

December 23, 1965

**Telegram from John F. Root, Office of Northern
African Affairs, 'Subject: Bulgarian Fronting For
Russian Interests in Ethiopia'**

Citation:

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Summary:

Observations by Israeli and US diplomats of the Soviet Union's attempt at indirect economic penetration of Ethiopia during the mid-1960s. The Ethiopian regime was suspicious of Soviet intervention, thus they had to resort to the help of the East European states, in this case Bulgaria.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan
Transcript - English

SOVIETS MAKING ETHIOPIA A PRIORITY TARGET IN AFRICA

DECLASSIFIED
Authority NND 933548
By RLS NARA Date 07/01/07

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF AFRICAN AFFAIRS

SECRET

~~LOB~~
~~JOF~~
~~SMW~~
AFN
File

TO : AF - Governor Williams

December 23, 1965

FROM : AFN - John F. Root *JFR*

SUBJECT: Bulgarian Fronting for Russian Interests in Ethiopia -
INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

The attached telegram (Addis' 795) from Ambassador Korry sheds some revealing light on current Soviet and Communist tactics in Ethiopia and Africa. The primary source is Israeli Ambassador Divon who is considered by our Ambassador to be one of the shrewdest and best informed observers of the Ethiopian scene. (The Israelis have been notably successful in penetrating the IEG security and military intelligence apparatuses.)

Concerning Rhodesia, the Soviets are apparently using the Bulgarians as a stalking horse to sound out (a) African receptivity and reliability in the event the "socialist countries...were to risk resources or troops in the Rhodesian crisis" and (b) what the U.S. reaction would be to "socialist intervention". The between-the-lines inference is that the Soviet Union is at least examining the possibility of intervention as a prelude to the Zambian mission to Moscow and has pressed the Bulgarians to supply the weather reports.

It also appears that the Russians are using the Bulgarians in a similar way to lay the groundwork for expanding Soviet influence in Ethiopian domestic affairs. There are several reasons that the Soviets would prefer to work through the Bulgarians rather than directly: (1) As the principal arms supplier to Somalia, the USSR is suspect in Ethiopian eyes; (2) as a small Communist state, Bulgaria presents less of a threat to Ethiopia; (3) this may be an indirect way of getting the IEG to use the large and still outstanding Russian line of credit to Ethiopia. (The Ethiopian drawdowns to date from the \$100 million USSR credit of 1960 have been minimal -- only about \$15 million. The Ethiopians have particularly resisted a Communist foot in the door in the potentially rich but reform-ripe agricultural sector. Hence the Bulgarian push for a huge model farm project.)

We certainly agree with Ambassador Korry's conclusion that the Soviet Union, directly and indirectly, is making Ethiopia a priority target in Africa.

Attachment: Addis' tel 795.

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GROUP 3
Downgraded at 25 year
intervals; not
automatically declassified

INCOMING TELEGRAM Department of State

AFW

46-S

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By RLS NARA Date 07/01/09

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1965 DEC 21 AM 9 46

Action NYNNGSAB875DAA890
RR RUEHC
AF DE RUQSDA 17Z 550940
Info ZNY SSSSS
R 210916Z
FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 795
INFO ZEN/AMEMBASSY SOFIA UNN
G ZEN/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW UNN
SP ZEN/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV UNN
SAH ZEN/AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO UNN
L ZEN/AMEMBASSY NAIROBI UNN
EUR ZEN/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM UNN
NEA ZEN/AMCONSUL ASMARA UNN
IO ZEN/CINCPACAFSA FOR POLAD
NSC STATE GRNC
INR BT
CIA SECRET DECEMBER 21 NOFORN
NSA COMMUNIST INTERESTS IN ETHIOPIA.
DOD
NIC EMBTEL 777

