Sung and saw glimpses of whole factories hidden away inside mountains. It made a deep impression on him.⁵⁸⁸

Indeed, the North Koreans experienced the Korean War as a 'total war' and internalised this mentality in the post-war development of their state.⁵⁸⁹ In an impeccable case of the

⁵⁸⁰ Berger 2016a.

⁵⁸¹ Berger 2016a.

⁵⁸² [NAUK] FCO 21/3231: North Korea, arms supplies.

⁵⁸³ Berger 2016a.

⁵⁸⁴ [NAUK] FCO 21/3231: North Korea, arms supplies.

⁵⁸⁵ Kerkhoff 2020, p. 56.

⁵⁸⁶ [NAUK] FCO 21/3231: North Korea, arms supplies.

⁵⁸⁷ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 88-89; 101.

⁵⁸⁸ Armstrong 1989, p. 82.

⁵⁸⁹ Stueck 2002, p. 1.

invention of tradition, the North Korean state would turn historical exploits of guerrilla warfare into political concepts that sustain the incumbent leadership.⁵⁹⁰ *Ch'ongdae* ('barrel of the gun philosophy') advocates 'an absolute moral unity between the army and the gun ... a practical and spiritual unity between the person and the gun'. As discussed further in Chapter 13, Kim Jong Il would use *ch'ongdae* to introduce a 'military first' policy that privileges the army (*sŏn'gun*). In both concepts, the revolutionary past plays an important role.⁵⁹¹

For Africans looking to defeat colonial states and Western interests, the North Korean war experience was appealing. In the conclusion of the previous chapter, I mentioned that North Korea served as an example in ZAPU's discussions about the formation of its armed wing. Dumiso Dabengwa remembered that during those heated arguments in 1964, his comrades gave presentations about the strategies and ideologies used by the Chinese, Cuban, and North Korean revolutions, 'based on the experiences of Mao Zedong, Che Guevara and Kim Il Sung'.⁵⁹² The next chapter will provide more examples of how the Korean War inspired African soldiers.

Moving Beyond the East–West Binary

African interest in North Korea's war experience fell within a broader framework of Afro-Asian solidarity. Many believed that 'the progressive African states regard the socialist countries as their natural allies'.⁵⁹³ As already highlighted in Chapter 1, the ever-closer fraternity between African liberation movements and their socialist sponsors raised the alarm in Western capitals. 'As soon as they run short of argument and force, the colonialists call our movement a communist movement', grumbled the steering committee of the MPLA. The Angolan organisation was adamant about its own position: they were not communist, and 'never pretended to be'.⁵⁹⁴

Julius Nyerere feared that the freedom struggles in Africa would 'become confused by a power conflict which is irrelevant to it'.⁵⁹⁵ Nyerere was tired of the inevitable question about whether African states were pro-East or pro-West. 'Every possible attempt is made to squeeze African events into the framework of the Cold War'. According to him, these were 'the wrong questions for anyone who wishes to understand what is happening in Africa'. The fundamental mistake that outsiders have always made is that they assume that 'Africa has no ideas of its own and no interests of its own'.⁵⁹⁶

For this reason, African politicians often embraced a non-aligned foreign policy. 'We are not interested in Cold War rivalries and quarrels', stated a Batswana minister in Tanzania in 1970. This was 'the primary reason for our decision to be non-aligned'. Like many African states, the minister stated that 'we wish to be free to seek aid from any quarter which will serve to sustain our independence'.⁵⁹⁷ Non-alignment opened the door for relations with North Korea and other communist states, which African elites viewed through a practical rather than an ideological lens.

Nevertheless, the communist label was effective in depicting African liberation movements as a danger to world peace and a threat to global stability.⁵⁹⁸ For instance, the South African apartheid government warned the world that the ANC would introduce a communist regime. Alfred Nzo called this 'noisy propaganda distorting the aims of our peoples', pointing

⁵⁹⁰ Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

⁵⁹¹ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 88-89.

⁵⁹² Dabengwa 2017, p. 219.

