

Post-1989 Cold War Diplomatic Shifts in Southern Africa¹

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ABSTRACTS

Dieser Artikel wertet erstmals Materialien aus britischen und US-amerikanischen Archiven aus, die jetzt zugänglich geworden sind und die diplomatischen Verhandlungen über das Ende der Konflikte in Namibia, Angola und Mozambique sowie das Ende der Apartheid in Südafrika betreffen. Dabei werden ältere Interpretationen, die den Rückzug der Sowjetunion als einen Verrat an den alten Bündnispartnern innerhalb der kommunistischen und Befreiungsbewegungen im südlichen Afrika ansehen, ergänzt um eine nuanciertere Sicht, die den Beginn dieses Wandels im Jahr 1988 und in den Verhandlungen um den Rückzug kubanischer Truppen aus Angola und um die namibische Unabhängigkeit lokalisieren. Das Ziel der sowjetischen Außenpolitik war nun nicht mehr die bedingungslose Unterstützung ihrer Alliierten, sondern eine Beruhigung und Stabilisierung der politischen Lage, um der angestrebten neuen Weltordnung zum Durchbruch zu verhelfen. Damit rückte auch eine demokratische, von einem Mehrheitsvotum der Wähler getragene Regierung für Südafrika in den Fokus sowjetischer Politik, was wiederum Ängste auf US-amerikanischer Seite vor einem sozialistischen Einparteiensystem reduzierte. Aus den britischen und US-amerikanischen Quellen lässt sich ebenfalls ablesen, dass die sowjetischen Unterhändler in einem komplizierten Annäherungsprozess Sympathien für eine kapitalistische Entwicklung in Südafrika entwickelten und darin auch Chancen für ihr eigenes Land sahen.

This article evaluates new materials from British and US-American archives that have now become accessible and concern diplomatic negotiations on the end of the conflicts in Namibia, Angola and Mozambique as well as the end of apartheid in South Africa. Older interpretations that view the withdrawal of the Soviet Union as a betrayal of the old allies within the commu-

1 Some of the evidence in this paper was initially presented at the "Reflections on 1989 Conference," Leipzig University, 14 June 2019. I wish to thank the organizers of the conference for all their assistance and support.

nist and liberation movements in southern Africa are supplemented by a more nuanced view that locates the beginning of this change in 1988 and in the negotiations over the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola and Namibian independence. The aim of Soviet foreign policy was no longer to give unconditional support to its allies, but rather to calm and stabilise the political situation in order to help the new world order that was seeking to break through. As a result, a democratic government for South Africa, supported by a majority vote of the electorate, also moved into the focus of Soviet policy, which in turn reduced fears on the US side of a socialist one-party system. From the consulted British and US sources it can also be seen that in a complicated process of rapprochement, the Soviet negotiators developed sympathies for capitalist development in South Africa and also saw opportunities emerging for their own country.

The Fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the end of the Soviet Union by 1991 were major global events in the history of Southern Africa. The most important impact was the end of Soviet support for liberation movements in Southern Africa, which in turn helped to end major Cold War conflicts in Angola, Namibia, and South Africa itself. Looking at the region in the years following 1989, it is possible to see a rapid de-escalation of conflicts in the region, starting with the independence of Namibia (21 March 1990) and the Rome General Peace Accords in Mozambique (4 October 1992). Perhaps the most dramatic impact post-1989, however, was the influence events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union would have on the timing and nature of the negotiated end of apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s. Conversely, it would be a mistake to anachronistically give too much credit to the changes in the Soviet Union and the events in Eastern Europe as the main catalyst for all of the transformations in Southern Africa from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. As experts on Angolan and Namibian political history would quickly point out, the international diplomacy necessary to unwind these conflicts had already begun before 1989. Still, it would be naïve to completely isolate the Angolan and Namibian negotiations from high level moves in Moscow that would transform the way the Soviet Union interacted with the Western powers and Southern African states before 1989.²

It would be convenient to be able to point to a specific “turning point” in this history, but the regional and international contexts of these transformations across a number of interrelated conflicts and negotiations makes the story much more nuanced. This article presents a limited examination of new evidence available in US and UK archives to suggest some possible trends in this history. Given that the sources are primarily diplomatic, the following discussion describes how Western diplomats reported the changes

2 For a much more detailed discussion of this process, see Ch. Saunders, 1989 and southern Africa, in: U. Engel / F. Hadler / M. Middell, 1989 in a Global Perspective, Leipzig 2015; also M. Webber, Soviet Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Final Phase, in: *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30 (1992) 1, pp. 1–30. For detailed treatment of the relationship between Eastern Europe social movements and South Africa, see P. Betts / J. Mark / I. Goddeeris / K. Christiaens, Race, Socialism and Solidarity: Anti-Apartheid in Eastern Europe, in: A. Konieczna / R. Skinner (eds.), *A Global History of Anti-Apartheid*, London 2019, pp. 151–190.

in Soviet policies toward South Africa. Limited access to sources for this time period, and limiting the source to English language archives, is a real constraint on reaching definitive historical conclusions over the plausibility of just how significant these changes in 1989 were for South Africa, so what follows remains cursory and cautious in this regard. The sources are primarily recently declassified British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) files, and US State Department files declassified through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. Therefore, the materials are limited and mediated by Anglo-American concerns. Still, I do believe these sources can provide us with some useful evidence as we continue to examine the impact of 1989 as a global event.

