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978-0-521-31064-2 - The USSR in Third World Conflicts: Soviet Arms and Diplomacy in
Local Wars 1945-1980

Bruce D. Porter

Excerpt

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1 INTRODUCTION

The principal foundations which all states have are good laws and powerful armies. Since there can be no good laws where there are not strong armies, I shall set aside any discussion of laws and proceed to speak of armies.

Niccolo Macchiavelli, *The Prince*

As the 1970s progressed, the problem of Soviet military involvement in Third World conflicts came to assume an increasingly prominent place on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. The USSR attempted – by means of diplomacy, military advisers, arms shipments, and occasionally troops – to influence the course of at least eight localized conflicts during the decade. The list of those conflicts reads like a roll call of the decade’s most dangerous international crises and hot spots: the Indo-Pakistani war, the Yom Kippur war, the war in Vietnam, the Angolan civil war, the Ogaden war, the intra-Communist clash in Indochina (Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and China’s incursion into Vietnam), South Yemen’s brief clash with Yemen, and the civil war in Afghanistan. The USSR had been involved militarily in local conflicts before, of course, but the magnitude, scope, and apparent success of its efforts in the 1970s were perhaps without precedent.

In the 1950s and 1960s the Soviet Union’s involvement in local conflicts, though often receiving considerable publicity, generally took place on a modest scale with respect to the actual volume of military equipment delivered to Third World clients at war. The main exceptions to this pattern were the massive Soviet arms shipments to the regimes in Pyongyang and Hanoi during the Korean war and the war in Vietnam. Although Moscow, prior to 1969, had transferred massive quantities of arms to Egypt, Syria, Indonesia, and India, and lesser amounts to some 20 additional countries, those shipments usually had preceded or followed the period of actual hostilities. The Kremlin had displayed its penchant for caution by refraining from large-scale arms shipments to regimes immediately engaged in conflict – particularly non-Communist regimes – and by minimizing any direct participation by Soviet personnel in combat or combat support. Commencing with the war of attrition in the Middle East (1969–70), the Soviet Union’s historical policy of restraint in this regard changed markedly. In that conflict, over 10,000 Soviet military advisers engaged in a wide range of combat-support operations: Soviet troops

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manned SAM installations; Soviet pilots flew combat missions; and Moscow transferred thousands of tons of weaponry to the Arabs. It was the USSR's first massive military effort on behalf of a non-Communist client at war since its effort to back the Kuomintang in China in the 1920s. Events in the following decade proved that the Soviet role in the war of attrition was not an anomaly. The 1970s witnessed three massive Soviet airlifts and sealifts of arms to client regimes at war, the deployment in combat of over 40,000 Soviet-armed Cuban troops in Africa, and the outright invasion and occupation of a Third World country by the USSR – all phenomena unheard of during the Cold War.

Inevitably, concern that the Soviets were running rampant in the Third World served to erode public support for détente in the United States, solidify support for increased military spending, and hasten the development of the Sino-American rapprochement. During the October war, and again during the Angolan crisis, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger warned that Moscow's actions imperiled the entire Soviet-American relationship and undermined prospects for a stable international order. Shortly after the Ogaden war, Dmitri K. Simes observed that "the new pattern of Soviet imperial gunboat diplomacy threatens to modify the rules of the international game." By 1979, Robert Legvold could state that turmoil in the Third World had overwhelmed all other considerations in the superpower rivalry, "save the growth and increased projection of Soviet military power whose menace it serves to accentuate." President Carter's state-of-the-union address in January 1980, shortly following the invasion of Afghanistan, identified "the steady growth and increased projection of Soviet military power beyond its own borders" as one of three principal challenges facing the United States. That challenge is certain to remain a critical one throughout the 1980s and beyond.¹

This book is intended as a study of the USSR's military and diplomatic involvement in Third World conflicts from 1945 to 1980. The study was motivated to a considerable extent by an awareness of the growing importance to U.S. foreign policy of understanding Soviet policy toward the Third World and particularly toward Third World conflicts. This book does not, however, treat Soviet involvement in Third World conflicts principally as a problem in U.S. foreign policy.² Rather, the intent is to understand Soviet foreign policy in its own right.

This study is designed primarily to illuminate certain of the *tactical* and *operational aspects* of the USSR's policy in local conflicts. In this respect

¹ Quotations are from Henry Kissinger, *Department of State Bulletin (DOSB)* LXIX (October 29, 1973):528, and *DOSB* LXXII (February 23, 1976); Dmitri K. Simes, "Detente, Russian Style," *Foreign Policy* No. 32 (Fall 1978):54; Robert Legvold, "The Super Rivals: Conflict in the Third World," *Foreign Affairs* 57 (Spring 1979):755; Jimmy Carter, "The State of the Union," *Presidential Documents* 16 (January 28, 1980):195.