⁵⁹³ [MA] ANC London Box 4: Communist call to Africa.

⁵⁹⁴ [NAI] PC Angola NLM MPLA: declaration, 4 February 1971.

⁵⁹⁵ [NAI] PC Tanzania Politics Nyerere: speech Nyerere, 15 October 1970.

⁵⁹⁶ [NAI] PC Tanzania Politics Nyerere: speech Nyerere, 21 October 1969.

⁵⁹⁷ [NAI] PC Regional Cooperation AAPSO: statement by Nwako, April 1970.

⁵⁹⁸ Sapire 2009, p. 272.

at the Freedom Charter that was adopted in 1955.⁵⁹⁹ Nelson Mandela ridiculed the ‘communist bogey’, which he called ‘an American stunt’. Such accusations were only meant ‘to distract the attention of the people of Africa from the real issues facing them, namely American imperialism’.⁶⁰⁰

Western insistence on communist ‘indoctrination’ irked African nationalists, who were motivated by a domestic agenda. Joshua Nkomo questioned why the West believed that simple exposure to the East would turn Africans into communists. He recalled his education by the British colonial authorities, where he had to memorise Shakespeare and read Adam Smith. ‘But we never became British! So why do the people who for years drilled us in their doctrine believe that two days in Moscow will make us communists?’⁶⁰¹ Kaunda lamented that ‘four trips to the West were not sufficient to make me a capitalist! Only one trip to Peking will make me a communist! What reasoning is this?’⁶⁰²

When Andreas Shipanga appeared in front of the US Senate, he noted that SWAPO’s leadership ‘never had time [for] or real interest’ in reading the socialist literature that was gifted to them upon their visits to the East.⁶⁰³ Indeed, a UN official who was intimately involved in Namibia’s decolonisation process later remarked in his autobiography that he ‘doubted if Nujoma would know a Marxist-Leninist idea if he met one in the street’.⁶⁰⁴ During Shipanga’s testimony, he criticised the hypocrisy of American politicians, asking if they really believed that ‘the bushes and sand dunes of Namibia to be teeming with red blacks, all indoctrinated with Soviet ideology? I can testify here truthfully that in Namibia I have never come across a single communist black person’. Shipanga turned the question around: ‘Instead of investigating Reds in our bushes, you could easily have caught them by their hundreds in the concrete and glass forests across the whole of the USA’.⁶⁰⁵

What many Western politicians missed at the time was the fact that exposure to communist ideology could sometimes be counterproductive. A case study from South Africa is illustrative of this point. All exiled ANC students in the Soviet Union received extensive lessons in Marxist–Leninist philosophy and scientific communism. In a note from 1988, the students voiced their concerns to the ANC leadership: they felt that the Soviets were ‘trying to indoctrinate’ them, as the work had ‘nothing to do with their specialities’, and, in any case, the lessons contained ‘too much repetition’. There was little appetite for Soviet ideological publications either. ‘The females usually do not read them. They rather read a novel’. But the main problem was that young people liked to have fun. ‘If there is a party somewhere, everyone will leave what they are doing and go to party’. The results of the exposure to the Soviet Union were sobering, as ‘some comrades have made it clear in private discussions that they don’t want socialism in our country’.⁶⁰⁶

In 1979, a report from the Bureau of African Affairs of the US State Department rightfully concluded that ‘nationalism is a powerful force in Africa, and no African leaders or peoples wish to come under the lasting influence of any foreign power’. However, their warning that ‘Africa is a continent of moving, not still, pictures’ did not reach American politicians.⁶⁰⁷ It is important to note that the Africans who sought cooperation with Pyongyang never understood this relationship through the lens of communism. Rather, they were motivated by a

⁵⁹⁹ [MA] ANC Lusaka Box 62: message from Nzo, 1987.

⁶⁰⁰ [MA] ANC London Box 7: Shakti, July–August 1978.

⁶⁰¹ [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZAPU: Nkomo, March 1979.