1. ISRAELI AMB DIVON (PROTECT) IN RESPONSE TO MY SOUNDINGS PROVIDED CONSIDERABLE DETAIL ON EXPANDING BULGARIAN INTERESTS IN ETHIOPIA. DIVON SAID BULGARIAN AMB KARATSANOV HAD CALLED ON HIM URGENTLY DEC. 16 PRIMARILY TO LEARN QTE WHETHER SOCIALIST COUNTRIES COULD DEPEND UPON AFRICANS UNQTE IF THEY WERE TO RISK RESOURCES OR TROOPS IN RHODESIAN CRISIS AND WHAT WOULD BE LIKELY US REACTION TO SOCIALIST INTERVENTION. BULGARIAN MADE NO EFFORT TO HIDE URGENCY BEHIND THESE QUESTIONS AS RESULT OF ANNOUNCEMENT OF ZAMBIAN MISSION TO MOSCOW.

PAGE 2 RUQSDA 17Z SECRET NOFORN
2. DURING CONVERSATION, DIVON ELICITED FOLLOWING FROM BULGARIAN:
A. BULGARIANS HAD INSISTED ON STATE VISIT FOR ZHIVKOV BECAUSE ONLY PARTY LEADER COULD MAKE AGREEMENTS. MOST IMPORTANT OF THESE WAS BULGARIAN DESIRE TO ACQUIRE PIECE OF AGRICULTURAL LAND OF ABOUT 250,000 ACRES (BUT 100,000 WOULD BE ACCEPTABLE) NEAR ADDIS FOR MAJOR AGRO-INDUSTRIAL OPERATION. AMBASSADOR HAD BEEN GIVEN URGENT ASSIGNMENT TO ACQUIRE LAND AND REACH ACCORD WITH IEG PRIOR TO HIS SCHEDULED DEPARTURE REASSIGNMENT IN MARCH. ECB ANXIOUS TO QUIT ETHIOPIA AND LEFT IMPRESSION HE COULD NOT DEPART UNTIL COMPLETED NEGS.

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-2- 795, DECEMBER 21, FROM ADDIS ABABA

B. TEN BULGARIAN SURVEYORS, AGRONOMISTS AND OTHER TECHNICIANS HAD BEEN IN ETHIOPIA MANY MONTHS SEEKING SUITABLE LAND (EMB A-593) BUT BULGARIANS REACHING CONCLUSION THAT IEG GIVING THEM RUNAROUND, FIRST BY OFFERING FEW THOUSAND ACRES ONE AREA, THEN ANOTHER, THEN STILL ANOTHER, ALWAYS KEEPING THEM ON MOVE BUT FAR FROM ACCORD. RECENTLY THEY HAD BEEN OFFERED LAND NEAR BAHAR DAR WHICH WAS SUITABLE BUT SITE SPLIT BETWEEN TWO PROVINCES ONE OF WHICH (BEGEMIDIR) REFUSED TO APPROVE MERGER OF LAND INTO ONE UNIT.

C. KARATSANOV SAID HIS GOVT WILLING TO SPEND QTE TENS

PAGE RUQSDA 17Z S E C R E T NOFORN
OF MILLIONS UNQTE TO GET PROJECT LAUNCHED AND COMPLETED IN RECORD TIME OF ONE YEAR. SAID FOR WHATEVER CROPS WERE SUITABLE TO LAND ACQUIRED, THERE WOULD BE CANNERIES (PLURAL) AND OTHER PROCESSING PLANTS. BULGARIANS WANTED PROJECT TO INCLUDE WHOLE MODERN TOWN WITH CINEMAS, SPORTS GROUND, AND RADIO STATION. ADDIS AREA WAS BEST BECAUSE OF SHOW PIECE EFFECT BUT THEY WOULD TAKE ANY ACCESSIBLE AREA SUCH AS BAHAR DAR BECAUSE QTE PEOPLE WOULD HEAR ABOUT IT UNQTE. IN RESPONSE TO DUBIOUS ETHIOPIAN EXPRESSIONS ABOUT BULGARIAN PIPEDREAMS, HE SAID HE HAD TOLD ETHIOPIANS QTE GIVE US THE LAND, LET US MAKE A START AND YOU WILL SEE UNQTE.