² I have written elsewhere on the subject of appropriate U.S. policy toward Soviet involvement in local conflicts. See Bruce D. Porter, "Washington, Moscow, and Third World Conflict in the 1980s," in Samuel P. Huntington, ed., *The Strategic Imperative: New Policies for American Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1982), 253–300.

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it departs from the main trend among studies of Soviet policy toward the Third World. The tendency has been for scholars and analysts either to focus on certain general features of Soviet ideology and thinking that pertain to the Third World or to evaluate the USSR's strategic aims and interests in specific regions of the world. Such aspects of the problem are by no means overlooked in this study, but the intention is to focus on a somewhat different, relatively neglected, echelon of policy: the tactical methods and operational approaches of the USSR in local conflicts generally. The terms *tactical* and *operational* refer here not only to the military details of the Soviet Union's involvement in conflicts but also to the entire range of implemental steps, both diplomatic and military, that the USSR has employed in attempting to influence specific conflicts.³

I have chosen the case-study approach to accomplish this end. By comparative analysis of five cases of Soviet military involvement in local conflicts, I have attempted to better understand in what specific ways the Soviet Union has sought to achieve its aims in local conflicts, what characteristic patterns can be traced in Soviet operations, and what practical lessons the USSR has learned over time in the implementation of policy in local conflicts. Each case treats the USSR's involvement in a given conflict as a single overall operation in which many facets of policy must be coordinated and on which many factors bear. For example, each case study treats the Soviet-American relationship as one factor bearing on the conflict at hand; however, the emphasis is not on how the conflict influenced relations between Washington and Moscow but on how specific Soviet-American interactions during the conflict contributed to shaping its course and outcome.

The main difficulty in undertaking such a study has been in obtaining accurate and pertinent information on Soviet diplomatic activities and arms shipments during the conflicts in question. The nature of the subject is such that few totally reliable sources exist, and even some normally credible sources must be treated with caution. I have been forced to take a fairly eclectic approach to obtaining information, relying on whatever sources have provided information that has seemed reliable, whether local newspapers, journalistic reports, memoirs, speeches, interviews, or information from Western intelligence sources that has managed to make its way into public sources. Soviet sources have been used whenever possible, but they have been, frankly, not very illuminating, save in a few instances. I have tried to use great caution in evaluating all sources, but occasionally have made personal judgments as to whether or not credibility could be attributed to certain sources that could not be independently confirmed.

³ After this book was written, a study was published that covers at least some of the same ground, and that does treat certain operational aspects of Soviet involvement in Third World Conflicts. I highly recommend this study by Stephen T. Hosmer and Thomas W. Wolfe, *Soviet Policy and Practice toward Third World Conflicts* (Lexington-Lexington Books, 1983).

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Wherever this has been the case, I have tried to make appropriate qualifications in the text.

The study is organized as follows. This chapter is intended as an introduction to the work as a whole. Chapter 2 is a historical survey of the USSR's involvement in Third World conflicts, tracing the evolution of Soviet policy through four distinct stages in the postwar period. Some attention is also given to the period from 1917 until World War II, as background for what follows. This survey is meant principally to provide an overall framework for the case studies that follow. Chapter 3 reviews postwar Soviet advances in the military capabilities necessary for projecting conventional power abroad. It reviews trends in five areas: arms exports, naval power, transport capabilities, the establishment of military support facilities abroad, and the employment of Soviet, East European, and Cuban military advisers and troops in local conflicts. Chapter 3 also discusses the implications of Moscow's achievement of nuclear parity for its behavior in local conflicts.

Chapter 4 is a brief introduction to the case studies, explaining why the five specific conflicts were selected for study and setting forth the parameters of comparison used in analyzing the cases. Chapters 5 through 9 constitute the heart of the work: case studies of Soviet involvement in the Yemeni civil war (1962–8), the Nigerian civil war (1969–70), the Yom Kippur war (1973), the Angolan civil war (1975–6), and the Ogaden war (1977–8). The case studies are organized identically, using the categories established in Chapter 4: the local dispute; the diplomatic relationship between the USSR and its client; Soviet weapons shipments and other military assistance; the roles of Soviet and East European advisers (and, where appropriate, Cuban troops); Soviet-American interactions; the China factor; the outcome of the conflict from the perspective of Soviet interests. Chapter 10, the conclusion of the work, summarizes the findings of the case studies using a comparative approach; it is organized according to the same outline used for the case studies. The concluding chapter also draws somewhat on the historical information in Chapter 2 concerning conflicts other than the five case studies. This is done in order to clarify just what is characteristic and what is exceptional about Soviet policy in the five conflicts selected for study.

