The Soviet Union and southern Africa:
Friend of the liberation forces?

by JENNY QUINN

Ten years ago, thousands of Americans were marching on the Pentagon and militantly demanding that the U.S. get out of Vietnam. In the ranks of the anti-war movement, anyone who suggested that we call instead for both "superpowers" to get out of Vietnam, the USSR along with the U.S., was immediately recognized as a dupe of the State Department. After all, there is just what Johnson, McNamara, and Rusk were proposing in order to hinder their aggression in South- east Asia.

Today, the struggles in southern Africa demand our attention and call for our solidarity. But the forces who say they support the liberation of southern Africa, we hear solidarity defined in terms of fighting both superpowers, or even that the Soviet Union, and not the U.S., is the main threat.

But this time it comes from a different quarter—not simply from the State Department, but from so-called Marxist-Leninists. Whatever this logic is dressed up in a revolutionary garb, it is sowing confusion in the ranks of the solidarity movement and misleading some honest anti-imperialists.

Therefore it is necessary to analyze what the real role of the Soviet Union is in South Africa. Is the Soviet Union now somehow a deeper imperialist power than the U.S.? Is it a socialist model of internationalism as other argue. Or is it something that lies somewhere between these polarities?

CONTRADICTORY NATURE OF USSR

The Soviet Union is a socialist country and for this reason it has a very definite, built-in antagonism with imperialism. Its socialist character propels it toward support of all the other forces in the world that share a basic antagonism with imperi-

But socialism in the Soviet Union is dis-
eased. A revisionist party stands at the helm of state, a party with a class outlook akin to that of the capitalists. Consistent with that outlook, and in order to protect their privileged position, the revisionists pursue a policy of accommodation with imperialism, and their relations with other peoples are marred by Great Power Chauvinism—that is, the pursuit by a large and powerful nation of its own interests, rather than mutual benefit, in its relations with a smaller nation.

From the standpoint of the world’s peoples, the Soviet Union is an ally, but it is stretching the point to call it a friend. If the USSR is a friend it is the sort of friend who cannot be fully trusted to give his all in a battle and who might turn and run...the sort of friend that may offer friendship selflessly, confident that you will return the same.

No, this friend is quick to remind you of your debts to him, quick to attach strings for favors rendered. And when you must fight your enemy, this friend urges appeasement and unnecessary compromise. This friend is even ready to talk to your enemy behind your back in order to "help".

This is not the stuff of which real friendship is made. Nor is it the content of proletarian internationalism.

In looking at Africa we can see all these contradictory aspects of Soviet policy.

MATERIAL AID

In Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa itself the Soviet Union has provided valuable military and economic aid as well as diplomatic support to the liberation movements. This aid has been indispensable and without it’s doubtful that the liberation movements would have been able to succeed to the extent they have.

This is most clear in the case of Angola. In 1975 with the collapse of Portuguese colonialism, Angola stood on the brink of liberation. In a desperate attempt to turn back the tide, the U.S. and South Africa intervened. The U.S. bankrolled Holden Roberto and the phoney CIA supported FNLA (Front for the National Liberation of Angola). South African troops rushed to join the forces of UNITA, another phoney national liberation movement.

The aim of U.S.-South African policy was to thwart the MPLA, the liberation movement which had fought the war against the Portuguese and was clearly committed to an anti-imperialist course for an independent Angola. The MPLA called upon the Soviet Union for an escalation of military assistance, only after these initiatives by the U.S. imperialists and the South African racists.

The Soviet Union had been aiding the MPLA for years and under the circumstances increased their aid to the tune of $100 million in order to repel the imperialist threat. Independently of the Soviets, the Cubans came to the aid of Angola with volunteers. The result was that the FLNA and UNITA were routed and, for the moment at least, the U.S. had to accept defeat.

Clearly, without Soviet and Cuban aid, the MPLA would have been defeated or at very least a long civil war would have been the result. This is the objective ef-
fact of the slogan “Soviet Social Imperialism out of Africa”. In practice it stands for an Angola under the neo-colonial domination of U.S. imperialism.

BUT STRINGS ARE ATTACHED

At the same time, the strain of Great Power Chauvinism is evident in Soviet behavior in Africa. The small country of Guinea in West Africa is a case in point. In 1958, Guinea gained its independence from France and announced its determination to pursue a non-aligned course. The imperialists: countries boycotted trade with Guinea and tried to force it into submission. The 1970 agreement between the USSR and Guinea gives some indica-
tion why.

The Soviets loaned Guinea $92 million for the construction of a bauxite mine. Ninety percent of the mine’s output was to be exported to the USSR, 56% to pay off the loan and 36% as barter for Soviet produced goods. These goods were often of inferior quality and in some cases bore no relation to the needs of the Guinean economy. Up to now told stories of warehouse full of Bulgarian swamp seed, past, perhaps a great staple in the Eastern bloc, but negligible to most Guineans.

Only 10% of the mine’s output was left to be exchanged for freely convertible currency. The Soviets secured the bauxite at $10 a ton below the world market price. All in all, an agreement that is hardly consistent with a policy of proletarian internationalism.

