



**February 16, 1978**

**Embassy of the GDR in the USSR, Political  
Department, 17 February 1978, Memorandum of  
Conversation with the Dep. Head of the MFA Third  
Department (Africa), Comrade S. J. Sinitsin**

**Citation:**

"Embassy of the GDR in the USSR, Political Department, 17 February 1978, Memorandum of Conversation with the Dep. Head of the MFA Third Department (Africa), Comrade S. J. Sinitsin", February 16, 1978, Wilson Center Digital Archive, SAPMO-BArch, DY30 IV 2/2.035/127; obtained and translated by Christian F. Ostermann.  
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/110970>

**Summary:**

Sinitsin briefs the East German embassy in Moscow on the current situation in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The briefing focuses on the ongoing war with Somalia and the internal situation in Ethiopia

**Original Language:**

German

**Contents:**

Translation - English

Embassy of the GDR in the USSR, Political Department, 17 February 1978, Memorandum of Conversation with the Dep. Head of the MFA Third Department (Africa), Comrade S. J. Sinitsin, 16 February 1978 [...] Comrade Sinitsin gave his estimate of the situation in Ethiopia and on the Horn of Africa. 1. The counteroffensive of the Ethiopian armed forces against the Somali troops in the Ogaden is considered positive. We are currently not dealing with a general offensive but the recovery of important strategic points which will then allow for the complete expulsion of Somali military from Ethiopian territory. So far, a 30 km to 70 km deep zone has been recovered. The air superiority of the Ethiopian forces has a great impact. Comrade Sinitsin considered the prospect for a successful conclusion of the fighting for the Ethiopians rather good; he also emphasized, however, that military encounters will intensify. Such factors as the general mobilization in Somalia and increased arms deliveries by the West will have some effect. Also, one cannot forget the fact that significant parts of the Ethiopian armed forces have to be kept in the North and are involved in fighting counterrevolutionary groups in Eritrea. Another part of the army is necessary to guarantee security towards the Sudan. The Ethiopian army can still not be considered a homogeneous unit. Large parts of the cadres, in particular the officer corps, were taken over from the imperial government. Sabotage, insubordination, even withdrawal without fighting are serious occurrences. Great attention is therefore paid to the reorganization of the army and the concerted build-up of a popular militia. The biggest problem here is once again the cadres and their training. One should also not underestimate the problems caused by the change-over in the army from Western to Socialist weapons systems which have to be managed and deployed efficiently. Finally, a number of problems with regard to the revolutionary development in Ethiopia need to be solved. The situation in the countryside is characterized by a heightening of class warfare. In contrast to other developing countries with a Socialist orientation, there is a strong social differentiation in Ethiopia and the implementation of class principle requires permanent relentless struggle. Although the necessity of an avant-garde party has evolved, there are currently no grounds for such a party. [...] Although there have evolved political groups at a local level which in the future could lay the foundations for a party, there exist a number of sectarian groups which at times exert large influence. Simultaneously with the problem of building up a unified political organization with a broad popular basis, the question arises with regard to a state apparatus which is loyal to the new leadership. Army and state apparatus - both taken over from imperial times - still are divided in two camps. Many decisions taken by the revolutionary military leadership are already sabotaged within the government, even in the defense and foreign ministry. The enemies of the people's forces enjoy the full support of Western countries. Since there is a lack of trained progressive cadres, no radical solution can be pursued. All these factors point to the conclusion that a long developmental stage will be necessary to solve the basic problems in favor of a Socialist Revolution in Ethiopia. 2. The international situation of the conflict at the Horn of Africa is characterized by the efforts of the imperialist countries to keep a crisis atmosphere on the African continent in order to achieve their long-term objectives. These plans are bound to fail with the increasing progress towards a military solution of the conflict in favor of Ethiopia. Western counter-efforts can clearly be recognized. Although the Barre regime is embarrassing to the Western powers, they are using it as a tool in their attempt to pursue their interests. They use the lie of alleged aggressive designs on Ethiopia's part in order to conceal their direct activities in support of Somalia. The declaration of Western powers that they would not make weapons available to Somalia is refuted by arms deliveries via third, in particular reactionary Arab countries and via "private" firms. Simultaneously, the Western countries are increasing their politico-diplomatic pressure for the "independence" of the Ogaden to at least achieve a partial success which would improve the prospects for the realization of their long-term goals. From this point of view we have to understand the willingness of the Western powers to attain an armistice without the withdrawal of Somali troops from Ethiopian territory. It is their goal to give Somalia the opportunity to consolidate its position on Ethiopian territory and to achieve, through protracted negotiations, a situation like the one in the Middle East. Therefore the Soviet Union and the Socialist countries fully support the basic Ethiopian position: armistice, withdrawal of Somali troops, and political negotiations. The direct and indirect [Western] support for Somalia illustrates the demagogic character of the declarations of the Western governments,

