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Rigidly ideological approach wrecks Soviet strategy in Africa

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In the third in a series of articles based on exclusive interviews with The Times, Ilya Dzhirkvelov, a former KGB officer and Tass correspondent who defected to Britain last month, outlines what he sees as the failure of Soviet strategy in Africa.

Soviet strategy in Africa has failed, largely due to Moscow's inability to comprehend African conditions and the African cast of mind, says Mr Dzhirkvelov, who was Tass correspondent in Zanzibar from 1967 to 1970, and then for two years in Sudan.

In the 1960s and 1970s Soviet strategy, according to Mr Dzhirkvelov, was to take advantage of anti-colonial sentiment in Africa and gain political influence over African countries by tying them to the Soviet Union economically.

Zanzibar was regarded as the "gateway to Africa" because of the openly pro-communist regime which took power there after the Zanzibar revolution of 1964. Under its President, Abaid Karume, Zanzibar was hostile to the West, while receiving vast amounts of aid from the Soviet Union, East Germany and China.

It was partly to moderate this Marxist radicalism on his doorstep that President Nyerere in neighbouring Tanganyika proposed the united state of Tanzania. But Zanzibar continued to pursue pro-communist policies semi-independently.

President Karume told Mr Dzhirkvelov when he arrived that Zanzibar was to be an "island of freedom", on an apology with Cuba in the Caribbean. The number of Soviet

advisers in Zanzibar rose during Mr Dzhirkvelov's time from under 300 when he first arrived to well over 400 by the time he left.

Mr Dzhirkvelov soon became aware, he told The Times, that Soviet control over Zanzibar was not increasing in proportion to the economic contribution.

This was partly because the Zanzibar leaders capitalized on the Sino-Soviet split by playing the Chinese off against the Russians. Of the two models of communism on offer, says Mr Dzhirkvelov, President Karume preferred the Chinese, on the ground that Chinese technicians and workers were happy to live in hostels and receive low pay.

The Russians began to "lose their position" Soviet difficulties, Mr Dzhirkvelov discloses, were compounded by errors in

economic planning. As an example he cites what he now thinks of as The Great Tuna Fish Disaster.

The Russians advised President Karume to diversify the Zanzibar economy, which depends on the export of cloves. Since Zanzibar is an island, the Soviet advisers proposed the construction of a tuna processing plant. It became known, however, that the fishing vessels supplied by the Russians were slower than the tuna fish, and the necessary equipment would have to be bought from Japan, since Russia did not produce it.

The cost of building the new port complex was in any case prohibitive. Existing port facilities were being used for loading spices. "The only result", says Mr Dzhirkvelov, "would have been that the fish would have ended up smelling of cloves and the cloves smelling of fish".

He has other examples of what he calls "economic adventurism" by the Russians in East Africa.

In 1969 he learnt from the Soviet ambassador in Mogadishu that the Russians were building a huge dairy complex in Somalia because there were cows feeding near the proposed site. The dairy was completed, at considerable cost, but by then there were no cows left to be milked, since Somali farmers are nomadic and the herds had moved elsewhere.

But the principal Soviet mistake in Africa, says Mr Dzhirkvelov, is serious. The Russians, he argues, have very little understanding of African agrarian and tribal societies, and assume that socialism on the Soviet model is suitable and inevitable.

In Tanzania the Russians were encouraged by President Nyerere's espousal of a socialist philosophy, but failed to grasp that he was an "educated man in the Western mould", and his socialism was unique to Tanzania.

Mr Dzhirkvelov denies that miscalculations of this kind arise from a condescending or even racist attitude on the part of Soviet officials in Africa, although such attitudes undoubtedly exist, he says, within the Soviet Union. But in Africa, he believes, Soviet blunders are attributable rather to the rigidly ideological Soviet approach.

The Kremlin, he says, often backs the wrong horse in

African politics. In 1970, for example, a number of Tanzanians were put on trial in Dar es Salaam, charged with having conspired to overthrow the Government.

The accused included (in absentia) Oscar Kambona, the former Foreign Minister. There was speculation, unconfirmed at the time, that the Soviet Union had supported some of the alleged conspirators. Mr Dzhirkvelov has told The Times that there was indeed a "Moscow connexion" and that Soviet officials in Dar es Salaam were "extremely worried" that this might emerge at the trial. Some of the accused, says Mr Dzhirkvelov, though not Mr Kambona—had "close ties" with the Russians.

Mr Dzhirkvelov attended almost all of the trial with instructions to report to the Soviet Embassy any mention of Russia. Fearing exposure, a number of KGB agents in the embassy left Tanzania before the trial ended, indirect proof of Soviet involvement, to which the Tanzanian authorities turned a blind eye.

As for the Sudan, Mr Dzhirkvelov recalls an even greater miscalculation, when the Russians supported, and perhaps even inspired, a communist coup against President Nimeri in July 1971. Mr Dzhirkvelov, who was in Khartoum throughout this period, foresaw that if there were such a coup it would undoubtedly be crushed, and the Sudanese Communist Party would be destroyed.

He made this plain, he claims, both in dispatches for Tass, which were passed on to the KGB, and in person to Mr V.V. Kuznetsov, a member of the Soviet leadership who visited Sudan in March. But the Soviet authorities, including the embassy in Khartoum, believed that a communist coup would succeed.

It took place in July, under Major Hashim al-Ata, and was put down within three days. President Nimeri was returned to power on a wave of popularity.

Relations between Khartoum and Moscow, which until 1971 had been warm, sunk to a low ebb, from which they have never recovered. The Soviet ambassador was asked to leave, with many of his staff. Mr Dzhirkvelov stayed on as Tass correspondent for another year, with the difficult task of presenting what had happened for

Soviet readers as a "victory for progressive forces".

Looking at Africa as a whole, Mr Dzhirkvelov sees a catalogue of setbacks for the Soviet Union, in contrast to the high hopes of the 1960s. The peaceful settlement of the Rhodesian issue was, he says, a disaster for Moscow, which had completely failed to foresee the election of Mr Robert Mugabe as Prime Minister, and had once again backed the wrong horse in Mr Joshua Nkomo.

Somalia and Zanzibar, Mr Dzhirkvelov points out, have both expelled their Soviet advisers. Egypt, which expelled all Soviet personnel in 1972, was regarded by Moscow as a safe Soviet domain to the last moment. Six months before President Sadat's expulsion order, a member of the Politburo, Mr Boris Ponomarev, visited Cairo, and was impressed by what he construed as the Egyptians' appetite for Marxism-Leninism, despite warnings from Soviet officials in Cairo that the Sadat Government was going in an unmistakably pro-Western direction.

The Soviet Union, says Mr Dzhirkvelov, has spent millions of roubles in Africa, with very little result. Mr Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, President Kenneth Kuanda in Zambia and Dr Milton Obote in Uganda were all at various times the object of misplaced Soviet hopes.

Ghana was once the main KGB base in Africa, but no more, while Zambia "does not want and never did want" Soviet help. As for Uganda, Moscow even made what Mr Dzhirkvelov considers the "appalling error" of backing Dr Obote's successor, Idi Amin, supplying him with the arms and equipment to maintain a reign of terror.

The Soviet military intervention in Angola and Ethiopia and the use of Cuban troops Mr Dzhirkvelov sees as a gambler's throw to turn the tide.

In Africa, and in the Third World as a whole, Mr Dzhirkvelov believes, the Soviet Union is at a disadvantage in competition with China and the West, and will remain so as long as it is blinkered by an inflexible ideology and the dictates of self-interest.

Tomorrow: How Crimean Tartars were deported.