

December 7, 1977

**Memorandum of Conversation, East German Official
with Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia Ratanov**

Citation:

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Summary:

The memo details a conversation between Ratanov and an East German official. The talk covered the ongoing war with Somalia and the internal political situation of Ethiopia

Original Language:

German

Contents:

Translation - English

Memorandum of Conversation, East German official with Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia Ratanov, Addis Ababa,
6 December 1977 (dated 7 December)

Comrade Ratanov gave the following information:

Militarily, the Eastern front is presently the most difficult problem for the Ethiopian side. Due to the correlation of forces the initiative is with the Somali side. The Ethiopian troops are forced onto the defense. The Ethiopian side is making all-out efforts to mobilize around 60,000 to 70,000 men. About 20,000 men will already be available within the next few weeks. They will be trained in short training courses. The Ethiopian side will be able to go on the offensive in about 1 1/2 to 2 months.

The technical superiority of the Somali troops is most prominent in heavy artillery. Although the Ethiopian side has - due to Soviet deliveries - at its disposal over 510 heavy guns while Somalia only has 126, there is a lack of soldiers who can handle the heavy artillery. The training is still taking time.

300 Cuban military experts (artillery, tank drivers, pilots) are expected to arrive soon.

The Ethiopian side currently has about 137 tanks on the Eastern front. The Somali side has about 140.

40 Ethiopian tanks cannot be used in battle due to minor repairs. Though these repairs would normally be done by the tank drivers themselves, they are not capable of doing so. On the Somali side such repairs are possible because the Soviet Union had established the necessary repair station.

In recent days, the Ethiopian side has for the first time launched air attacks on mobile objects using the MiG 21. The negative opinion about the MiGs has meanwhile improved (the [U.S.] F-5 is a much improved model with a wider operational range).

Comrade Ratanov gave the following explanation of the Eritrean problem:

If it were possible to give the Ethiopian side a breathing-spell in Eritrea, it could focus its efforts on the Eastern front. A dialogue has to be initiated. This has not been done so far. In this regard, it would not be advantageous to show all our cards right away.

It is of critical importance that the Ethiopian side is not willing to grant the Eritrean population autonomy within the bounds of its old territories. They assume that other peoples still reside in Eritrea (e.g. Tigre and Afars). This has to be taken into consideration. Therefore they want to trim Eritrean territory. The area of the Afars around the port of Assab as well as the Tigre are to be separated. This would be almost half of Eritrean territory.

Should the Ethiopian leadership stick with this point of view, it will be difficult to find a common ground for negotiations. (Various peoples live, for example, in Dagestan and Georgia. There are autonomous territories within the individual republics of the [Soviet] Union.) The most important thing is to get both parties to the negotiating table.

The first point of the 9-point program on Eritrea states autonomy with respect to tribes/peoples but not with respect to territories. Mengistu has stated in a previous speech that Ethiopia would be willing to grant more autonomy to Eritrea than it had

had before. But he has not yet stated what he meant by this.

On the correlation of forces within the PMAC:

Mengistu has further consolidated his position since the elimination of [Co-chairman of the Coordinating Committee of the Armed forces (DERG) Lt. Col.] Atnafu Abate. He has further gained stature as a revolutionary statesman. One senses in speaking with him that he views things realistically. At the same time one has to reckon with his complicated character.

On the establishment of the Party:

One has to convince the Ethiopian side that it is an illusion to be able to create a monolithic party from the start. The party can only be created in the fight against the various currents. It has to develop on the basis of social conditions. [...]

There will be risks involved in the establishment of the party which have to be taken into consideration. During the establishment of the party one has to deliberate the question of co-option.

The PMAC presently has about 80 members. 30 of them are a burden. These members hardly have any education and can easily become victims of the counter-revolution. Mengistu intends to send them to the USSR, Cuba, and the GDR to turn them into revolutionaries. Only 25 to 20 men belong to the active inner circle. It is therefore necessary upon the establishment of the party to add to the leadership other capable forces from outside. There will be a fight about the leadership positions within the central committee of the party. If the forces around Mengistu do not succeed in this fight, then the CC will not be an improvement in quality over the present PMAC. The Ethiopian leadership has lately devoted much attention to the establishment of the party. There still exists great confusion with respect to ideological questions as well as strategy and tactics. For example, they have only diffuse ideas about the class basis.

The workers, the peasants, the left wing of the petit-bourgeoisie as well as anti-feudal and anti-imperialist elements belong to the forces which support the Revolution. There is no talk about a national bourgeoisie. From the start it has been perceived as an enemy. There are also a great number of honest people among the state apparatus and the officers corps. The minister for agriculture has stated that they would probably some day appoint him ambassador in order to get rid of him. Many people have gone abroad out of fear. Not all of them were counterrevolutionaries.

On the question of non-capitalist development with Socialist orientation: Within the leadership there is nobody who knows what this state of development really means. It is presented as a Socialist revolution. For example, the development of kulaks is rejected. 75% of the rural population is still involved in a produce-based economy. Who should develop agricultural production? There are no social statistics on which the development of the Ethiopian village could be based. There are regulations for private investments but they are not propagated. The bourgeoisie has money but is afraid to invest because it fears nationalization. One should follow the example of the USSR and develop a NEP [New Economic Policy], thus providing a prospect for all social classes.

Atnafu was criticized for problems which he rightfully brought up. He favored the development to a mixed society. It was another thing that he opposed socialism altogether. Now nobody dares to say anything anymore. The mood of the workers and peasants is extremely leftist. It will take great persuasion to convince them of the necessity of a NEP. On the other hand there is the danger that the PMAC will become

too distant from the people.

On the national question:

One has to try -- through political work and by a intelligent policy towards the nationalities -- to make all members of individual ethnic groups to feel as Ethiopians first. Members of all ethnic groups should be represented in ministries and other institutions on an equal basis. The various individual nationalities have not even been represented in the PMAC. Its composition came about by accident. The popular mood is directed in particular against Amharen. Therefore Mengistu was elected chairman. He evolved as the strongman. The Soviet military experts have come to realize that no decision is made without his agreement.

[Source: SAPO-BArch, DY30 IV 2/2.035/126; document obtained and translated by Christian F. Ostermann.]