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

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Citation

Hoog, T. A. van der. (2024, May 7). *North Korea and the liberation of Southern Africa, 1960-2020*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3753571>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

9 VICTORY CONSOLIDATING POWER, 1980–2000

During the wars for liberation in Southern Africa, national liberation movements benefited from North Korean training programmes in counterinsurgency and guerrilla warfare. But what happened when victory was achieved? ‘The attainment of political independence’, according to Kim Il Sung, ‘is no more than the initial step towards the ultimate victory of the national-liberation revolution’.⁶⁷⁶ In 1982, the Great Leader proclaimed that ‘the most important problem confronting the peoples who have won their national independence today is how to consolidate the political independence of their countries’. African revolutionaries should therefore consider the question ‘how to defend independence’.⁶⁷⁷

Defending independence became a key priority for newly installed African government. They were anxious not to succumb to the internal and external pressures that marked postcolonial politics, and lose power as a result. African leaders struggled with domestic opposition to their authority and faced South Africa as a mighty adversary that sought to destabilise the entire region. Again, North Korea proved to be a reliable partner during these difficult times. North Korea took on a new role by offering internal regime support to African states.⁶⁷⁸ More specifically, the provision of presidential security became a key theme in African–North Korean relations in the last decade of the Cold War.⁶⁷⁹

North Korea provided training that was compatible with equipment gifted by the Soviet Union or China, two major suppliers of arms in Africa. Nonetheless, its independent foreign policy, underlined through its membership of the Non-Aligned Movement, was a significant advantage in terms of convincing African liberation governments to work together.⁶⁸⁰ ‘The DPRK does offer an attractive option to governments that are not too keen to accept a large Soviet or Cuban presence’, stressed a British report from 1984. ‘They can certainly improve the effectiveness of host nation armed forces’.⁶⁸¹

The best-known example of a North Korean training mission in Africa is the Fifth Brigade in Zimbabwe, which wreaked havoc in Matabeleland in the 1980s. As the historian Stuart Doran points out, this episode is fairly well-known today because of a report from the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, which exposed the ‘savage killings’ to a wide audience in 1997.⁶⁸² Largely unexplored, however, is the fact that North Korea also trained military divisions of other countries in Southern Africa – and that the Zimbabwean example was a factor in the diplomatic negotiations with African countries concerning North Korean aid.

Newly elected African governments faced a rapidly deteriorating security situation in Southern Africa, a region marked by civil war, assassinations, and other forms of instability. The widespread presence of North Korean bodyguards was not a sign of African paranoia, but the result of an objective need for protection. African states had the freedom to organise their own security the way they saw fit and deliberately choose to trust North Korea with this important task.

This chapter seeks to illuminate the proliferation of North Korean training missions in 1980s Southern Africa. The first part provides a detailed account of the military cooperation

⁶⁷⁶ Kim 1984, p. 345.

⁶⁷⁷ [UNAM] PA3/6/117.

⁶⁷⁸ Bermudez 1990.

⁶⁷⁹ [NAUK] FCO 21/2319.

⁶⁸⁰ [NAUK] FCO 21/2876.

⁶⁸¹ [NAUK] FCO 21/3231.

⁶⁸² Doran 2017, p. viii-ix; Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe 1997.

between ZANU and North Korea in the first years of Zimbabwean independence. The second part consciously moves beyond Zimbabwe and uncovers a wide range of North Korean training missions in neighbouring states in Southern Africa. The third section analyses the impact of these collaborations on African–North Korean relationships.

The Fifth Brigade of ZANU

When Zimbabwe gained full independence on 18 April 1980, large crowds gathered in Harare to celebrate the victory over the Rhodesian settler regime. One of the highlights of the festivities was a performance by Bob Marley, the Rastafarian singer who was incredibly popular across Africa. For this special occasion, Marley performed a song called ‘Zimbabwe’. Thousands of people cheered when Marley sang the words ‘no more internal power struggle’, a line that eerily foreshadowed the tensions that would follow in the years to come.

The two main liberation movements of Zimbabwe, ZANU and ZAPU, had a ‘strained relationship’ that would define much of Zimbabwe’s postcolonial future. In the meantime, South Africa sought to destabilise Zimbabwe through a range of covert actions. Shortly after independence, South African agents sabotaged ‘key sites’ in Zimbabwe, spread rumours that ZAPU would overthrow the ZANU-dominated government, and destroyed large quantities of ammunition in an attack on military barracks just outside Harare. Moreover, in 1981, South African operatives bombed the ZANU headquarters in Harare and ‘almost killed many seniors leaders’ from the party, including Robert Mugabe.⁶⁸³

Power struggles were at the heart of the newly independent nation of Zimbabwe. In a quest to consolidate his power, ZANU leader and prime minister Robert Mugabe approached Kim Il Sung, the man who had already supported ZANU during the liberation struggle. In October 1980, six months after the festive independence celebrations in Harare, Mugabe travelled to Pyongyang to discuss a possible North Korean training mission for the Zimbabwean military. He ‘spoke in warm terms about his talks with Kim Il Sung’ during a press conference in the capital and said that Zimbabwe had much to learn from North Korea. The two nations subsequently signed a treaty that underlined their mutual friendship and cooperation.⁶⁸⁴