The most heated debate over the removal of support of Southern African liberation movements centres around South Africa and competing historical narratives about negotiations within the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party, and the Soviets themselves. Former Soviet diplomat, and since an important Russian Africanist scholar, Vladimir Shubin, has perhaps written the most on this topic. Having been part of these negotiations himself, Shubin has written detailed accounts of how the Soviets handled, or at times mishandled, their removal of support for the ANC and to the ANC's military organization, *uMkonto weSizwe* (Spear of the Nation, or "MK"). Shubin tends to view the period as one where the top Soviet leaders, including Gorbachev himself, had let down the ANC. He argues that Gorbachev had continued to promise support for the ANC through Oliver Tambo and others, but in the end, it was Gorbachev who decided to sacrifice his relations with the ANC for better relations with the West. By 1991, with the coming to power of Boris Yeltsin, the "sellout" of the ANC was complete, from Shubin's perspective, as Nelson Mandela was not received in Moscow as the leader of the ANC but as an international human rights leader, and Yeltsin invited South African President F. W. de Klerk to Moscow to open up formal relations between South Africa and the new Russia.³

From a distance, it is obvious that the events of 1989 in Eastern Europe had a substantial impact on the region, although those involved in diplomacy in Southern Africa in the late 1980s would make it clear that the thawing process had already occurred between the Americans and the Soviets over Angola and Namibia well before 1989.⁴ The most tangible influence of the dramatic events of late 1989 are visible in the sudden shift made by the new South African President, F. W. de Klerk, in early 1990, as he capitalized on the political space created by events in Eastern Europe to denounce communist economic and political systems, while at the same time using this space – and the lessening

3 V. Shubin/M. Traikova, There is No Threat from the Eastern Bloc, in: South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, vol. 3: International Solidarity, part II, Pretoria 2008, pp. 985–1067. Shubin writes of Yeltsin and his group, "The political renegades and sell-outs who controlled the country and its foreign affairs during that period did their best to distance themselves from the ANC (just as from other old friends of Moscow) and embrace Pretoria." V. Shubin, *The Hot "Cold War": The USSR in Southern Africa*, London 2008, p. 263; V. Shubin, *The Soviet Union/Russian Federation's Relations with South Africa*, with Special Reference to the Period since 1980, in: *African Affairs* 95 (1996) 378, pp. 5–30.

4 See H. Melber/Ch. Saunders, *Transition in Southern Africa – Comparative Aspects*, Discussion Paper, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala 2001.

of the threat from the Soviet Union – to unbanned the ANC and take the initiative on negotiations with the ANC. There can be debates over who “sold out” whom in the process, but the fundamental influence cannot be denied. As expressed in diplomatic records, it soon became possible for Soviet diplomats to compare Gorbachev with South African president de Klerk (and at times Mandela), in order to make the point that the changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union offered the right conditions for a negotiated transition. The South African case saw a move away from formal apartheid and the “total strategy” of former President P. W. Botha and his fellow hardliners who had previously used Soviet support of the ANC as the main impediment to avoid any serious negotiations with the ANC.⁵

This article examines, in a tentative manner, some of the ways American and British diplomats interpreted the new Soviet view towards South Africa. Western diplomats were, at times, surprised by the sort of opinions shared with them from their Soviet counterparts on South Africa and the ANC. This was an interesting shift in positions, as diplomats from former Cold War adversaries were now expected to find common ground in their views of African politicians and leaders.

According to Chester Crocker, Ronald Reagan’s Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs during the 1980s, the Soviets had been slowly rethinking their approach to Southern Africa since 1986, and then the process was “accelerated in 1987 due to a variety of factors, including the cycle of war in Afghanistan and the priorities of US-Soviet ministerial and summit diplomacy during Reagan’s final eighteen months.” According to Crocker, “[t]he takeover of Moscow foreign policy machinery by Shevardnadze and his ‘new thinkers’ did not all happen in one day. The military and intelligence bureaucracies, and above all the Communist Party had long played a dominant role in shaping African policy.”⁶ Crocker explains that in “May 1988, the endgame began, U.S. and Soviet priorities were no longer mutually incompatible.” He writes, “by late 1987 and early 1988, Soviet diplomats, academics and media elites were increasingly frank in distancing themselves from policy commitments driven by the Party and the armed forces.”⁷ Crocker concludes his discussion of the Soviet role in reaching an agreement with the Angolans that would pave the way to Namibian independence:

At the December 1988 signing ceremonies in New York and Brazzaville, George Schultz and I made generous public remarks about the Soviet contribution. This was not only the gracious thing to do; it was tactically important to salute [Anatoly] Adamishin, [Vladil-

5 Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, Philadelphia 1994, p. 548. Mandela notes that the first formal meetings he held with the South African Government were in May 1988.