D. KARATSANOV SAID HIS GOVT WAS LOSING MILLIONS ON FISH AND MEAT PROJECTS IN ERITREA BUT IT HAD NOT DETERRED SOFIA FROM WISHING TO EMBARK ON ITS BIGGEST OVERSEAS PROJECT.

3. ISRAELI SAID THAT ONE OF HIS TECHNICIANS WORKING AT IEAF HQ BASE AT DEBRE ZEIT WAS APPROACHED RECENTLY BY THREE BULGARIAN TECHNICIANS ACCOMPANIED BY DEPUTY AF COMMANDER COL ABERRA. LATTER INTRODUCED THREE BULGARS WHO PRESENTED QTE TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN UNQTE LETTER FROM ERITREAN GOVGEN EXPLAINING THAT THREE WERE WORKING ON ASSAB TOWN PLANNING AND SHOULD BE GIVEN COOPERATION. THREE PUT QUESTIONS TO ISRAELI AS TO NUMBER OF

PAGE 4 RUQSDA 17Z S E C R E T NOFORN
AIRCRAFT IEAF HAS, NUMBER AND TYPE IF EXPECTS, NUMBER AND TYPE OF RADIO COMMUNICATIONS, MAINTENANCE EQUIPMENT ETC. ISRAELI TOOK

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-3- 795, DECEMBER 21, FROM ADDIS ABABA

GULLIBLE ABERRA ASIDE AND EXPLAINED OBVIOUS PLOY, THEN GOT RID OF BULGARIANS.

COMMENT: I HAVE CONFIRMED SAME THREE ARE APPEARING IN VARIOUS IEG MINISTRIES AND TRIED SAME LINE, JUSTIFYING QUESTIONS ON GROUNDS THEY NEED INFO FOR WORK THEY WILL DO ON EXPANSION ASSAB AIRFIELD.

4. ISRAELI AMB SAID BULGARS HAD ALSO REQUESTED INTERIOR MINISTRY FOR PERMISSION INSTALL RADIO TRANSMITTERS IN TWENTY OF THEIR MOBILE SLAUGHTERING VANS IN ERITREA BUT APPLICATION BEEN REFUSED AFTER CONSULTATION WITH ISRAELI TECHNICIANS.

5. ISRAELI AMB SAID HE HAD NO DOUBTS THAT BULGARS FRONTING FOR SOVIETS WHO BECAUSE OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN SOMALIA USING ALLY IN ETHIOPIA.

COMMENT: AGREE BUT SOVIETS MIGHT ALSO RECKON EASIER FOR SMALL COUNTRY TO GET PROJECTS STARTED WITHOUT RAISING AS MANY FECCS.

6. I HAVE RAISED QUESTION OF INTENSE BULGAR EFFORT WITH MEMBER OF OFFICIALS I REGARD AS INTRINSICALLY ANTI-COMMUNIST (MAMMO TADESSA, BULCHA DEMESKA). BOTH CONFIRMED ISRAELI STORY. BOTH SAID BULGARS FRONTING FOR SOVIETS SINCE BULGARIA QTE