The North Korean minister of foreign affairs, Ho Dam (Hǒ Tam), characterised the ties between both countries as ‘intimate comrades-in-arms and brothers’ during a return visit to Harare in 1980.⁶⁸⁵ Another agreement between Zimbabwe and North Korea was signed in May 1981, during a visit of North Korean prime minister Li Jong Ok (Ri Chong’ok). Li visited Zimbabwe again between 15–20 June 1981.⁶⁸⁶ During a banquet to honour his esteemed guest, Mugabe embraced North Korea’s foreign policy agenda by professing his ‘fullest support’ for the Workers’ Party of Korea and denouncing the ‘military occupation’ of South Korea by the United States.⁶⁸⁷

Shortly after Mugabe’s visit to Pyongyang, rumours about the impending North Korean training mission were quickly spreading within Zimbabwe. The new Zimbabwean army was originally designed as a merger of former ZANU and ZAPU fighters and the British military had deployed a training mission in 1980 to help shape four brigades. The North Korean security assistance would instead focus on a so-called Fifth Brigade (or 5 Brigade) that was almost entirely

⁶⁸³ Karekwaivanane 2017, p. 191.

⁶⁸⁴ [NAUK] FCO 36/2764.

⁶⁸⁵ [SADIRCO] 1.191.1.

⁶⁸⁶ [DARK] 15765.

⁶⁸⁷ [NAUK] FCO 106/464.

composed of ZANU fighters.⁶⁸⁸ It was evident that this would be a powerful tool for Mugabe to exercise control. In the run-up to the arrival of the North Koreans, tensions were already building in Zimbabwean politics. Two thousand members of ZANU's youth movement took to the streets to call for the installation of a one-party state and the Fifth Brigade. The crowd was addressed by Mugabe, who encouraged the youths to help ZANU succeed. Naturally, this terrified the ZAPU base. In response, ZAPU organised a counter march, with some members carrying banners displaying the text 'Koreans go home'.⁶⁸⁹

By then, it had also become clear to the outside world that North Korea would train a Zimbabwean military brigade. Mugabe's decision to approach Kim Il Sung for this kind of mission raised widespread international concern. The ZANU government defied extensive diplomatic pressure to stop its cooperation with North Korea, which underlines the strong bonds between Harare and Pyongyang.

The United Kingdom was deeply concerned about the North Korean arrival. Yet, the influence of the former colonisers in Harare had waned. In a meeting with Mugabe, the British major-general Palmer – the commander of the British military training team in Harare – argued that accepting North Korean aid would result in a confusing mix of different army systems. Mugabe countered this argument by pointing at the example of Tanzania, a country that had done exactly the same (and had equally firm ties with Pyongyang). Palmer's response that Tanzania was hardly an example for Zimbabwe 'was not well received' by Mugabe. Instead, the prime minister reiterated that North Koreans had helped Zimbabwe during the struggle for independence, and 'had to be given an opportunity to help Zimbabwe now'. The British counteroffer of help was rejected.⁶⁹⁰

Several other states added their voices to the chorus of disapproval. Diplomatic opposition against ZANU's military policy came from all corners of the world. An obvious contestant was South Korea, which realised it was losing the inter-Korean diplomatic competition in Southern Africa. South Korea's offer of unconditional aid was made in vain, as Harare chose to support North Korea.⁶⁹¹ South Africa, Zimbabwe's antagonist, and Japan, which had a strained relationship with North Korea, both voiced concern about Zimbabwean–North Korean cooperation. Australia offered alternative military training, to no avail.⁶⁹² The United States, which had fought North Korea during the Korean War, threatened the ZANU government that their move could jeopardise an American aid package with a value of \$250 million.⁶⁹³ Mugabe was steadfast in his decision.

This episode not only illustrates that Harare was independent in its foreign policy – Pyongyang was equally capable of making sovereign decisions. North Korea's military strategy was not dependent on the Communist Bloc. Following the failed diplomatic campaign to prevent the Fifth Brigade from coming into existence, British and Japanese diplomats concluded that the offer of aid was 'North Korea's independent action and could not be seen as a derivative of the Soviet strategy'.⁶⁹⁴

In August 1981, 103 military instructors from North Korea arrived in Zimbabwe to train the Fifth Brigade. Designed as a counter-insurgency force consisting of 5000 men, the soldiers

⁶⁸⁸ Formally the name of the army division is '5 Brigade', yet in practice the name 'Fifth Brigade' has become common. This book therefore uses the latter.

⁶⁸⁹ Doran 2017, p. 285.

⁶⁹⁰ [NAUK] FCO 21/1988.

⁶⁹¹ [NAUK] FCO 106/758.

⁶⁹² [NAUK] FCO 106/464; [DARK] 15765.

⁶⁹³ [NAUK] FCO 106/464; [DARK] 15765.