6 Ch. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood*, New York 1992, p. 409.

7 Crocker emphasizes that the Soviets were eventually forced to realize the benefits of the American plan: “Soviet realists came to see that Angola was an unmitigated military disaster: no amount of hardware and advisers could bring victory to the MPLA. Gradually, the ‘new thinkers’ accommodated themselves intellectually to some elements of our settlement.” *Ibid.*, p. 410.

len] Vasev, and their colleagues who had worked with us during the endgame. We had created a powerful precedent.⁸

Providing an alternative reading of the end of the Angola conflict, Piero Gleijeses, in his assessment of the negotiations over Cuban withdrawal from Angola and linkages, gives a much different interpretation of what caused progress on Angola: “It was not Gorbachev’s new policy or the presidential elections in the United States, it was not constructive engagement nor linkage, that overcame South Africa’s resistance.” For Gleijeses, given his overall project to emphasize the paramount importance of Cuban military intervention in Angola: “It was, rather, forces that Crocker and the Reagan administration abhorred; black militants in South Africa waving the flag of the ANC, the threat of sanctions, and Fidel Castro.”⁹

Archival sources show that Crocker’s efforts and those of his Soviet counterparts to negotiate Cuban withdrawal had an impact on the highest levels of US-Soviet talks. In 1988, news of progress in the Angolan talks had been well-received before the Moscow Summit between Gorbachev and US President Ronald Reagan (29 May to 2 June 1988). The British archival documents dated just prior to the meeting only briefly mention Southern Africa. However, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher wrote to Gorbachev to encourage progress on a number of issues at the summit, mostly on arms control, but did make mention of Southern Africa. “I am encouraged by the opening of talks between Angola, Cuba, the US and South Africa on the implementation of UN SCR 435 on Namibia and on Cuban troop withdrawals.”¹⁰ Just before the Summit, the British noted that Southern African issues had “moved up sharply on the Agenda before the talks.”¹¹ There is not space here to enter into an analysis of the Angola talks and the historical debates around them, but it is important to note that the cooperation of the Soviets and Americans over Angola had established a repertoire that would carry over into diplomatic discussion of South African negotiations after 1989.¹²

8 Ibid, p. 424.

9 P. Gleijeses, *Vision of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for South Africa, 1976–1991*, Chapel Hill 2013. Gleijeses goes on to say that “the answer is abundantly clear in the U.S. and South African archives. It was Cuban military might” (p. 508).

10 British National Archives (BNA), British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), FCO 82/1992, From Washington to FCO, “Thatcher to Gorbachev”, 23 May 1988, item 28.

11 British National Archives (BNA), British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), FCO 82/1992, From Washington to FCO, “Moscow Summit Preview”, 15 May 1988, item 9.

12 Perhaps a more valuable account of this interaction than in Crocker’s account in his book, is his detailed discussion of cooperation with his Soviet counterparts provided in a 2006 interview. He provides a compelling narrative of how cooperation came to be, and how strange it was for both sides to get to know each other and to develop working relations. See, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Assistant Secretary Chester Arthur Crocker, interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Initial Interview date: June 5, 2006 (2011). <https://adst.org/oral-history/> (accessed 23 May 2020).

1989 and the End of Soviet Public Support for the South African ANC as a Liberation Movement

The thaw between the apartheid state in South Africa and the Soviets had already started before the Fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. In April 1989, the *New York Times* reported the arrival in Pretoria of the first “public diplomatic mission to South Africa since the two countries broke off relations 33 years ago.” The delegation was in South Africa to further the negotiations between Angola, South Africa, and Cuba. The Americans and Soviets were there as observers. The *New York Times* reported that earlier in April, “Deputy Foreign Minister Anatoly L. Adamishin, a ranking expert on southern Africa, secretly came here for visits with senior South African officials.” The article gave credit for this thawing of relations to Gorbachev:

*The decision of Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, to encourage stability over adventurism abroad to save resources for economic changes at home has made Moscow seem less threatening to Pretoria. The South Africans have also been encouraged by Soviet advice to the African National Congress to seek a negotiated settlement with the white Government rather than its violent overthrow.*¹³