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2 THE USSR IN LOCAL CONFLICTS: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

Between 1945 and 1980, well over 100 separate wars took place around the globe, the vast majority of them in or between developing countries.¹ The Soviet Union was involved as a major arms supplier and diplomatic actor in some 20 of these conflicts. Although these figures suggest that the USSR steered clear of local wars far more often than not, involvement in 20 conflicts nevertheless represents an extraordinarily high level of foreign commitment for a country that prior to World War II only rarely had acted as a major supplier of arms, or even as a principal diplomatic actor, in conflicts outside Europe. Furthermore, under the tsars, and during the first two decades of Soviet rule, Russia had generally avoided any kind of involvement in conflicts not on or near its borders, whereas most of the conflicts in which it became involved after 1945 took place in regions of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East that were not contiguous to the Soviet Union.

At least three factors contributed to the USSR's enhanced diplomatic and military roles in local conflicts after 1945. First, and most obvious, was the vast expansion of Soviet military power that took place as a result of the war with Nazi Germany. Huge stocks of surplus armaments, large and well-trained military forces, and (within four years after the war) possession of nuclear weapons all made it simply much more feasible for the USSR to play a larger role in world affairs after 1945 than was previously possible. Second, the rapid decolonization of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East that followed World War II left a power vacuum in what came to be known as "the Third World." The retreat from empire by the European colonial powers gave rise to a whole host of new nations, impoverished and militarily weak, thereby opening up numerous opportunities for the USSR to seek influence in regions once beyond its reach and making possible the establishment of supplier-client relation-

¹Istvan Kende, "Local Wars in Asia, Africa and Latin America, 1945-1969," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in *Armaments and Disarmaments in the Nuclear Age: A Handbook* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1976), 174-5.

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Table 2.1. *The USSR in local conflicts, 1945–80*

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Stage 1 (1945–53) | Chinese civil war (1945–9) Korean war (1950–3) |
| Stage 2 (1953–64) | Suez war (1956) Indonesian conflicts (1958–65) Congo crisis and civil war (1960–4) Laotian civil war (1960–1) Algeria vs. Morocco (1963) Yemeni civil war (arms shipments via Egypt) (1962–4) |
| Stage 3 (1965–72) | Yemeni civil war (direct Soviet involvement) (1965–9) War in Vietnam (through Paris peace accords) (1965–72) Nigerian civil war (1967–70) Six-day war (1967) War of attrition (1969–70) Indo-Pakistani war (1971) |
| Stage 4 (1973–80) | Yom Kippur war (1973) War in Vietnam (through fall of Saigon) (1973–5) Angolan civil war (1975–6) Ogaden war (1977–8) Vietnam vs. Cambodia (1978–9) China vs. Vietnam (1979) South Yemen vs. Yemen (1979) Afghan civil war (1978–) |

ships with regimes that had not even existed before the war. Third, the building of nuclear arsenals by the United States and the Soviet Union, together with the development of a permanent U.S. commitment to the defense of Western Europe, soon led to a complete East-West standoff, a stalemate on the European continent. Soviet ambitions had to be channeled elsewhere, and the Third World, if only because of its instability, must have appeared to present a more appealing venue for the pursuit of those ambitions than Europe itself.

The Soviet Union's involvement in Third World conflicts from 1945 to 1980 evolved through roughly four stages, as depicted by Table 2.1. Each successive stage represented a broadening of either the physical magnitude or the geographical scope of Soviet efforts to provide military assistance to Third World regimes at war. This chapter will review each of the four stages in turn in order to provide historical background for the case studies in later chapters. First, however, a look at the USSR's behavior in local conflicts and its role as an arms supplier prior to World War II may be in order. During the interwar years the USSR was a militarily weak power, with very limited capabilities for exporting arms or projecting military force abroad; its involvement in foreign conflicts was of necessity fairly minimal and largely defensive

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in nature. Also, the few conflicts in which it did become involved were not centered in the Third World, because today's large numbers of developing independent nation-states did not even come into being until after World War II. This was nevertheless an important formative period for Soviet conduct that must have had considerable influence on the course of Soviet foreign policy after 1945.