⁶⁹⁴ [DARK] 15765.

were mainly derived from former ZANLA forces, the military wing of ZANU during the liberation struggle.⁶⁹⁵ The brigade was trained in a military base in Nyanga, close to the Mozambican border. The brigade later moved to Gweru.⁶⁹⁶ The North Koreans specifically requested an isolated area for the training exercises and refused a location near Harare.⁶⁹⁷

The brigade's equipment (T59 tanks, AK-47 rifles, armoured cars, artillery, and trucks) was imported from Pyongyang by rail, through the port of Beira, Mozambique. The material was a gift from Kim Il Sung, with a total worth of \$12 million.⁶⁹⁸ However, the salaries and in-country costs of the North Korean instructors were paid by the Zimbabwean government.⁶⁹⁹

At the end of 1982, the number of North Korean military advisors in Zimbabwe was 'higher than in any other developing country'.⁷⁰⁰ As was generally the case with North Koreans in Africa, their presence was shrouded in mystery and they seldom blended with the local population. The instructors could occasionally be spotted at public displays of the Fifth Brigade, where the soldiers displayed their newly acquired martial art skills, impressing the public by smashing logs of wood and blocks of concrete with their bare hands.⁷⁰¹

It was rumoured that the brigade started each day with a salute to 'MUGABE!'.⁷⁰² A Zimbabwean officer later recalled that the training also included the teachings of Juche.⁷⁰³ The emphasis on ideology was not a coincidence, but deliberate. Mugabe explained that the Fifth Brigade 'were trained by the Koreans because we wanted one arm of the army to have a political orientation which stems from our philosophy as ZANU ... their approach was not just to use the gun. It was also political'.⁷⁰⁴ Mugabe's approach was thus a continuation of the military mindsets that were developed in exile.

Joshua Nkomo, the leader of ZAPU and long-time rival of Mugabe, feared that the Fifth Brigade would effectively become a private ZANU brigade and was part of a plan to establish a one-party state in Zimbabwe.⁷⁰⁵ His fears came true in 1982, when the Fifth Brigade invaded Matabeleland, the traditional ZAPU stronghold, and murdered an estimated 20,000 people. At least one operation was 'furthered by on-the-ground assistance from Korean officers'.⁷⁰⁶

In the early 1980s, for several years on end, the Fifth Brigade spread its terror across Matabeleland in a genocidal campaign that came to be known as *Gukurahundi*. Mugabe had already named the Fifth Brigade *Gukurahundi*, a Shona word that can be roughly translated as 'the rain that comes before the spring rains and washes away the chaff', or the 'first rains of the season that sweep away the rubbish'.⁷⁰⁷ In 1979, shortly before Zimbabwean independence, Mugabe had called this year *Gore re Gukurahundi*, or Year of the People's Storm. 'Let the people's fury break into a revolutionary storm that will engulf and sweep the enemy completely from our land', Mugabe proclaimed in a New Year's message. 'The People's Storm must come with thunder, heavy rain and irresistible blasting gusts that will ransack the enemy strongholds'.⁷⁰⁸ The sinister symbolism of the Fifth Brigade's nickname can hardly be missed. For Mugabe and his allies, the Fifth Brigade represented an opportunity to cleanse the nation of ZAPU's opposition and achieve unity through violence.

⁶⁹⁵ [SADIRCO] 1.191.1; Doran 2017, p. 283.

⁶⁹⁶ [DARK] 15765.

⁶⁹⁷ Tendi 2020, p. 201.

⁶⁹⁸ Doran 2017, p. 285.

⁶⁹⁹ [NAUK] FCO 106/464.

⁷⁰⁰ [NAUK] FCO 21/3231.

⁷⁰¹ [DARK] 20368.

⁷⁰² Todd 2007, p. 36.

⁷⁰³ Nyathi 2018, p. 50.

⁷⁰⁴ Tendi 2020, p. 203.

⁷⁰⁵ [NAUK] FCO 106/464; [DARK] 15765.

⁷⁰⁶ Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe 1997; Daily Maverick, 25 October 2017.

⁷⁰⁷ Doran 2017, p. 283-284.

⁷⁰⁸ [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZANU: speech Mugabe, 1979.

The exploits of the Fifth Brigade were extremely violent and gruesome. The violence was not ‘simply a matter of soldiers running wild’, but was meticulously planned and organised.⁷⁰⁹ There was a method to the madness, as the historian Blessing-Miles Tendi notes. The Fifth Brigade was not designed to function as a regular army force, it was destined to spread terror. In addition to the thousands and thousands of killings, Mugabe’s army division carried out widespread torture and rape in Matabeleland. Civilians were forced to chant ZANU slogans and Shona songs.⁷¹⁰ Victims were stuffed with mines and thrown in the water, their bodies only to be revealed by a long drought ten years later.⁷¹¹

The terrible events of the 1980s ‘indelibly marked the foundational years of the Zimbabwean nation’.⁷¹² Through mass killings, the Fifth Brigade effectively destroyed ‘the backbone of ZAPU’s party structure in Matabeleland, present and future’.⁷¹³ Mugabe had foreshadowed the violence that would unfold in a 1981 newspaper interview, describing the militia as a ‘crack unit’. Regular Zimbabweans should not fear the Fifth Brigade, Mugabe said. But ‘if you plan to be a dissident, watch out’.⁷¹⁴ Joshua Nkomo, who had warned of violence against his political base from the onset, escaped execution by only ‘the narrowest of margins’ when he fled to Botswana in the dead of night.⁷¹⁵