A more detailed explanation of Soviet thinking about South Africa and the end of support for liberation wars can be found in an article by Vladimir I. Tikhomirov translated into English and published in *Africa Report* at the end of 1989. This article would have been circulating around the time of the political upheavals in Eastern Europe. The author, Vladimir Tikhomirov, was described as “a research coordinator at the Institute for African Studies of the USSR Academy of Science, Moscow.” Tikhomirov, like Crocker, locates the changes in Soviet policy “in the Angola-Namibia settlement process in 1988.”¹⁴ Tikhomirov then indicated the shift in approach happening among Soviet Africanist specialists: “...though formally never abandoning its principal support for the governments, organizations, and movements which traditionally received help from the Soviet Union, Soviet diplomacy, particularly in southern Africa, was recently reoriented toward achieving a more stable situation in the region.” This seems to be hedging a bit, and a more realistic and specific description of the transformation of Soviet policy is given for their relations to the ANC-South African Communist Party (SACP):

Although support for the ANC-SACP continues to be a very important feature of Soviet policy toward South Africa, there have been certain changes in Soviet attitudes regarding the prospects for southern African conflict resolution. The policy of ‘new thinking’ has demanded independent assessments of the situation in different parts of the world and has led to the development of a broader outlook on South African problems among Soviet

13 “Soviet Diplomats in South Africa After Three Decades of Hostility”, in: *New York Times*, April 27, 1989, Section A, p. 8.

14 BNA, FCO 105/3798, USSR/South Africa Relations 1990, V. Tikhomirov: The USSR and South Africa: An End to “Total Onslaught”?, *Africa Report* November/December 1989, p. 58.

scholars and policy-makers. This means that nowadays academics and politicians in the USSR do not see the ANC-SACP alliance as the only 'true representative' of the people of South Africa, but realize the complexity of the problems that country faces."

Elaborating further, Tikhomirov explains that the ideological solidarity with the ANC-SACP was also to be discarded, as the new thinking "also means the abandonment of the former one-sided approach to the problem of apartheid as an issue in the context of global East-West confrontation, the solution to which could lie only in the national democratic and/or socialist revolution." Tikhomirov argues that "there is a growing concern for the crisis developing in South Africa, a crisis leading to a destructive and bloody civil war rather than to the creation of a society with racial and social harmony." This new perspective argued that the Soviets were now focusing solely on the push for majority rule in South Africa:

The new Soviet tendency of taking ideology out of global politics means in the South African context that the USSR is prepared to recognize any future South African government elected by the majority of the people. In other words, the Soviet Union is not seeking to establish a socialist one-party state in South Africa, nor, of course, is it pressing for the development of a capitalist multi-party system. This issue should be solved through a negotiated process with the participation of representatives not only from the present government and the ANC, but from all South African parties.¹⁵

Tikhomirov also questioned the future supply of weapons to the ANC's military wing, without suggesting the weapons would be completely cut off.

Though the Soviet Union continues to be one of the major arms suppliers to the national liberation movement, it is now paying more attention to finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict. This objective of creating a just and democratic society in South Africa through a settlement constitutes the essence of the new Soviet policy toward South Africa.

He concludes by pointing out that the new Soviet Union was also facing their own problems with ethnic revolts:

Experiencing deep national problems at home, the USSR has become very sensitive to ethnic conflicts in general. Consequently, Soviet officials today have become much more realistic in their attitudes concerning the prospects of solving the national and racial problems in South Africa.¹⁶

We will return to Tikhomirov again, as he would encounter considerable criticisms from ANC leaders for this "new thinking".

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 60.

South African Negotiations and the Eastern European Moment

About a month before South African President F. W. de Klerk's famous 2 February 1990 speech in which he official unbanned the ANC and other banned parties, Pik Botha was discussing the dramatic changes taking place in Southern Africa with the British, noting that "it was a pity that the full impact of Namibian independence was being dwarfed by the far-reaching developments in South Africa itself. The Namibian settlement had been a very important step towards creating the climate for negotiations on South Africa's future." Pik Botha looked back on the recent past and believed that "...the breakthrough had been achieved because of Gorbachev's leadership of the Soviet Union." He also recalled that the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, Anatoly Adamishin,

*had told him back in 1986 that the Soviet Union was distancing itself from violence as a means of achieving change. It was this new approach which had led to the timetable for Cuban withdrawal which, as Crocker had always argued, proved to be the key to Namibian independence.*¹⁷

It is interesting that Botha refers to Crocker's linkage strategy here, but compared to Crocker, Botha gives a bit more of the credit to the Soviets for making Cuban troop withdrawal possible.

South African President F. W. de Klerk's groundbreaking speech on 2 February 1990 made significant references to the changes taking place in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe. Addressing the growing interaction of South Africa in international relations after years of isolation, de Klerk stated, "I hope this trend will be encouraged by the important change of climate that is taking place in South Africa." He went on to relate these internal changes to trends elsewhere in the world:

*For South Africa, indeed for the whole world, the past year has been one of change and major upheaval. In Eastern Europe and even the Soviet Union itself, political and economic upheaval surged forward in an unstoppable tide. At the same time, Beijing temporarily smothered with brutal violence the yearning of the people of the Chinese mainland for greater freedom. The year of 1989 will go down in history as the year in which Stalinist Communism expired. These developments will entail unpredictable consequences for Europe, but they will also be of decisive importance to Africa. The indications are that the countries of Eastern and Central Europe will receive greater attention, while it will decline in the case of Africa.*¹⁸

De Klerk also viewed the demise of the Soviet-era economies in Eastern Europe as a warning to the ANC and SACP: "Those who seek to force this failure of a system on

17 BNA, FCO 105/3798, USSR/South Africa Relations 1990, From Pretoria to FCO, 9 January 1990, "South Africa/Namibia", item 1.