PAGE 5 RUGSDA 17Z S E C RMG T NOFORN
OBVIOUSLY AS POOR AS WE ARE UNQTE. BOTH SAID IEG HAS EYES WIDE OPEN AND BULGARS WOULD ENCOUNTER ALL SORTS OF DIFFICULTIES. BOTH NOTED LARGE MONEY-LOSING ACTIVITIES IN ERITREA AND ASKED WHY? BOTH SAID THERE WERE ETHIOPIANS WHO WERE EITHER PLAYING SELF INTEREST (REFERENCE TO POSSIBLE PAYOFFS TO ASRATE KASSA AND OTHERS) OR WHO WERE GULLIBLE. BOTH SAID IEG WOULD NOT WANT TO CREATE PUBLIC IMPRESSION IT WAS SPURRING OFFERS FROM COMMUNISTS WHICH WERE MORE ADVANTAGEOUS THEN THOSE EMANATING FROM WEST SO THAT MATTER HAD TO BE HANDLED WITH GREAT DISCRETION. MAMMO ASKED WHY I THOUGHT IEG HAD NOT YET USED AVAILABLE SOVIET CREADITS. BOTH WERE MORE THEN SLIGHTLY INTERESTED IN SOME DETAILS OF PARA 4 AND 5 ABOVE WHICH I GAVE WITH VIEW TO BROADENING WAYS LATENT IEG SUSPICIONS.

COMMENT: MOST INTERESTING ASPECT OF ISRAELI INFO IS WHYSOVIETS HAVE DECIDED NOW IS MOMENT TO LAUNCH INTENSIFIED EFFORT IN

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-4- 795, DECEMBER 21, FROM ADDIS ABABA

ETHIOPIA. MOST LOGICAL EXPLANATION IS THAT MOSCOW IS MOTIVATED BY SAME REASONING BEHIND 1964-5 ALTERATION IN US POLICIES. HERE, THAT IS FOCUS ON ADDIS AS CAPITAL OF OAU AND UNECA, AGING EMPEROR AND YOUTHFUL STIRRINGS, PLUS PERHAPS DESIRE TO MATCH EXPANDED US EFFORT IN AFRICAN SHOW PLACE AREA AND PERHAPS DISILLUSION WITH SOMALIA AND SUDAN.

GF-3. KORRY

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Authority NND 989548By RLS NARA Date 07/01/09

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Bureau of African Affairs

SECRET

December 23, 1965

TO : AF - Governor Williams

FROM : AFN - John F. Root

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Concerning Rhodesia, the Soviets are apparently using the Bulgarians as a stalking horse to sound out (a) African receptivity and reliability in the event the "socialist countries...were to risk resources or troops in the Rhodesian crisis" and (b) what the U.S. reaction would be to "socialist intervention". The between-the-lines inference is that the Soviet Union is at least examining the possibility of intervention as a prelude to the Zambian mission to Moscow and has pressed the Bulgarians to supply the weather reports.

It also appears that the Russians are using the Bulgarians in a similar way to lay the groundwork for expanding Soviet influence in Ethiopian domestic affairs. There are several reasons that the Soviets would prefer to work through the Bulgarians rather than directly: (1) As the principal arms supplier to Somalia, the USSR is suspect in Ethiopian eyes; (2) as a small Communist state, Bulgaria presents less of a threat to Ethiopia; (3) this may be an indirect way of getting the IEC to use the large and still outstanding Russian line of credit to Ethiopia. (The Ethiopian drawdowns to date from the \$100 million USSR credit of 1960 have been minimal — only about \$15 million. The Ethiopians have particularly resisted a Communist foot in the door in the potentially rich but reform-ripe agricultural sector. Hence the Bulgarian push for a huge model farm project.)

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[...]

FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 795

[...]

Secret December 21 Noforn

Communist Interests in Ethiopia

EMBTEL 777

1. Israeli Amb. Divon (protect) in response to my soundings provided considerable detail on expanding Bulgarian interests in Ethiopia. Divon said Bulgarian Amb. Karatsanov had called on him urgently Dec. 16 primarily to learn "whether socialist countries could depend upon Africans" if they were to risk resources or troops in Rhodesian crisis and what would be likely US reaction to socialist intervention. Bulgarian made no effort to hide urgency behind these questions as result of announcement of Zambian mission to Moscow.