The Fifth Brigade wreaked havoc in Matabeleland from 1982 until 1987, when Mugabe and Nkomo signed the Unity Accord. ZAPU and ZANU were subsequently merged into ZANU-PF, a political organisation dominated by ZANU that remains in power today. In the same year, Mugabe was declared president instead of prime minister. The constitution was amended, giving him more extensive powers than before. Zimbabwe became a ‘de facto one-party state’.⁷¹⁶ ZAPU has subsequently been largely erased from the historical record in Zimbabwe.⁷¹⁷ The archives of ZAPU’s armed wing, ZIPRA, were confiscated by the Zimbabwean government during the genocide and are not accessible to the public, if they even still exist.⁷¹⁸

Gukurahundi continues to loom over Zimbabwean politics, as the perpetrators remain in power today.⁷¹⁹ Mugabe remained in power for three decades. In 2006, one of his former ministers, Nathan Shamuyarira (the ZANU politician who visited Pyongyang) called the genocide ‘not regrettable’ as the Fifth brigade ‘were doing a job to protect the people’.⁷²⁰ In 2017, Mugabe was ousted from the presidency by Emmerson Mnangagwa following a military coup, but even the new regime had personal ties to the Fifth Brigade. Mnangagwa acted as minister of state security during *Gukurahundi* and can be seen as one of its architects.⁷²¹ Furthermore, of his ministers was Perrance Shiri, the former commander of the Fifth Brigade, who called himself ‘Black Jesus’ because ‘he could say if you live or not’.⁷²²

In 2010, the Zimbabwean government planned to invite the North Korean football team to establish a training camp for the World Cup in South Africa. In an event reminiscent of the

⁷⁰⁹ Werbner 1998b, p. 94.

⁷¹⁰ Tendi 2020, p. 203.

⁷¹¹ Werbner 1998b, p. 94.

⁷¹² Alexander 2021, p. 763.

⁷¹³ Doran 2017, p. 429.

⁷¹⁴ Doran 2017, p. 283.

⁷¹⁵ Doran 2017, p. 434.

⁷¹⁶ Cheeseman and Tendi 2010.

⁷¹⁷ Macmillan 2017.

⁷¹⁸ Mazarire 2010, p. 97.

⁷¹⁹ Alexander 2021, p. 763.

⁷²⁰ ‘Outrage spreads over Gukurahundi remarks’ available at https://www.zimbabwesituation.com/old/oct27_2006.html.

⁷²¹ Daily Maverick, 25 October 2017.

⁷²² Todd 2007, p. 374; A BBC transcript including Shiri’s quote is available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/panorama/transcripts/transcript_10_03_02.txt.

protest march of 1980, a large demonstration by Ndebele-speakers voiced their grievances against ZANU's ambition.⁷²³ In both cases, they were largely ignored by the authorities. Moreover, attempts by the Gukurahundi Memorial Centre to honour the victims were met with violence. Part of a wider rise in 'popular counter-memorialism in Southern Africa', an attempt to erect a tombstone commemorating the victims in 2021 proved futile – the memorial was destroyed the very next day.⁷²⁴

Spill-Over Effects in Southern Africa

The massacres of *Gukurahundi* are commonly understood as a domestic event, a Zimbabwean tragedy, and existing scholarship largely overlooks the transnational dimensions of the Fifth Brigade. There are indications, as Doran argues, that the Fifth Brigade partly consisted of Tanzanian and Mozambican soldiers. Nyerere had supported ZANU when it competed with ZAPU prior to Zimbabwean independence. Nyerere's involvement in the Fifth Brigade might have been motivated by his willingness 'to help Mugabe deal with unfinished business'. Machel's involvement could have been a 'quid pro quo' for Mugabe's support in FRELIMO's civil war against RENAMO. In that sense, writes Doran, 'Machel was beholden to Mugabe'.⁷²⁵

Moreover, the ZANU–North Korean training mission reverberated throughout Southern Africa during the 1980s. As North Korea propped up the young ruling parties in other countries in the region, the Fifth Brigade was regularly discussed during diplomatic negotiations between African states and the British government, which, as a former colonizing power, had a vested interest in the stability of the region. From the British perspective, the Fifth Brigade was a symbol of disaster, but many African liberation governments viewed this differently. For them, the Fifth Brigade symbolised the necessity of regime consolidation during the uncertain first years of independence.

As such, the Fifth Brigade was both a model for African states surrounding Zimbabwe, and a factor in the negotiations between these states and the United Kingdom. In the 1980s, North Korea excelled in providing presidential security for African regimes. The next sections examine military cooperation between North Korea and African ruling parties in the wake of *Gukurahundi*: FRELIMO (Mozambique); AREMA (Madagascar); SPUP (Seychelles); BNP (Lesotho); and SWAPO (Namibia).

In 1975, the year of Mozambican independence, Machel lauded the 'unsparing efforts' of North Korea to help FRELIMO win victory. 'Knowing our present needs', Machel continued, 'they are also willing and ready to support us in the consolidation of our power'.⁷²⁶ Mozambique subsequently followed a similar trajectory as Zimbabwe.