18 Source: FW de Klerk's speech to Parliament, 2 February 1990; <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/fw-de-klerks-speech-parliament-2-february-1990> (accessed 23 May 2020).

South Africa, should engage in a total revision of their point of view. It should be clear to all that is not the answer here either.” de Klerk argued that continued dependence on outsiders would not work either:

The new situation in Eastern Europe also shows that foreign intervention is no recipe for domestic change. It never succeeds, regardless of its ideological motivation. The upheaval in Eastern Europe took place without the involvement of the Big Powers or of the United Nations.

It is within this global context made possible by events in Eastern Europe that de Klerk found the political space to offer a new program for a new Southern Africa:

Southern Africa now has an historical opportunity to set aside its conflicts and ideological differences and draw up a joint programme of reconstruction. It should be sufficiently attractive to ensure that the Southern African region obtains adequate investment and loan capital from the industrial countries of the world.

He was foreshadowing the debates to come within the ANC over nationalization and socialism that would eventually accept a neo-liberal order to attract much needed FDI to South Africa, and warned: “Unless the countries of Southern Africa achieve stability and a common approach to economic development rapidly, they will be faced by further decline and ruin.”¹⁹

A few months after de Klerk’s historic speech, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze made a trip to sub-Saharan Africa, the first by a Soviet foreign minister, in order to speak directly with those leaders to whom it must have been clear that the Soviet Union was dropping most of its commitments across Africa. Shevardnadze would also meet with de Klerk and Mandela in South Africa. American diplomatic accounts of Shevardnadze’s trip naturally focus on what they could gather about the end of Soviet assistance to former Soviet client states and liberation movements. One account states:

*Shevardnadze’s trip to sub-Saharan Africa reflects a re-focusing of Soviet priorities in Africa and in the third world in general, including: a more pragmatic approach to economic relations, i.e., the phasing out of Soviet handouts to nominally “Marxist-Leninist” regimes and attempts to increase trade ties with countries having something to offer (e.g., Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and a future South Africa). However, no significant economic agreements were reached during this trip.*²⁰

The same summary noted that “Shevardnadze’s meeting with de Klerk is seen as perhaps the most important event of the trip, a significant psychological breakthrough – more interest than ever in working closely with the U.S. to solve regional problems.” His trip also came at a

19 Ibid.

20 From American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State Washington, DC, “Shevardnadze Trip Reflects Changing Soviet Priorities in Africa”, 29 March 1990, U.S. Department of State Archive, FOIA Case No. F-2016-00610, Doc. No. C06020922, Date: 12/14/2017.

time when many observers here [Moscow] see Africa's importance to the Soviets at an all-time low. One of the primary purposes of the trip was to reassure Africans that Soviet interest in the continent will continue after the end of the cold war, and to explain that perestroika in the Soviet Union does not mean the end of the socialist model of development.

American diplomats in Moscow questioned Shevardnadze's promises of a continued role for the Soviet Union in Africa as "a necessary component of *perestroika*." The reporting officer noted, in contrast, an editorial by Alexei Vasiliev [Vasil'yev], deputy director of the African Institute in Moscow, published in the 6 February issue of *Izvestiya*, where "Vasil'yev's strikingly frank appraisal of this issue ends up emphasizing above all the daunting obstacles facing the Soviets in transforming their Africa policy." Vasil'yev, according to the American Embassy's translation and interpretation of the article,

*notes that the day is past when "every revolutionary-authoritarian dictator" has the right to expect our unconditional political, moral, and material support just because he pronounces "Marxist-Leninist slogans or demonstrates in words his anti-imperialism".*²¹

Such dramatic language in the mainstream media was part of the dramatic changes occurring under Gorbachev and Shevardnadze's shift from the old, Cold War era, Soviet positions. Reflecting on the restructuring achieved under *perestroika*, and after Shevardnadze's meeting with de Klerk, the Soviet media began comparing de Klerk to Gorbachev. The summary of such media coverage noted that "[t]here is a great deal of interest in de Klerk here in the Soviet Union. Many people see him as another Gorbachev."²² By August 1990, the comparison between the de Klerk government and the new Soviet government became more common, as were Soviet commentaries on the similarities between the Soviet Union and South Africa. One British political officer in South Africa, Shaun Cleary, wrote from Pretoria, "As both countries struggle through their respective *perestroikas*, there seems even to be a sense of a certain common feeling. After all, both countries have faced a serious 'nationalism' question, and neither have found a solution."²³

