

**May 11, 1978**

**Memorandum of Conversation between [SED]  
Comrade Friedel Trappen and Soviet Comrade R. A.  
Ulyanovsky in the CC of the CPSU**

**Citation:**

"Memorandum of Conversation between [SED] Comrade Friedel Trappen and Soviet Comrade R. A. Ulyanovsky in the CC of the CPSU", May 11, 1978, Wilson Center Digital Archive, SAPMO-BArch, DY30 IV 2/2.035/127  
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/111899>

**Summary:**

The conversation focused on the negotiations between Ethiopia and the Eritrean Liberation Movement. The talks were focusing on how the Eritreans could obtain a certain degree of regional autonomy

**Original Language:**

German

**Contents:**

Translation - English

Memorandum of Conversation between [SED] Comrade Friedel Trappen and Soviet Comrade R. A. Ulyanovsky in the CC of the CPSU, 11 May 1978 [Other participants] □Ulyanovsky: As Comrade B.N. Ponomarev has already pointed out in the last conversation with the comrades of the SED, the CC of the CPSU considers the talks of the SED with the Eritrean movements and the Ethiopian side very useful and positive. We can still say this today. On this basis one should approach the next meeting in June as well as other meetings. We consider the four points agreed on at the last meeting as positive. If both sides really take the four points as a starting point, this would be positive for further development. We are of the opinion that the following main points should be emphasized: a) The political solution of the problem and an end to the bloodshed. b) The granting of regional autonomy for Eritrea, but, however, no separate national independence. c) The unconditional use of Ethiopia's communications with the ports on the Red Sea. d) The increased unification of the progressive forces on both sides. This would be a deeply satisfying platform which could be developed further. The points agreed upon in the March meeting are contained in these proposals and hence could be developed further at the June meeting. This would create a real foundation for the rapprochement of both sides. The main question is, how honestly, how genuinely, and how deeply both sides will comply with these points. If one could say today that the four points are fulfilled by both sides or will soon be fulfilled, this would be a great relief for us. The CPSU also works in this direction. It agreed to receive an ELF-RC delegation led by Ahmed Mohammed Nasser at the level of the USSR Solidarity Committee on a confidential internal basis around 20 May 1978. We will use these contacts in order to induce the representatives of the ELF-RC to have direct contact with the Provisional Military Administrative Council. The objective is to find an appropriate solution for Eritrea within the framework of the Ethiopian state. We do not have the intention to hide from Ahmed Nasser our policy toward a unified Ethiopia. The policy of the CPSU is aimed at the unity of Ethiopia. We will try to convince Ahmed Nasser that the future development of the Eritrean people can only evolve in a unified Ethiopian state. In the discussions we will continue to pursue the line of emphasizing the unity between the Marxist-Leninist forces and national-democratic forces in Ethiopia and Eritrea. We would like to stress that we have to be extremely tactful in our relations with Mengistu Haile Mariam and the PMAC, in particular with respect to the Eritrean question. Mengistu Haile Mariam does not have an easy stand within the PMAC in this regard. In connection with the well-known Dr. Negede [Gobeze] affair tensions have heightened within the PMAC and this has not made Mengistu's task any easier. We would like to emphasize that all concrete initiatives on the Eritrean questions have to originate from Ethiopia. This does not mean that the Eritrean side is free of any initiatives. If we put the entire weight on the Mengistu Haile Mariam's shoulders and free Ahmed Nasser or respectively Aforki of any responsibility, this would be one-sided. The Ethiopian side is watching with great jealousy the actions of the CPSU and the SED. Here as well one has to see the connection between Mengistu Haile Mariam's position and the people around him. Mengistu Haile Mariam deserves to be regarded by us as a man who represents internationalist positions. By contrast to him, Berhanu Bayeh and Fikre Selassie as well as Legesse Asfaw and others, for example, are marked by nationalism although they are faithful to Mengistu Haile Mariam. All steps and initiatives on the part of the CPSU, the CP Cuba, and the SED must be put forward extremely tactfully and carefully not to cause any protests. Frankly, the problem lies to a certain degree in the fact that we all attempt to square the circle. The one side of the problem is - and we are both working on this - to solve the problem on an internationalist basis. On the other hand there are efforts to solve it on a nationalist basis. This is precisely why, I emphasize again, we have to apply maximum caution, circumspection, and tactfulness towards Mengistu Haile Mariam so that the nationalists will not grasp him by the throat. In our contacts and talks with Ahmed Nasser we intend to make it unmistakably clear to him that it is necessary that all revolutionary forces join together and that the Eritrean problem is not only a national but above all a class problem which has to be solved by the common fight against the imperialists and the Arab reaction. Efforts to split up Ethiopia and create a separate Eritrean state, to refuse to give Ethiopia access to the ports on the Red Sea, to drive the Soviet Union and the other Socialist countries out of this region, are not simply a national problem but a problem of international class warfare, not to speak of the fact that such a separate state would be manipulated by the Sudan and

Saudi Arabia and their petrol dollars. We will therefore point out to Ahmed Nasser, who claims to be a Marxist, the national and international dimension of the Eritrean problem. Concerning the questions put forward by Comrade Trappen I would like to add the following consideration: The basic difficulty is the fact that separatist ideas have been rooted in Eritrea for a long time. These ideas are very popular among the population, especially among the workers. This factor, the factor of the erring of the masses based on nationalism, is a given one. The main difficulty therefore is that the mass of the Eritrean population does not understand the difference between the imperial regime of Haile Selassie and the policy of the PMAC.