In 1982, North Korean military advisors travelled to Mozambique to support the FRELIMO government during a deteriorating security situation: shortly after Mozambican independence in 1975, a civil war broke out with RENAMO, which was partly funded by South Africa. The North Koreans helped to establish the Clean Brigade, an elite counterinsurgency force led by Fernando Honwana. Honwana was a special advisor to Machel and held high-ranking positions in the military and security branches of the Mozambican government. He had

⁷²³ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 140.

⁷²⁴ Werbner 1998b, p. 73; see also the reporting from Zenzele Ndebele and the Genocide Against the Ndebele Memorial Centre, <https://twitter.com/zenzele/status/1397470081362374656> and <https://twitter.com/Gukurahundizim>.

⁷²⁵ Doran 2017, p. 460-461; see also the following message from Hopewell Chin'ono <https://twitter.com/daddyhope/status/1397569773177823241>.

⁷²⁶ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: message from Machel, 8 January 1975.

developed ‘close ties’ with Zimbabwean leaders in the 1970s.⁷²⁷ Moreover, Honwana had received ‘special military training’ in Pyongyang, together with other FRELIMO officials.⁷²⁸ The South Korean government reported that, in 1976, North Korea offered to train Mozambican special forces, a mission with a value of \$100,000.⁷²⁹

In the early 1980s, between 100 and 130 North Koreans instructors resided at Chiduachine, in the Gaza province of Mozambique.⁷³⁰ They trained soldiers of the Clean Brigade. In 1982, the Clean Brigade and the Fifth Brigade executed a failed joint operation against RENAMO guerrillas along the Umtali–Beira railway. Interestingly, this operation was the first combat action for the Fifth Brigade, occurring before the larger-scale *Gukurahundi* genocide in Matabeleland.⁷³¹ Zimbabwean soldiers remained in Mozambique for a number of years in order to support the weakened FRELIMO government in their fight against RENAMO.⁷³² Critics have described the Zimbabwean forces as ‘a pack of wild dogs looking for a fight’.⁷³³

The North Korean advisors left Mozambique in 1983. The Clean Brigade remained active for several years and then slowly sunk into oblivion, except for 1987, when it was reported to have massacred 380 people during a battle in southeast Mozambique.⁷³⁴

In 1975, Didier Ratsiraka came to power in Madagascar, the island nation east of Mozambique. The ‘Red Admiral’ introduced a socialist system and established firm control. In 1976, he founded AREMA and reached out to North Korea for help. Ratsiraka feared the South African apartheid regime, especially the prospect of assassination. In 1976, North Korean advisors arrived in Madagascar to train Ratsiraka’s presidential guard and counterinsurgency forces.⁷³⁵ Just outside of Antananarivo, North Korean labourers built a fortified bunker for him. In subsequent years, AREMA and North Korea concluded several military assistance agreements. Pyongyang provided arms and training for the Malagasy defence forces.⁷³⁶ In the late 1970s, for example, Malagasy pilots practiced with four MiG-17 aircrafts and four naval patrol boats that were borrowed from North Korea, before the arrival of Soviet MiG-21 aircrafts.⁷³⁷ A decade later, the North Koreans built a munitions factory in Madagascar.⁷³⁸

The case of the Seychelles, north of Madagascar, fits within the broader pattern of African–North Korean relations.⁷³⁹ SPUP was the sole party from 1979 to 1991, when France-Albert René was president. In 1981, the regime of René survived a South African-backed military coup

⁷²⁷ Southern Africa Report 1986, available at https://www.mozambiquehistory.net/history/mbuzini/8_victims/19861200_isaacman_on_fernando_honwana.pdf.

⁷²⁸ [NAUK] FCO 21/2527.

⁷²⁹ [DARK] 9351.

⁷³⁰ [DARK] 20368.

⁷³¹ Bermudez 1990.

⁷³² Tendi 2020, p. 208-209.

⁷³³ [NAI] PC Mozambique Military/Conflicts: The Campaign Against Zimbabwean Aggression in Mozambique

⁷³⁴ Bermudez 1990.

⁷³⁵ [NAUK] FCO 21/3231.

⁷³⁶ Bermudez 1990.

⁷³⁷ [DARK] 11727. For more background on Soviet activities in Africa, see Shubin 2008.

⁷³⁸ [NAUK] FCO 21/3231; [NAUK] FCO 31/3922.

⁷³⁹ [NAUK] FCO 31/2433.

d'état by a mercenary force.⁷⁴⁰ This was a sharp reminder of the perilous security situation that was emanating from Pretoria. Similar to the case of Madagascar, René requested Kim Il Sung's help with the training of his presidential guard.

The first North Korean training mission arrived in 1982.⁷⁴¹ For several years, the Seychelles Peoples' Defence Forces were supported by 110 North Korean instructors, who stayed for one year before they were rotated with new instructors. They kept a low profile and remained 'largely isolated from the people' but conducted a satisfactory job in the eyes of René.⁷⁴² The instructors were integrated into the Seychelles army at junior officer ranks and were outfitted in Seychelles uniforms.⁷⁴³

Outsiders viewed the close SPUP–North Korea relationship with curiosity. When a journalist asked a SPUP official why the Seychelles had opted for North Korean instead of Western assistance, the party member replied that the West 'would sit on their hands if mercenaries attacked us again. We know the North Koreans would fight to defend us'.⁷⁴⁴ The trust that SPUP placed in North Korea is illustrative of a broader sentiment shared among African governing elites at the time, who saw North Korea as an ally.