A month after de Klerk's speech to the South African parliament, prominent Soviet diplomats began approaching the Americans to discuss possible joint projects with the United States. On March 1, 1990, Vladimir Lebedev of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told the American diplomats in Moscow:

[...] the Soviets wished to exercise their 'responsibility' as a great power in a 'positive' way, not simply as a counterweight to the U.S., as may have been the case in the past. 'We are thinking about ways to push all sides to reach a solution.' Lebedev said the Soviets

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 BNA, FCO 105/3798 USSR/South Africa Relations 1990, From Pretoria to FCO, "South African/Soviet Relations," 15 August 1990, item 48.

*do not see their objectives in the region as differing from those of the U.S., and would greatly appreciate any assessments the U.S. could share regarding the internal situation in South Africa.*²⁴

US officials in Moscow also noted a shift in Soviet thinking about South Africa, as they began to foresee future investment opportunities in a capitalist South Africa. “The Soviets are now encouraging, and expecting, any new South African government to preserve many capitalist elements in the economy.” The report goes on to relate a discussion the Political Officer had with “Mikhail Vishnevskiy of the Africa Institute, [...] who can be depended upon to faithfully reflect official concerns.” Vishnevskiy questioned the

Poloff[Political Officer] *quite intensely on the possibility of Soviet-American joint commercial ventures in the extraction of southern African minerals. He implied that the Soviets, despite their own mineral wealth, were anxious to obtain a share of southern Africa’s mineral resources.*

Based on this discussion, the American Political Officer concluded: “These changing Soviet priorities, along with their desire to play the role of a ‘responsible’ world power, suggest that Moscow can be expected to press the ANC to moderate its positions and come to the conference table.”²⁵ Such views indicated the willingness of Soviet contacts to engage in business deals with the South Africans, but it may have seriously overestimated the power the Soviets had to influence the ANC after the shift away from direct support of the liberation struggle.

Foreign Minister Shevardnadze ended his Africa tour with a two-day visit to Nigeria. At a banquet hosted in his honour and at a press conference held afterwards at the Soviet Embassy, he reflected on his tour of Africa. He acknowledged that the Soviet Union could no longer be as involved in Africa as in the past. He wanted the Soviet Union to now “concentrate on moving from confrontation to dialogue over the handling of regional conflicts, the arms race, and the international economic order”. Shevardnadze reportedly also said,

We know that no-one gains from confrontation – not ourselves, nor the Africans, whichever “camp” they claim to represent [...] turning entire continents into east/west battle grounds under the banner of ideological intransigence not only victimises the nations of those continents but harms the vital interests of people in both the east and the west.

Shevardnadze seemed to have taken in the suffering caused by the Cold War proxy wars in Africa:

24 From American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State Washington, DC, “Soviets reviewing policy on South Africa”, 05 March 1990. U.S. Department of State Archive, FOIA Case No. F-2016-00610, Doc No. C06020925, Date: 12/14/2017.

25 Ibid.

*On Southern Africa, Shevardnadze implicitly criticized armed struggle in the region. He had seen "how tired people are of the wars that are robbing their national economies of dozens of billions of dollars. [...] The best defence is not weapons but dialogue, particularly in situations where there is no solution to internal problems, as we were told in Angola and Mozambique".*²⁶

This is a pretty remarkable commentary coming from the Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union after years of financial and military support for such conflicts.²⁷

During a 15 March 1990 meeting with Boris Asoyan, the Deputy Head of the MFA's African Countries Directorate, British diplomats discussed the future plans for negotiations in South Africa. "Asoyan believed that the ANC and de Klerk were ready for negotiations, but pressure must be kept up", Asoyan thought talks could begin "before summer", and Asoyan "was insistent that violence and the armed struggle are out of the question now that the ANC are legalised and in South Africa." In terms of the economic plans of the ANC, Asoyan "believed that Mandela would move from his current (public) position on nationalisation towards support for market economics."²⁸

A punchy dispatch from a British diplomat in Cape Town, Louise Alliot, dated 27 March 1990, reports of a secret meeting between Romanian Foreign Minister Sergiu Celac and South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha in Cape Town. According to the account given by a member of the South African Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), the whole trip was disappointing to the Romanians. They had secretly landed on an airstrip outside of Cape Town, flying in the private Boeing 707 airliner of the recently assassinated Romanian dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, and then driving into Cape Town. They were annoyed to have gone to such trouble only to find out later that Pik Botha had made their visit public knowledge. The South African DFA official, John Mare, was also reportedly "irritated by Botha's handling of the dinner. He had behaved in a rather aggressive manner, demanding of his guests why they had killed Ceausescu on Christmas day of all days." After telling the British "that the only successful thing about the meeting was that it had taken place," Mare then "attributed Botha's uncharacteristic behaviour to 'stress', induced partly by recent reports in the Afrikaans press suggesting that he has kept mistresses in the Cape and Pretoria."²⁹ It is interesting to consider why this newly minted post-Ceausescu Romanian government found it necessary to send their Foreign Minister in an attempt to make direct ties with South Africa only a few months after coming to power. The answer may be found in what Mare also told Alliot, that there were many

26 BNA, FCO 105/3798 USSR/South Africa Relations 1990, From Lagos to FCO, 27 March 90, "Visit of Soviet Foreign Minister to Nigeria", item 18.