At the same time it should be remem-
bered that such inequitable trade agree-
ments are not equivalent to the export of capital characteristic of imperialism, however reprehensible they may be.

After all, the Guineans own the mine and once the Soviet debt has been retired will be free to market the bauxite according to their own lights.

It is cases of this sort that lend most cre-
dence to the warning that nations and movements that value their independence should steer clear of the Soviets.

LIBERATION MOVEMENTS GUARD OWN INTERESTS

But in some ways, the most important factor to take into account is the lib-
eration movements themselves. The lib-
eration movements who have been fighting colonialism for years are not about to trade their hard-won independence to anyone. The newly independent countries of Southern Africa are jealous of the peripatetics of sovereignty, and give that they waged a protracted armed struggle and won over the masses in the process, they are in a strong position to resist encroachments from any source.

It is the liberation movements themselves which are in the best position to decide who is the greatest threat to their inde-
pendence. And these movements have made it clear, that it is U.S. imperialism that constitutes the real and immediate danger.

Angola, the country which has received the most aid and is at the same time been most dependent on that aid, is a case in point. The People’s Republic of Angola has made clear from the outset its intention to follow a policy of non-alignment. That this is more than words is reflected in the actual relations between the newly independent country and the USSR.

In 1976, Angola signed an agreement with the Soviets covering mutual cultural, scientific, military and trade relations. While all the features of the agreement are not known, some key features stand out. Soviet-Angolan trade is to be con-
ducted in freely convertible currency, which means that Angola is not locked in-
to a junior partner relationship within the USSR’s "international division of labor" that prevails among Soviet bloc countries.

Angola joins other socialist countries which like Vietnam, while friendly to the USSR, have chosen to remain outside COMECON and retain their trade op-
tions. Also, contrary to the predictions of our "Marxist-Leninists" the Soviet Union did not acquire any military bases in Angola.

ALVES AFFAIR

The Alves affair is another indication of the MPLA’s determination to guard its independence. Early last year, António Alves, a member of the MPLA central commit-
tee, held private meetings with Soviet dip-
lomats in Lusaka, Zambia. Alves made statements that Angolan President Neto was “anti-Soviet”. Following this, a Soviet diplomat was expelled from Angola and Alves and his cohorts were expelled from the MPLA central commit-

Prime Minister Lopo de Nacimento jour- neyed to Moscow for discussions with the Soviet leaders. Two months later, the MPLA led an abortive coup attempt against the MPLA.

There is no evidence that the Soviets were involved in this or supported the coup. It is suspected to have been linked to members of the PIDE (the Portuguese Sec- ret Police) and has destroyed a coor- dinated international plan for "destabili- zation" of the anti-imperialist front line states. The same day, a commando unit, South Africa mounted a ground and air attack on Mozambique.

The incident reveals both the Soviet pen- chant for meddling and the Angolans del- iberate and suicidal decision to support Nito himself put it: "We have a series of capitalist countries who are against us and don't want us to follow this path (of non-alignment). We also have friendly countries, who while they are friends, are countries who don't understand our op- tions very well."

US SSR NOT ALONE

Unfortunately the Soviet Union is not the only country not to have supported the liberation struggle. In Zimbabwe (Rho- desia) ZANU and ZAPU, the two major liberation forces, split and formed rival parties under the leadership of Mugabe. ZAPU's primary ties have been with the USSSR.

Recently, on the eve of a meeting of the OAU (the Organization of African Uni- ty), the Chinese news service released a statement attributed to Robert Mugabe who had just returned from the People's Republic of China. Mugabe affirmed the support of the Soviet Union of social imperialism and said it was more dangerous than western imperialism. He said that "should it ever come true it would have destroyed the unity of the Patriotic Front." Mugabe countered the statement, saying: "Such fabrications are aimed at under- mining the Patriotic Front. It is absurd to come out against the Soviet Union which makes tangible contributions to the cause of liberation of Southern Africa from the yoke of racism." From the standpoint of the interests of the African liberation struggle, the Chinese aid is not the same thing as imperialistic aid. Historically, China's role in relation to the liberation movements has been char- acterized by a much greater attention to the ideological side of developing People's war than the aid of the Soviet revisionists which has tended to place technical considerations above politics. Also China's economic and trade agreements have been much more beneficial recently. In recent years, China has increasingly sought to attach the political string of anti-Soviet- ists of its support.

A MARXIST-LENINIST VIEW

As these examples indicate, the situation in Africa is complicated. There is little room for easy realizations of the Soviet Union ala the CPUSA. Nor can we stand reality on its head, as the CPML and others do in order to conform with the People's Republic of China's view of the world. As the Soviet Union and the U.S. on the backdoor, more dangerous than both the Chinese and the U.S. tiger that is battering down the front door.

As proletarian internationalists, it is our responsibility to build solidarity with the liberation movements which necessarily includes their right to take aid from the Soviet Union. While we have no interests to aid revisionism by glossing over their negative aspects of the Soviet role in Africa, we have to consider the balance of interest in promoting the line of the State Department that Soviet aggression is the main problem. The American people and the U.S. working class will both be best served if we strive to tell the truth.

by BELINDA

In his short lifetime, Steven Biko, a lead- er of the Black Consciousness Movement, had established a rich history of resist- ance to the racist regime of the South Afri- can government. He had been imprisoned sev- eral times for his political activities although he never stood trial. Since 1973 a five year ban had forbidden him from marrying anyone publicly, from publishing and from being quoted (even after death).