Lesotho is a case study that reveals how the British government used the Fifth Brigade in diplomatic negotiations with African governments to illustrate North Korean failure, without success. Leabua Jonathan rose to power with the BNP in 1966, but when it appeared that he had lost the elections in 1970, Jonathan declared a state of emergency and nullified the vote. In addition to domestic turmoil, the prime minister was sensitive to Lesotho's precarious security situation: the nation is encircled by South Africa.

Jonathan visited Pyongyang in 1983 and signed extensive agreements with North Korea.⁷⁴⁵ In that same year, North Korea opened an embassy in Maseru.⁷⁴⁶ The British embassy discovered the developing military relationship between the BNP and North Korea by accident: one of their receptionists was married to a Basotho army sergeant who travelled to Pyongyang. This was crucial information for the British government, as Lesotho hosted a British military training mission. London feared a repetition of the Zimbabwean saga.⁷⁴⁷

British diplomats warned the Basotho authorities about the 'problems and dangers' of North Korean aid by referencing the Fifth Brigade. As was the case in Zimbabwe, it was argued that the presence of two different military training missions (one North Korean, one Western) would cause confusion for the Lesotho Paramilitary Forces. Instead, the British government offered to augment their existing mission. Jonathan followed the same reasoning as Mugabe and declined the offer.⁷⁴⁸

In 1983, a few months after the establishment of a North Korean embassy in Maseru, several North Korean military instructors arrived to train the LPF.⁷⁴⁹ Senior army staff were

⁷⁴⁰ Ellis 1996, p. 172-174.

⁷⁴¹ Bermudez 1990.

⁷⁴² [NAUK] FCO 21/3217; [NAUK] FCO 21/3231; [NAUK] FCO 31/3922.

⁷⁴³ [DARK] 18677.

⁷⁴⁴ [SADIRCO] 1.191.1.

⁷⁴⁵ Jonathan had declared a state of emergency following signs that his party, the Basotho National Party, was losing control over Lesotho. At the same time, South Africa pressured Jonathan because Lesotho harboured ANC-operatives. A scenario similar to the military coup in the Seychelles was a threatening prospect for Jonathan.

⁷⁴⁶ [DARK] 20368.

⁷⁴⁷ [NAUK] FCO 105/1198.

⁷⁴⁸ [NAUK] FCO 105/1198.

⁷⁴⁹ [DARK] 20368.

sent to North Korea for military training, sometimes for as long as 2.5 years.⁷⁵⁰ Jonathan's decision to break off diplomatic ties with South Korea was the icing on the cake.⁷⁵¹

This case study illustrates the pragmatic considerations that informed the decisions of African leaders. Before 1970, Jonathan 'identified communism as the major threat to Southern Africa'.⁷⁵² However, when the BNP was on the brink of losing power, with South Africa looming in the background as a threat, he was persuaded to accept North Korean aid.⁷⁵³ While British diplomats called Jonathan 'disingenuous', the prime minister defended his policy by emphasizing Lesotho's non-aligned status.⁷⁵⁴

The Zimbabwean Fifth Brigade also cast its shadows on the formation of the presidential guard of Sam Nujoma, the first president of Namibia. The SWAPO leader was elected as president in 1990 and was guarded by soldiers from SWAPO's liberation army. After decades of guerrilla fighting, these PLAN fighters struggled to adjust to their new role. Incidents occurred when guards fired at unarmed members of the public, and the newly established Namibian government decided to approach North Korea for training. Perhaps Nujoma remembered the banquet he had attended in Pyongyang, a few years earlier, when Kim Il Sung promised him future support.

Similar to Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and other parts of Africa, the British government already trained certain parts of the Namibian national army.⁷⁵⁵ They were deeply concerned by Nujoma's move. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office described it internally as a 'serious mistake ... naïve and staggeringly inept'. In a meeting with Prime Minister Hage Geingob, British diplomats emphasised the 'very unfortunate experience of North Korean training in Zimbabwe'. But this was an ineffective deterrent. The British objective to 'keep the North Koreans out', as they put it, ultimately failed as the Namibian government formally requested North Korean military aid in January 1991.⁷⁵⁶

Analysis

When Mugabe was pressed about why he choose North Korea to take care of his security, he hinted at the historical friendship between Zimbabwe and North Korea: 'It is those who come to you when you are in greatest need who are your friends indeed'.⁷⁵⁷

Nevertheless, North Korea's anti-imperialist struggle credentials do not adequately explain why African states desired North Korean security assistance in the 1980s. There was also a practical reason. Newly elected liberation governments in Africa faced internal opposition as well as external security threats. The civil wars in Angola and Mozambique were a nightmare scenario for anyone who had recently acquired power, such as ZANU in Zimbabwe. There was a real fear among African elites that independence was under threat. Such sentiments were deliberately fuelled by South Africa.