⁶⁰² [NAI] PC Zambia Politics Kaunda: speech Kaunda, 14–20 August 1967.

⁶⁰³ [UNAM] PA1/1/5.

⁶⁰⁴ Urquhart 1991, p. 321.

⁶⁰⁵ [UNAM] PA1/1/5.

⁶⁰⁶ [MA] ANC Lusaka Box 58: Thabetha, report, 15 March 1988.

⁶⁰⁷ [NAI] PC Socialism: Department of State, Current Policy No. 99, 18 October 1979.

practical need to bring their own revolution to a successful conclusion. Subsequently, the main goals were consolidating and maintaining power.

The *Journal of African Marxists* concluded bitterly that ‘the re-colonisation of Africa does not require the use of guns, the cheque book is sufficient’. It was a striking comment on the ideological route that most liberation governments took when they finally got a hold on power: ‘Most African states have consciously or unconsciously taken the capitalist road’.⁶⁰⁸ Despite the sometimes overt communist rhetoric of the Cold War, most liberation movements were not truly socialist – they simply desired independence.

Conclusion

‘If the door to freedom is locked and bolted, and the present guardians of the door have refused to turn the key or pull the bolts, the choice is very straightforward’, Nyerere said in 1969. ‘Either you accept the lack of freedom or you break down the door’. African nationalists across the continent envisioned the armed struggle as inevitable. However, for the revolution to succeed, arms were necessary. ‘Not even the most skilled guerrilla movement can fight machine guns with bows and arrows’, he added. There was one downside to this strategy: ‘Africa cannot supply these arms; we do not make them, and we have no money to buy them’. For Nyerere and other revolutionaries, there was only one viable alternative. ‘So we accept arms from communist states, and say “thank you” to them’.⁶⁰⁹

Among a number of other nations, North Korea became a principal supporter of African nationalists who desired self-governance. Pyongyang’s timely intervention in the struggle for freedom was not forgotten in African capitals. In a speech aptly titled ‘The Weapons That Brought Us Victory’, Samora Machel celebrated the ‘natural alliance’ between socialist countries and Mozambique. It was the tenth anniversary of the start of the Mozambican war of independence and Machel emphasised that FRELIMO would ‘never forget the exemplary solidarity extended by North Korea’.⁶¹⁰

While these events were shaped by the Cold War, African guerrillas and North Korean instructors were not Cold Warriors, as they were fighting for independence. Nationalism mattered most, not ideology. Nyerere was confident that external aid would not corrupt the quest for African freedom. ‘We know our own motives ... We are not communists; we are nationalists desiring freedom’.⁶¹¹ This sentiment was also captured in the military doctrine of the ANC, which envisaged nationalism as the driving force for revolution, not internationalism. The military vision of Umkhonto we Sizwe stipulated that ‘the national character of the struggle must dominate our approach ... The national sense of grievance is the most potent revolutionary force’. The ANC believed that to blunt this revolutionary force ‘in the interest of abstract concepts of internationalism, is, in the long run, doing a service neither to revolution nor to internationalism’.⁶¹²

North Korea’s military experience, a virtue closely associated with Pyongyang’s idiosyncratic recovery from the ruins of the Korean War, caught the attention of African liberation movements. For them, North Korea’s appeal did not come from its communist background, but rather from its successful resistance against imperialism – a revolution that, during the decades of African decolonisation, was still within recent memory. The next three chapters in this part of the book will explain how North Korea moved from a theoretical inspiration to a practical partner for exiled liberation movements that wanted to achieve, consolidate, and maintain power.

⁶⁰⁸ [MA] ANC London Box 197: *Journal of African Marxists*.

⁶⁰⁹ [NAI] PC Tanzania Politics Nyerere: speech Nyerere, 21 October 1969.

⁶¹⁰ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: Mozambique Revolution, July-September 1974.

⁶¹¹ [NAI] PC Tanzania Politics Nyerere: speech Nyerere, 21 October 1969.

⁶¹² [MA] ANC London Box 7: *Unity in Action*.