2. During conversation, Divon elicited following from Bulgarian:

A. Bulgarians had insisted on state visit for Zhivkov, because only party leader could make agreements. Most important of these was Bulgarian desire to acquire piece of agricultural land of about 250,000 acres (100,000 would be acceptable) near Addis for major agro-industrial operation. Ambassador had been given urgent assignment to acquire land and reach accord with IEG prior to his scheduled departure reassignment in March. ECB anxious to quit Ethiopia and left impression he could not depart until completed negs.

B. Ten Bulgarian surveyors, agronomists and other technicians had been in Ethiopia many months seeking suitable land (Emb A-5933) but Bulgarians reaching conclusion that IEG giving them runaround, first by offering few thousand acres one area, then another, then still another, always keeping them on move but far from accord. Recently they had been offered land near Bahar Dar which was suitable but site split between two provinces one of which (Begemidir) refused to approve merger of land into one unit.

C. Karatsanov said his Govt willing to spend "tens of millions" to get project launched and completed in record time of one year. Said for whatever crops were suitable to land acquired, there would be canneries (plural) and other processing plants. Bulgarians wanted project to include whole modern town with cinemas, sports ground, and radio station. Addis area was best because of show piece effect but they would take any accessible area such as Bahar Dar because "people would hear about it". In response to dubious Ethiopian expressions about Bulgarian pipedreams, he said he had told Ethiopians "give us the land, let us make a start and will see".

D. Karatsanov said his Govt. was losing millions on fish and meat projects in Eritrea but it had not deterred Sofia from wishing to embark on its biggest overseas project.

3. Israeli said that one of his technicians working at IEAF HDQ base at Debre Zeit was approached recently by three Bulgarian technicians accompanied by deputy AF commander Col. Aberra. Latter introduced three Bulgars, who presented "to whom it may concern" letter from Eritrean GovGen explaining that three were working on Assab town planning and should be given cooperation. Three put questions to Israeli as to number of aircraft IEAF has, number and type of IF expects, number and type of radio communications, maintenance equipment etc. Israeli took gullible Aberra aside and explained obvious ploy, then got rid of Bulgarians.

Comment: I have confirmed same three are appearing in various IEG ministries and tried same line, justifying questions on grounds they need info for work they will do on expansion Assab airfield.

4. Israeli Amb. Said Bulgars had also requested interior ministry for permission install radio transmitters in twenty of their mobile slaughtering vans in Eritrea but application been refused after consultation with Israeli technicians.

5. Israeli Amb. Said he had no doubts that Bulgars fronting for Soviets who because of their involvement in Somalia using ally in Ethiopia.

Comment: Agree but Soviets might also reckon easier for small country to get projects started without raising as many fees [sic].

6. I have raised question of intense Bulgar effort with member of officials I regard as intrinsically anti-communist (Mammo Tadessa, Bulcha Demeska). Both confirmed Israeli story. Both said Bulgars fronting for Soviets since Bulgaria "obviously as poor as we are". Both said IEG has eyes wide open and Bulgars would encounter all sorts of difficulties. Both noted large money-losing activities in Eritrea and asked why both said there were Ethiopians who were either playing self interest (reference to possible payoffs to Asrate Kassa and others) or who were gullible. Both said IEG would not want to create public impression it was spurring offers from communists which were more advantageous than [sic] those emanating from west so that matter had to be handled with great discretion. Mammo asked why I thought IEG had not yet used available Soviet credits [sic]. Both were more than [sic] slightly interested in some details of para 4 and above which I gave with view to broadening ways latent IEG suspicions.

Comment: Most interesting aspect of Israeli info is why Soviets have decided now is moment to launch intensified effort in Ethiopia. Most logical explanation is that Moscow is motivated by same reasoning behind 1964-5 alteration in US policies here that is focus on Addis as capital of OAU and UNECA, aging emperor and youthful stirrings, plus perhaps desire to match expanded US effort in African show place area and perhaps disillusion with Somalia and Sudan.

Korry