The formative period: revolution and retreat (1917–41)

The Bolshevik revolution was conceived in armed uprisings and propagated by military force. The Red Army undertook an astonishing number of tasks in the first few years of Soviet rule: It defeated three separate White armies; it invaded and occupied Ukraine, Belorussia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia; it assisted the Soviet leaders in gaining control over the Moslem borderlands and the Far East; it helped establish satellite regimes in Outer Mongolia, Tannu-Tuva (Urankhai), and northern Iran; and it unsuccessfully attempted to invade Poland and establish a Red government in Warsaw. By November 1922, five years after the revolution, Soviet power extended over most of the territory of the former Russian Empire, a remarkable achievement by any measure. Although numerous factors contributed to the Bolshevik victory – propaganda, superior organization, astute political and diplomatic maneuvering, the incompetence and disunity of the Whites – the establishment of Soviet rule depended more on raw military force than on anything else. Without the Red Army the revolution would have failed – this lesson made a deep impression on the Soviet leaders, and it played a major role in shaping their attitude toward the uses and utility of military power.

Subversion and support for foreign revolutions also played central roles in Soviet policy during the early years. Although the Communist uprisings that took place in Europe shortly following the Russian revolution were too small and too short-lived to be considered “local conflicts” for purposes of this study, Moscow's support for them was indicative of the revolutionary commitment and internationalist ambitions of the new Soviet leadership. Bolshevik efforts to foment revolution abroad were confined mostly to propaganda and rhetoric, support and encouragement for foreign Communist parties, and the dispatching of agents such as Karl Radek, Eugen Levin, and M. N. Roy into Europe and Asia with the specific mission of exploiting revolutionary opportunities. But some military efforts were also made. Arms transfers, if they can be called that, began in the first few months after the revolution, when small arms and ammunition were smuggled into Finland in support of an abortive Communist uprising. A more direct attempt at military support for revolution occurred after the Hungarian Soviet Republic headed by Bela Kun was established in March 1919. The commander in chief of the Red Army in Moscow

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ordered some of his troops to travel toward eastern Galicia and Bukovina in order to establish direct contact with Kun, but before the plan could be carried out, the troops were transferred to the Urals front in order to meet a White offensive. Between 1919 and 1924, the Kremlin supported a number of other Communist and workers' uprisings: the Spartacist uprising in Berlin early in 1919, the declaration of a Bavarian Soviet Republic in Munich in March 1919, the *Märzaktion* in northern Germany a year later, German uprisings in the fall of 1923, an attempted revolution by the Bulgarian Communist party in September 1923, and a one-day coup in Estonia in December 1924. Moscow was unable to offer significant military assistance to any of these movements, and they all failed quickly.

The failure of these Communist uprisings in Europe was a factor in turning the Bolshevik leaders eastward in pursuit of their revolutionary aspirations. Shortly prior to the October revolution, Lenin had published *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, in which he had significantly further developed Marx's theory of the evolution of capitalism. Lenin asserted that the process whereby huge monopolies came to dominate the capitalist economic system eventually forced the Western industrial powers to undertake imperialist conquests of foreign colonies in order to find outlets for investment and profit. Imperialism would temporarily forestall the inevitable collapse of the capitalist mode of production. Indeed, without its colonies to exploit, capitalism would long since have perished. In the summer of 1920, following the failure of the Spartacist uprising, the Bavarian Soviet Republic, and the *Märzaktion*, Lenin returned to some of the concepts he had developed in *Imperialism*. Recognizing the futility of overthrowing capitalism by a frontal assault, the Soviet leader conceived a strategy of weakening the imperialist powers by striking at them from the rear – by encouraging national revolutionary movements in their colonial empires.

Lenin articulated this strategy in his draft theses on the national and colonial questions prepared for the Second Comintern Congress, and in his speech to that congress, which met in July of 1920. According to Lenin, the Soviets had to pursue a policy that would achieve the closest possible alliance between Soviet Russia and “all the national and colonial liberation movements.”² This union was the key to the eventual overthrow of capitalism:

At this Congress we see taking place a union between revolutionary proletarians of the capitalist, advanced countries, and countries where there is no or hardly any proletariat, i.e., the oppressed masses of colonial, Eastern countries... World imperialism shall fall when the revolutionary onslaught of the exploited and oppressed workers in each country... merges with

²Vladimir I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 4th ed., vol. 31 (Moscow, 1950), 124.