The fight continues as in earlier times under the imperial regime. This creates the great necessity for intensified political work by the PMAC and above all by Mengistu Haile Mariam towards the Eritrean population. It was particularly this point that Comrade Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev discussed with Mengistu Haile Mariam during his trip to Moscow. The PMAC is confronting a decisive, great, and huge task to get the people of Eritrea on the side of the Ethiopian Revolution. Preparations have been made but no concrete steps and measures. The Soviet comrades have told Mengistu Haile Mariam and Legesse that it was now important to show the Eritrean people that the PMAC is not identical with the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie and the interests of the Ethiopian Revolution are in harmony with the interests of the progressive forces in Eritrea. Unfortunately, forces in the PMAC and Mengistu Haile Mariam himself have caused a slow-down of this necessary political work towards the people of Eritrea. Mengistu Haile Mariam is passive. We completely agree with the estimate that military actions for the solution of the Eritrean question alone are pointless and, moreover, dangerous. They would widen the gap between the Eritrean people and the Ethiopian Revolution and create new intensified hatred. This does not mean that the PMAC should completely abandon military activities. We think that it is necessary to exert military pressure on the Eritrean separatists forces. This especially since in regard to military matters the current situation in Eritrea is not favorable for the PMAC. It is therefore necessary to talk but at the same time to act militarily on the part of the PMAC. This applies in particular to the safeguarding of important military strategic positions and especially of the communications with the ports of Massawa and Assab well as the capital Asmara, the cities Akordat, Keren, and Barentu. These military actions have to serve political measures. It was emphasized in the talk between Comrade L.I. Brezhnev and Mengistu Haile Mariam that it is necessary for the PMAC to address itself to the Eritrean people. This political initiative is extremely acute today as never before. We deem it necessary that both the CPSU and the SED together exert influence on Mengistu Haile Mariam in this respect. We have to take into consideration that the position of the Eritrean movements has not become any less obstinate, because they still demand the separation of Eritrea. This shows that there are no honest efforts for a political solution on the part of the Eritrean representatives. Therefore it is correct to work for a change in the current position of the Eritrean movements. It is especially necessary to receive from them a declaration pledging that self-determination for the Eritrean people will be achieved within the framework of a Ethiopian state. We received an information [report] in early May according to which direct contacts had been established between the PMAC and the EPLF. We do not know anything about the substance of these contacts. With respect to the concrete question whether it makes sense to continue the negotiations or to await military actions, Comrade Ulyanovsky stated that both sides had to be induced to [take part in] further negotiations and that at the same time a certain limited military pressure was quite useful, meaning that even with the continuation of the negotiation efforts certain military actions could not be precluded. Concerning the question on the concrete coordination between the CPSU, the SED, and the Cuban CP, Comrade Ulyanovsky emphasized that all bilateral contacts with the Cuban CP are excellent and that the same applied to the SED. There has been no exchange of opinion with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen on the part of the CPSU. They have, as is well known, pulled their troops out of Ethiopia. One has to take into consideration that the situation in the PDR Yemen is difficult. The PDR Yemen has to be protected. Comrade Ulyanovsky agreed to put the proposal for the creation of a mechanism for consultation and coordination before the leadership of the CPSU. Concerning the question of a possible later public announcement of our parties on the Eritrean question (in some form), it is

expedient to examine this in the light of the Moscow talks with Ahmed Nasser and the planned third meeting of the Ethiopian and Eritrean sides with the SED. With respect to the question of expert consultations on variants of a solution, it is possible at any time for GDR scientists [specialists] to consult with Soviet comrades about concrete questions. Comrade Ulyanovsky thinks that at this point these contacts should be limited to the level of the International Relations Departments of the Central Committees. With respect to the involvement of CPSU experts in the consultation and negotiations at the third meeting, Comrade Ulyanovsky stated that he would put this question before the party leadership for decision. Concerning the guarantees called for by the Eritrean side, one can only get more precise on this point after concrete results have been achieved on the question of what, who, and to whom in some matter guarantees might be given. Finally, Comrade Ulyanovsky pointed out that the attempt to keep the Ethiopian leadership from its military advance through us was a very delicate matter. The PMAC was predominantly of the opinion that even a political solution of the Eritrean question was not possible without a strengthening of Ethiopia's military positions in Eritrea and that the liberation of above-mentioned ports and cities can only be achieved by military means. The PMAC assumed that only then [would] actual and basic conditions exist for negotiations with the separatists.[...][Source: SAPMO-BArch, DY30 IV 2/2.035/127; document obtained and translated by Christian F. Ostermann.]