27 "On South Africa, Shevardnadze said of President de Klerk, 'My impression is that he sincerely wants racial peace for his country.' Of Mandela, 'My conversation with that remarkable man, an acknowledged leader of his people, is that apartheid can be abolished solely through dialogue and with mutual respect for the rights of all concerned.'" Ibid.

28 BNA, FCO 105/3798, USSR/South Africa Relations 1990, "Call on Africa Directorate, MFA", 16 March 1990, item 16.

29 BNA, FCO 105/3798, USSR/South Africa Relations 1990, Louise Alliot, to P. H. Tibber Foreign & Commonwealth Office "South Africa/Soviet Bloc", 27 March 1990, item 17.

“South African businessmen wanting to do trade with Eastern Europe.” He continued: “There was a constant stream of enquiries. One of the more enthusiastic entrepreneurs was [former State President] P. W. Botha’s son.”³⁰

Returning now to African expert Vladimir Tikhomirov, described by American diplomats in Moscow as the “the top South Africa specialist at the Africa institute”, who came to talk with the Americans in Moscow on 5 April 1990 after completing a ten-day visit to South Africa. According to the American political officer reporting on their conversation,

Tikhomirov said that local ANC representatives were extremely upset about his trip, and warned that he would encounter hostility from ANC cadres in South Africa. Tikhomirov was told there would be “mass meetings” protesting his visit and that his safety in South Africa ‘could not be guaranteed.

He went on to describe how difficult it was to make any headway with Pallo Jordan of the ANC, who he met in Harare, stating that “Jordan was ‘impossible to reason with.’ Tikhomirov noted that due to the ANC threats, he maintained a low profile during his visit, but encountered no actual hostility. Tikhomirov, said his visit was the first of its kind not to have been ‘cleared’ with the ANC.”³¹ Clearly, the “new thinking” of the Soviets Tikhomirov had so carefully detailed in his *Africa Report* article at the end of 1989 had not gone over so well with the ANC leaders in Harare or in South Africa.

Given this poor reception, Tikhomirov was not very generous in his description of the ANC in South Africa after he returned to Moscow. He told the Americans that he thought “...that the ANC and UDF were ‘losing ground’ rapidly in wake of the ANC’s unbanning and Mandela’s release.” His anecdotal evidence was his description of an

ANC-backed “rainbow concert” he attended in Johannesburg, which drew only 10,000 people in a stadium seating many times that number. He attributes this decline of influence to the ANC/UDF’s lack of organizational structures on the ground, and their reliance on “authoritarian methods”.

He also suggested that “many people walked out of Mandela’s initial speech in Soweto, ‘because most of those attending had been forcibly rounded up at ANC roadblocks in the township.’” Tikhomirov then provided the Americans with his “two main impressions from his trip; first, that everyday relations between the races were much better than he had expected – not nearly as bad as relations between the various nationalities in the Soviet Union; and second, that both the national party and the ANC were essentially authoritarian organizations.” He went on to say, “many people, black and white, simply see two authoritarian groups starting to negotiate, with no prospect for real democ-

30 Ibid.

31 From American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State Washington, DC, “Soviet Views on Developments in South Africa”, 12 April 1990, U.S. Department of State Archive, FOIA Case No. F-2016-00610, Doc No. C06020921, Date: 12/14/2017

racy.” Tikhomirov seemed most bothered by his talks with Jay Naidoo of COSATU. He characterized Naidoo’s style as someone, “while speaking of ‘unity,’ actually means that everyone should follow the dictates of the leadership.” Tikhomirov said that “ironically, he found black consciousness groups such as PAC and AZAPO more sensitive to white concerns than uncompromising leaders such as Naidoo.”³² Perhaps most of the above should be attributed to Tikhomirov’s unusually poor reception by his ANC contacts. Still, it is interesting to see how candid he was with his American counterparts about what he witnessed in South Africa in early 1990.