The South African apartheid regime experienced a 'sense of siege' as the countries surrounding its border became independent. The fall of the Portuguese Empire and the subsequent liberation of Angola and Mozambique in 1975 was a shock to the system, as was the liberation of Zimbabwe in 1980. South Africa saw itself as 'the only domino left standing'

⁷⁵⁰ [NAUK] FCO 21/2866.

⁷⁵¹ [NAUK] FCO 105/1198.

⁷⁵² Leistner 1983.

⁷⁵³ [DARK] 18677.

⁷⁵⁴ [NAUK] FCO 105/1198: Varcoe to Clemens, 6 July 1983.

⁷⁵⁵ [NAI] PC Namibia NLM SWAPO: Legum, 13 December 1989.

⁷⁵⁶ [NAUK] FCO 21/4953.

⁷⁵⁷ Doran 2017, p. 461.

in the fight against Black majority rule and communism. As such, the apartheid government channelled its energies into creating ‘division and instability’ across the region.⁷⁵⁸

A wave of assassinations engulfed the continent: Patrice Lumumba; Eduardo Mondlane; Herbert Chitepo; Steve Biko; Clemens Kapuuo; Ruth First; Samora Machel; Anton Lubowski; Chris Hani – it was dangerous to be a high-ranking African nationalist or president. In a region rife with conflict, security assistance from the North Koreans – and, in particular, presidential security – was a welcome gift. Regime consolidation was the key concept.

As Mugabe explained to the public, the North Koreans ‘assist us to consolidate our independence and strengthen our defence forces’.⁷⁵⁹ For several neighbouring African states, the Fifth Brigade was not understood through the lens of genocide. Rather, it was understood through the lens of unity and control.

It should be noted that not all African governments accepted North Korean aid. Between 1983–84, the North Korean ambassador in Gaborone repeatedly offered to send 100 military instructors to support the army of Botswana, but despite the existing cordial bilateral ties between both nations the offer was declined by the Botswana.⁷⁶⁰ However, Botswana is an outlier in the region.

Even though North Korea was able to penetrate the heart of African political and military nerve centres that governed much of Southern Africa, the impact of Pyongyang on African affairs was limited. In this case, too, African agency mattered. Mugabe and his presidential colleagues were not beholden to Kim Il Sung, and North Korea did not influence African domestic policies. The following three points should be kept in mind when discussing North Korean–African military cooperation.

Firstly, African leaders accepted North Korean aid with a healthy degree of suspicion. While publicly Mugabe expressed gratitude towards North Korea, in fact he remained distrustful of the actual instructors and ‘tracked every move of the Koreans in the country’ using wiretaps and intelligence officers.⁷⁶¹ Despite the fraternal relations between Kaunda and Kim Il Sung, the Zambian government sometimes refused North Korean appeals for visas if they thought that it was not ‘the proper time’ to grant such a request.⁷⁶²

Another interesting example comes from Tanzania. When the North Korean embassy in Dar es Salaam held a reception to celebrate ‘The Victory of the Korean People of the Imperialists’ (imperialists meaning Americans), Nyerere forbade Tanzanian government officials from attending the festivities. Nyerere clearly did not condone the strong language of the North Koreans. When the North Korean chargé d’affaires gave a press conference later that day in which he condemned ‘American aggression’, he was summoned to the Tanzanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on Nyerere’s instruction, and warned that further ‘violation of Tanzanian hospitality’ would result in him ‘being declared persona non grata’.⁷⁶³ A few days later, the Tanzanian newspaper *The Standard* wanted to criticise the North Korean embassy by recalling this incident. Before printing, the editor informally asked Nyerere’s office if he would object to such an attack. His office responded that ‘the President wanted him to publish the

⁷⁵⁸ Doran 2017, p. 302-3.

⁷⁵⁹ Doran 2017, p. 285.

⁷⁶⁰ In the early days of an independent Botswana, North Korea had stationed several unarmed combat instructors in Botswana to train local police forces, but the cooperation between both groups was unsuccessful and the Koreans returned to Pyongyang fairly soon. [BNARS] OP-1375; NAUK FCO 45/1283. See for more details about Botswana’s balancing of Eastern and Western allies: Kirby 2020; Franklin 1996; [DARK] 9351.

⁷⁶¹ Daily Maverick, 25 October 2017.

⁷⁶² [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2399, POL 27-7 Korea, N-US -- POL 2 Korea, South: Dar es Salaam to Department of State, 26 January 1965.

⁷⁶³ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2396, POL 17-5 Kenya-US -- POL 12-6 Korea, North: Dar es Salaam to Department of State, 28 June 1966.

editorial'.⁷⁶⁴ This goes to show that even Kim's strongest allies, such as Mugabe, Kaunda, and Nyerere were guarded about North Korea's activities.

Secondly, North Korea's omnipresence in the region was partly the result of clever branding. North Korea allegedly assigned higher ranks to outsourced military advisors than they actually possessed back home. This way, Pyongyang could charge higher salaries to the host countries (resulting in more income), and simultaneously give the impression to their African hosts that they were 'getting first-class personnel'.⁷⁶⁵ This was reported in several instances, including the case of the North Korean instructors of the Fifth Brigade.⁷⁶⁶ The North Koreans were said to be 'extracting their pound of flesh from the Zimbabweans'. The ranks of the North Korean officers were 'artificially inflated' and they were seen 'spending lavishly in the most expensive hotels, demanding huge quantities of diesel and insisting on brand new staff cars'.⁷⁶⁷ North Korea's military programme in Africa thus followed a similar pattern as its development programme, which was discussed in Chapter 5. North Korea was able to project an image of success at relatively little cost. The public praise from African leaders for North Korea's help was very valuable to Kim Il Sung.