During the Soweto uprisings, he was de- tained for 101 days without hearing or trial, spending most of that time in solitary con- finement. His last jail outing came on August 18, when he was arrested but not charged. At that time, he was put in solit- ary confinement at Port Elizabeth. On September 12, Steven Biko died in that South African prison.

Biko was the 21st political prisoner to die in police custody during the last year and a half. When the news of the death hit the papers across South Africa the reaction was strong and immediate, provoking that biggest wave of protest against the government of South Africa since police in Soweto attacked demonstrating school children last year.

Just hours after his death was announced, anti-apartheid forces gathered in mem- orial services for Biko. It was the first of several demonstrations to the memory of a man who was described by one newspa- per as being "perhaps the most important Black leader in South Africa."

When 1200 students tried to hold a service at a Black university outside Jo- hannesburg, they were quickly surround- ed by police, herded into a grandstand, and taken away in police vans. Officials said the students were being detained un- der the RosARIO Assemblies Act, which re- quires official permission for public gath- erings of more than three people.

Opposition groups in the white com- munity joined Black leaders in demand- ing a judicial inquiry, the removal of Pol- ice Minister James Kruger, and the with- drawal of the South African Defence Force (SADF) from Goose Bank. The SADF's role in the shooting of students has been much greater attention to the ideological side of developing People's war than the aid of the Soviet revisionists which has tended to place technical considerations above politics. Also China's economic and trade agreements have been much more beneficial recently. In recent years, China has increasingly sought to attach the political string of anti-Soviet- ists of its support.

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Steven Biko, Revolutionary Brother Murdered in South Africa

Feeling ran so high in South Africa that 20,000 people attended the five hour long funeral despite the government's prohibition of bus permits which would have allowed buses to travel outside their normal areas.

THE GREAT BLACK HOPE?

Why all this sound and fury about a single man? A man described in the press as a Black moderate. A man, according to the Pittsburgh Bulletin, who "simply wanted Black to stop being subservient to white." A man described by one white South African editor as "one of the main hopes for a peaceful solution to the racial crisis in this country."

Steven Biko was a thirty-year-old Black man whose influence on the course of events in South Africa has been and will continue to be for some time profound and lasting. He was instrumental in the founding of the South African Students Organization (SASO) in 1968, and he was also the Machiavellianist of what has come to be known as the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). SASO was formed from a caucus of students within the Uni- versity Christian Movement in an impor- tant step towards consolidating an alli- ance among non-whites in South Africa.

As the first president of SASO, Biko spent a considerable amount of time working to ensure that political unity be established among Indian, Colored (mixed-race), and African. As the first president of SASO, Biko spent a considerable amount of time working to ensure that political unity be established among Indian, Colored (mixed-race), and African. It was a difficult task in the face of the white power structure which works against uni- formity of any kind.

In 1970, Biko remarked that "the Black (non-white) people of the world, in choosing to reject the legacy of colonial- ization, have established a solid basis for meaningful cooperation among themselves in the larger battle for the liberation of all world against the rich nations."

This kind of statement indicates that Ste- ven Biko understood the need for unity among world peoples, and, more importantly, realized that the goal was not to replace Black faces for white with- in the power structure, but to overcome and rid the world of its dominance by the rich and powerful colonizers and imperialists.

This same theme runs through the policy manifestos adopted by SASO at its 1971 general conference. At that meeting SASO adopted a resolution which re- jected foreign investment in South Africa, saying that investors "profit from exploita- tion and end up with a vested interest in its maintenance." The resolution con- demned "Black puppets who go overseas under the cloak of leadership and per- suade foreign investors to stay in South Africa with the belief that (that invest- ment) is for the betterment of Blacks." At that same meeting, SASO declared its solidarity with the people of Nam-ibia in "their determination to rid them- selves of this unwarranted (South Afri- cian) occupation."

From the beginning, SASO and its com- munity counterpart, the Black People's Convention, emphasized its ties with both urban workers and rural peaa- tists. It organized literary projects, self- help programs such as medical clinics and cooperatives and devoted much time and energy to promoting and supporting trade union militancy.

None of this should be taken as being a moderate's view of the means toward lib- eration. Biko fully understood the impli- cations. He observed: "The importance of the SASO is not to find in SASO per se . . . rather it is to be found in the fact that this new approach . . . heralded a new era in which blacks (third world peoples) are beginning to see with greater clarity the immensity of their responsibility . . . "

This new "greater clarity," is what the Black Consciousness Movement is all about. And Steven Biko played a promin- ent role in its formation, Steven Biko is dead, but the Black Consciousness Move- ment is very much alive.

As stated by the president of the Black People's Convention, Kenneth Radhii, when delivering the funeral oration for Steven Biko: "Forward we march until we win. The best road to follow is the road that Steven Biko followed."

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