A breakdown in communication between Soviet diplomats and the ANC was also communicated by the Head of the Africa Directorate in the MFA, Yuri Yukalov, who told the British at a meeting on 30 July 1990 that the Soviet government was having “‘serious difficulties’ in communicating with the ANC. The ANC representative was away from Moscow. His deputy was too junior to be a useful interlocutor. It was also useless these days to talk to the ANC in Lusaka.” According to Yukalov, there was discussion of opening a direct “channel of communication to South Africa”, and this was likely to happen “as a result of the Shevardnadze/de Klerk meeting in Windhoek and of other contacts in third countries.” Yukalov said that the Soviets were relying on public statements to communicate with the ANC, and these statements were calling for restraint.³³ The British asked

whether the Russians were using CPSU channels to press restraint on the SACP, Joe Slovo and the MK. Yukalov gave a fuzzy answer. He acknowledged that Slovo had been a frequent visitor to Moscow and had often holidayed in the Soviet Union. He claimed that Slovo had moderated his line, and jocularly represented Slovo as Boris Yeltsen to the Gorbachev role jointly played by Mandela and de Klerk.

The British diplomat commented that “Yukalov did not seek to underplay the seriousness of the MK’s activities, or to question the SAG’s allegations. Indeed, at one point he drew a comparison with SWAPO’s ill-fated incursion into Namibia in April 1989. He readily agreed that extremist behaviour by elements within the ANC would play into the hands of de Klerk’s opponents on the far right. However, he was careful to make no commitment that the Soviet Government would intercede with the ANC.”³⁴

To conclude, it is worth considering how contested the transition in South Africa was in the years following 1989. There was no way to simply “turn off” the momentum and ideologies of many in the ANC. An example of this comes in the form of President de Klerk’s complaints to the Americans in late 1991. On 19 November 1991, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen, Crocker’s successor in the George H. W. Bush administration, met with de Klerk in Pretoria. By this time, nearly two years

32 Ibid.

33 BNA, FCO 105/3798, USSR/South Africa Relations 1990, From Moscow to FCO, “Your Telno 126 to Pretoria: SACP arrests”, item 91.

34 Ibid.

into negotiations with the ANC and other parties, de Klerk vented his frustrations with the ANC, claiming they “had ‘reneged on its undertakings in the Pretoria minute’ on several important issues. He charged that the ANC keeps arms caches, shows bad faith by refusing to renounce permanently the armed struggle, still conceives itself as a ‘liberation movement’ rather than accepting party status, and is employing a ‘steam roller strategy’ to get what it wants.”

De Klerk was also critical of “the ANC leadership for undermining business confidence in South Africa’s future, citing Mandela on nationalization, [Cyril] Ramaphosa on possible debt repudiation and [Chris] Hani on the armed struggle.” He complained of “personal verbal attacks by Mandela” and concluded that

“I am not an egotist, [...] but neither am I prepared to hand the country over to chaos or a Marxist/Socialist state.” His goal was to create a new constitution for South Africa [that] will protect “the values that you and we believe in.” He opposed any plans for redistribution of property “from people who have legal title to their possessions.” He concluded his message to the Americans, “We deserve international support on this. Otherwise, South Africa will not be a stable country”.³⁵

Assistant Secretary Cohen also spoke with South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha on the same day. According to the account available, Botha, like de Klerk, asked the US to help convince the ANC that they needed to drop their commitments to socialism and communism. “Pik said the US and other governments needed to remind the ANC that its economic policies were wrongheaded and that its alliance with the communist party was a serious liability.” To make his point, he described “a recent lunch he’d had with Joe Slovo, Jeremy Cronin and two Black and one Indian communists. ‘Only the two whites really believed in communism,’ he claimed.” Botha told the Americans that

unfortunately [...] there was little likelihood of the ANC severing its alliance with the SACP in the short term: “Mandela depends on Slovo for tactical advice and trusts him completely.” The most outsiders could do, Pik thought, was to urge the ANC to be “less reliant” on the SACP.³⁶

There is still a lot of research to be done about the decisions and the internal and external pressures on the ANC to accept the neo-liberal constitution and economic policies that became realities after coming to power in 1994. The above examination of some of the available American and British diplomatic sources from this key period seems to confirm that many of the Soviet diplomats and experts were interested in aligning with the capitalist classes in South Africa. As time would tell, similar interests could be found in the

35 From American Embassy Pretoria to Secretary of State Washington, DC, “Assistant Secretary Cohen’s Meeting with State President de Klerk”, 22 November 1991, U.S. Department of State Archive, FOIA Case No. F-2016-00610, Doc No. C06020858, Date: 12/14/2017.

36 From American Embassy Pretoria to Secretary of State Washington, DC, “Assistant Secretary Cohen’s Meeting with Foreign Minister Botha”, 22 November 1991, U.S. Department of State Archive, FOIA Case No. F-2016-00610, Doc. No. C06020857, Date: 12/14/2017.

subsequent shedding of more radical positions for many in the ANC leadership as well. As this diplomacy in 1991 shows, de Klerk relied on the Americans to put pressure on the ANC to drop their more radical ideas. By 1991, any notion that the ANC and SACP were still tied to the Soviets was a non-starter, and most of the ex-Soviet experts, with some notable exceptions, were in the same camp with de Klerk and the Bush Administration diplomats when it came to the future of South Africa.