Thirdly, the continuation of bilateral relationships depended on the survival of African regimes. This point is best illustrated through UNIP, the political party that governed Zambia from its independence in 1964 until 1991. UNIP ensured that Zambia followed the same pattern of military cooperation as its neighbours. In the early 1980s, the Zambian government sent a delegation of 'very senior military men' to Pyongyang to discuss cooperation.⁷⁶⁸ North Korea, in turn, offered to train members of the Zambian army.⁷⁶⁹

As Chapter 3 revealed, Kenneth Kaunda, the Zambian president, maintained a personal relationship with Kim Il Sung. A high-ranking official of the Freedom House, UNIP's headquarters in Lusaka, entrusted to a British diplomat the secret of this relationship. While in other socialist countries 'the people serve the party', Kaunda believed that in North Korea 'the party serves the people'. The British government had 'no doubt' that 'Kaunda will be picking Mugabe's brains on his experience with them', which is another sign that the Fifth Brigade loomed in the background as an example.⁷⁷⁰ This did not have the effect that the British intended. In 1982, North Korean instructors were reportedly based in Kabwe, in the Central Province of Zambia. While British sources spoke of ten advisors, South Korean sources assumed that there were 45 North Koreans present.⁷⁷¹ Their aim was to train Zambian soldiers, most likely paramilitary forces.⁷⁷² The former Zambian vice president Guy Scott remembered how they came to Zambia 'to show us to perform the goose step and other tricks'.⁷⁷³

However, when the Zambian people voted UNIP out of power in 1991, North Korea lost a valuable ally in which it had invested heavily. As a result, there is no evidence of post-1991 military ties between Zambia and North Korea. This book's emphasis on parties instead of countries is deliberate, as this seems to be a major factor for the success of North Korean aid. Currently, the majority of Southern Africa continues to be ruled by former liberation governments but it is likely that if these parties lose power in the future, North Korea could lose allies.

⁷⁶⁴ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2398, POL 27-14 Korea, N-UN -- POL 33-4 Korea, N-UN: Dar es Salaam to Department of State, 2 July 1966.

⁷⁶⁵ [NAUK] FCO 21/3231.

⁷⁶⁶ [NAUK] FCO 105/1198.

⁷⁶⁷ [NAUK] FCO 106/464: Henshaw to MacKellar, 11 September 1981.

⁷⁶⁸ [NAUK] FCO 106/850.

⁷⁶⁹ Owoeye 1991, p. 642.

⁷⁷⁰ [NAUK] FCO 106/850.

⁷⁷¹ [DARK] 20368.

⁷⁷² [NAUK] FCO 106/850.

⁷⁷³ Scott 2019, p. 211.

Conclusion

The historian Basil Davidson wrote in *The Black Man's Burden* that the 'transfer of power' that African independence entailed was effectively 'a transfer of crisis'. With the attainment of state power came an incredible combination of political challenges that plunged newly elected African politicians into uncharted territory.⁷⁷⁴ Although Davidson mainly focused on the inherited failures of colonialism, the sense of crisis can also be applied to the security system in which young African governments operated.

Southern Africa's deteriorating security situation was a major factor in the decision of African governments to accept North Korean help. During the 1980s, African governments were not deterred by Western warnings of the North Korean danger. Neither offers of aid nor direct threats could dissuade them from accepting Kim Il Sung's military consultants. In this sense, there is an interesting parallel between yesterday's North Korean military advisors and the contemporary Russian mercenaries of the Wagner Group. While the Western world fears it will lose influence in Africa, Wagner met a particular demand for African regime consolidation. Graham Harrison shows that the 'Liberalism 101' mantra of free elections and open economies fails to understand the 'lived-in crisis' that characterises many African governments. Both in the cases of Wagner and North Korea, 'Western circles share a deep and significant misreading of African politics'.⁷⁷⁵

With the end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the North Korean economy, North Korea could no longer sustain its military programmes in Africa. In that sense, the military programmes faced the same fate as the Juche Study Centres (Chapter 4) and development aid projects (Chapter 5) that were hosted by African states. North Korea's decision to invest heavily in these areas was part of a foreign policy agenda that aimed to promote Kim Il Sung's standing in the world. The events of the 1990s severely disrupted these operations.

The turmoil of the 1990s could also be the reason why there is little evidence of extensive military relations between North Korea and South Africa. When the latter became independent, in 1994, it was arguably too late for the kind of regime consolidation programmes that had been executed in the 1980s. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to equate the diminishing of these military programmes with the end of the African–North Korean military alliance. As the next chapter shows, the end of the Cold War did not mean the end of North Korea's military adventures in Africa.

⁷⁷⁴ Davidson 1992, p. 190.

⁷⁷⁵ Harrison 2023.