which shows itself in the comparison of Somalia with Ethiopia, the comparison of an aggressor with its victim, and the attempt to blame the Soviet Union and the Socialist countries for the heightening of the conflict and thus to keep them from further supporting Ethiopia. The Ethiopian leadership is carefully observing the attitude and actions of the imperialist states and differentiates between them. In this respect one has to view Mengistu's declaration announcing to the United States, Great Britain, and the FRG that he would break diplomatic relations if they continued their direct support of Somalia. Hence he is clearly considering with subtle difference states such as Italy, which as a former colonial power is currently taking on a flexible position in Ethiopia, and France, which is above all interested in the consolidation of its position in Djibouti.

3. The conflict in the Horn of Africa has led to a strong polarization and differentiation among the African and the Middle Eastern countries. The situation in Ethiopia is made more difficult by the encirclement by reactionary regimes of states which depend upon them. While South Yemen is altogether taking a positive position on Ethiopia, the other, even many progressive, Arab nations, have considerable reservations about supporting Ethiopia. In particular, the Arab nations differ in their attitude towards Eritrea which ranges from open solidarity to direct support of the separatists in Eritrea. Reservations are also held against Libya and Algiers who do not even support the revolutionary development in Ethiopia to a full measure. Differences of opinion also exist between Syria and Iraq on the one hand, and Ethiopia on the other hand. While the OAU has continued to defend, in the framework of its own decisions and in full agreement with Ethiopia, the integrity of Ethiopian borders, one has to differentiate the attitude of individual African countries toward the conflict.

The countries of Black Africa fully support the Ethiopian position. But the unanimous condemnation of Somalia as an aggressor was not achieved. Thus, just as a number of member states of the OAU repudiated the clear condemnation of the aggression against Angola, they also differ in their position in the evaluation of the situation on the Horn of Africa. One can also not overlook such influences as that exerted by Nigeria which favors the independence of the Ogaden.

In general, the Soviet comrades acknowledge the positive fact that the OAU will continue its activities for a settlement of the conflict. This fact is also especially important because some powers continue to pursue attempts for a settlement of the conflict by the UN Security Council. Like Ethiopia, the Soviet Union is against an intervention by the Security Council since this would promote the internationalization of the conflict as intended by the Western countries. One should also remember that a takeover by the Security Council would delay a resolution of the conflict - in a similar fashion as the Middle East conflict - to an uncertain point in the future. Furthermore, a UN involvement would lead to a great power confrontation [and] would aggravate the situation within the UN which would have a negative effect upon the main problems now confronting the UN.

Although a treatment of the conflict has so far not been put before the Security Council by the Western powers, it cannot be precluded that such attempts will be undertaken. One thing is clear, they would have an anti-Soviet impetus. With regard to Beijing's attitude towards the conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia, one can detect - as has been exposed in Soviet publications and mass media - a clearly hostile attitude against the Ethiopian leadership. Beijing supports, as all over the world, reactionary regimes inasmuch as this serves anti-Sovietism. Although China openly shares Somalia's point of view, its direct material support is altogether rather moderate. Besides direct arms deliveries, Beijing is supporting Somalia in the construction of roads and irrigation systems and delivers medical aid.

Existing pro-Maoist groups in Ethiopia exert very little influence and have no broad popular basis. 4. With regard to the demand by Somalia to recall its students in the USSR, Comrade Sinitsin informed us about the following: Upon request of the Somali government, the Somali embassy in Moscow delivered a note to the MFA in Moscow communicating the intention to recall all Somalis residing in the USSR. The Soviet Union was asked to help with the return of the students which is to be carried out on special planes. The MFA of the USSR responded by arguing that the recall of students in ongoing training programs would be a violation of existing agreements and thus the financial burden had to be carried by Somalia. The students' return aboard special planes itself was not refused. [...]

[Signed: Vogel][Source: SAPMO-BArch, DY30 IV 2/2.035/127; obtained and translated by Christian F. Ostermann.]