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the revolutionary onslaught of hundreds of millions of people who have hitherto stood beyond the pale of history.³

Lenin freely admitted that “it is beyond doubt that any national movement can only be a bourgeois-democratic movement,” but he insisted that Communists support such movements so long as they were “genuinely revolutionary.” He made clear that this alliance with bourgeois liberation movements in colonial and underdeveloped countries would be a temporary expedient, and he stressed that the genuine proletarian parties in those countries, however small they might be, must not actually merge with the bourgeois nationalist movements, but must only work with them for a time, even as they prepared to undermine these movements in the long run.⁴ Lenin’s viewpoint prevailed over strong opposition at the congress. For the next several years the Soviet regime and the Comintern pursued a policy of lending support to national revolutionary movements and encouraging local Communists – where such existed – to cooperate with them in a “united-front” strategy.

One consequence of the new emphasis on cooperating with local nationalists was a shift in Soviet policy toward Turkey. Moscow began to explore the possibility of rapprochement with the nationalist movement of Mustapha Kemal Pasha, recognizing that the tiny, newly formed Communist party of Turkey had no prospect of winning popular support. Kemal was then fighting the Greek army, which was attempting to occupy Anatolia under the terms of the Treaty of Sèvres, and the Soviet leadership evidently believed that victory by Kemal would undermine the influence of Great Britain and other Western powers in the Near East, thereby serving Soviet security interests, as well as contributing in a roundabout manner to the revolutionary struggle in Europe.⁵ Following difficult negotiations, a treaty of friendship was signed on March 16, 1921, between the Soviet government and Kemal’s nationalist regime in Ankara. In the course of the following 15 months, the Kremlin turned over to Kemal’s nationalist army enough military supplies to equip perhaps three divisions. It also extended a substantial amount of financial credit for military purchases. Although it was not decisive, the Soviet aid contributed to Kemal’s eventual victory over the Greek army in the autumn of 1922. This can be considered the first historical case of Soviet military assistance to a foreign regime at war.

A second early example of Soviet diplomatic and military involvement in a local conflict took place from 1923 to 1927, when Moscow provided assistance to the Kuomintang, the Canton-based National

³ *Ibid.*, 207–8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 216–17.

⁵ An excellent treatment of this subject is Harish Kapur, *Soviet Russia and Asia, 1917–1927: A Study of Soviet Policy towards Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan* (Geneva: Michael Joseph, 1966).

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Revolutionary party of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, in its struggle to unite a divided China under its leadership. This was the first major test of Lenin's united-front strategy, and it ended in disaster. The entire episode was one of the most complex undertakings in Soviet diplomatic history: In addition to maintaining diplomatic relations with the truncated government of the "Chinese Republic" in Peking, Moscow established relations with the Kuomintang and with a number of the warlords who controlled various regions of China; it also exerted considerable control over the small Chinese Communist party, which after 1922 entered into a united front with the Kuomintang. The Kuomintang-Communist front, which was engineered largely through the efforts of Soviet diplomat Adolf Joffe, gave the Kremlin a channel through which it was able to influence Kuomintang policies for a number of years.

In January 1923, Sun and Joffe signed an agreement effectively establishing a political and military alliance. The following August, a Nationalist general, Chiang Kai-shek, visited Moscow to discuss Soviet assistance to the Kuomintang. During his visit, Mikhail Borodin, a Comintern agent who became the chief of Soviet efforts inside China until 1927, left for China with a delegation that included several military advisers, all veterans of the civil war and graduates of the Red Army military academy. These Soviet advisers helped establish, staff, and finance the Whampoa military academy, a training school for officers near Canton. In May 1925, another large body of Soviet advisers arrived in Canton with the mission of training officers of the National Revolutionary Army (NRA) in the field. The Soviet Union shipped some military equipment to the NRA via Vladivostok, including over 23,000 small arms and large amounts of ammunition; Soviet sources estimated the value of the weapons sent by December 1925 at \$2 million. As the civil war in China intensified, some Soviet advisers – and apparently some troops – participated in actual combat alongside units of the NRA. During the first months of Chiang's highly successful northern expedition, the USSR provided some long-range radio equipment, and Soviet planes occasionally undertook tactical bombing, reconnaissance, and supply missions in support of the Nationalist army. The number of Soviet advisers working in China may have reached over 1,000.⁶

Stalin's professed intention of having the Chinese Communists squeeze the Kuomintang like a lemon before throwing it away was, ironically, fulfilled in reverse. Dissension between the Communists and the Nationalists in the united front grew steadily, leading to a number of tense situations and incidents, to a split in the Kuomintang, and eventually, in April 1927, to a brutal massacre of Communists in

⁶ Joseph E. Thach, Jr., "Soviet Military Assistance to Nationalist China 1923–41," Parts I and II, *Military Review* (August 1977):72–82, and *Military Review* (September 1977):49–56.