

The African Giant Stretches Its Limbs (September 18, 1960)

Abstract

After 1945, colonialism and decolonization became a lynchpin of the global foreign policy debate; between 1945-1960, three dozen new states in Africa and Asia achieved either self-sufficiency or independence from their former European colonial rulers. European countries struggled to rationalize a rapidly decolonizing world as former colonies emancipated themselves. In this aspect, Germany was unique, as they had not had a colonial holding since the end of World War I. But colonialism pervaded political culture in both East and West Germany, in large part because colonialism mattered to the rest of the world. The process of decolonization quickly became another Cold War conflict, with both the United States and the USSR supporting former colonies' right to independence, but also attempting to organize the world into spheres of influence and satellite states. In this article from *Neues Deutschland*, the SED's official newspaper, one can clearly see how Africa's fight for decolonization is utilized to prove the superiority of socialism as a system, which is described as an "accelerator" of historical processes.

Source

Abruptly, like a lost island resurfacing from the sea, Africa, not that long ago the "nameless continent," has reentered public consciousness with the breathtaking news of recent months and days. Three times the size of Europe, but with less than half the population, its proud history, which has influenced world events from the empires of the Pharaohs and Carthaginians to the Moors, crushed and extinguished forever under the iron heel of colonialism. In Europe, scalp-hunters, bush and desert were elevated to its misleading symbols.

The grotesque distortion of the black human face created by the USA, which allowed it to appear only as a fairground punching bag, a figure in a servant's or shoeshine boy's uniform, a monkey for whites, an unsuccessful example of divine creation, which they otherwise portray as perfect, banished the varied history of Africa and its rich cultures to the dark dungeons of oblivion.

Apparently for all time. Six years ago, when Algeria took up arms to fight for freedom, the map of the gigantic continent still designated just four small spots as African states: Liberia, Libya, Ethiopia and Egypt. That was all. These four states covered only 4.2 million sq km of land out of 30 million; out of 220 million Africans, only 46 million live there.

For nearly three centuries, Africa nourished the age of civic "liberty, equality and fraternity." As Marx put it, Africa became a "warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins." Bound, battered and spat upon, no fewer than 100 million slaves were taken abroad, mostly to America, where they prepared the ground for the wealth of white citizens. Driven across the battlefields of the world wars by French and British imperialists, Africa's youth collapsed amidst its first awakening.

Fabulous Riches

The pillaging and raging annihilation that Europe's "Western civilization" visited upon Africa is quite incredible. During the half century of Imperial Germany alone the subjugation of the continent increased rapidly, and German imperialism played a major role. Its "leap of the panther to Agadir" in 1911 conjured up the storm clouds of world war for the first time.

In this period, white rule by machine gun and rhinoceros-hide whip spread like a polyp, covering first 10 and then 90 percent of the continent. Africa suffered immiseration and a setback in its development more terrible than any other colonial region.

And yet the continent possesses fabulous resources. The capitalist world draws 40 percent of its chromium, 81 percent of its cobalt, 99 percent of its diamonds, 63 percent of its platinum, 75 percent of its uranium, nearly half of its copper, bauxite and gold from the continent, and Africa's riches—as the discovery of oil in the Sahara shows—have not yet been fully explored.

This is the mother soil for a heroic revolutionary movement that has claimed many lives, and that has continued across the centuries. But only the universal crisis of the colonial system that began with the October Revolution led to the emergence of modern national organizations, including the first trade unions, which are moving to the forefront of Africa's liberation struggle.

Socialism — Accelerator of Historical Processes

This crisis deepened after the Second World War. Under cover of the final cruel outgrowths of colonial terror, proof of one of Marx's boldest prognoses erupted with great suddenness: Socialism acts as an "accelerator" of historical processes. The existence of the international socialist camp strengthens the liberation struggle of the colonial peoples and, as the example of Suez showed politically and militarily sometime later, forces imperialism to stand back from the most brutal consequences of its methods of repression.

It still seemed for a moment as if Africa's call for freedom and independence might be drowned in the blood of the Malagasy Uprising of 1947. The wave of national liberation struggles across the globe was too strong, however, not to wash up on Africa's shores. From Madagascar and the Algerian War, from the uprisings, clashes and massacres in Kenya, Gabon, Nyasaland, Cameroon and Leopoldville, from the first conference of African states in April 1958 to today, it has victoriously borne the ship of national independence from one port to the next.

In the decade just behind us, this colorless wasteland of the African map, broken up by just four or five spots of color, has been invigorated by 20 new shades. Of these new states, eight arose in the month of August 1960 alone. The role of the colonial lands as a reserve for imperialism has played itself out. With their liberation movements, whose fire has gripped entire continents, they are being transformed—albeit largely by revolutions of a moderate, democratic character—into an ally of the progressive, anti-imperialist forces of peace. Their explosive power is evident in the accelerated tempo with which the colonies are separating from the "motherlands"—optically in the radical shift in the distribution of votes in the UN away from the imperialist powers—and in the new powers' membership in the "zone of peace," in the vibrant energies of the people who are in the process of toppling war from the throne of "inevitable necessity."

The tempo of African development and the clarity of its progressive historic message has astonished the entire world. Any closer scrutiny of the process that lies behind us repeatedly brings up, in the African problematic, the full force of the international struggle against this fortress of imperialism.

The Year of Africa

When the first conference of African states convened in April 1958, there were eight African states, only one of which, Ghana, was Black African. The immediate effect of the evident mass pressure on the conference was that Guinea became the first (and today the only) former French colonial territory in Black Africa to attain complete independence by cutting all ties to the so-called "French community." With Guinea's inspiring example in mind, the African delegates at the next conference in December issued the same slogan: "Peoples of Africa unite! We have nothing to lose but our chains. We have a

continent to regain. We have freedom and human dignity to attain.”

One month later, this cry had found an echo in the demonstrations and clashes in Leopoldville. The second conference of African peoples in Tunis in January 1960 increased the anti-imperialist pressure to such a degree that, in the brief period since then, the flag of independence was raised not just in the capital of the Congo, but also in another 13 African capitals.

The often bewildering and not seldom dramatic news from Africa—events in the Mali Federation and the Republic of Congo are just two examples—reflect the difficulties and also the problems of the young continent. The national storm has not yet completely played itself out, and it is already faced with a counter-attack conducted on a staggered front by the colonial exploiters:

Imperialism is conducting a war in Algeria; in Katanga it makes use of black lackeys to weaken the national front, in other states—fearing a national revolutionary hurricane it can no longer control— it proves itself “flexible.” The objective is the same everywhere: It seeks to preserve its political, but above all economic, positions and, if necessary, camouflage and “modernize” them with new contractual relationships or inferior, corrupt “participations” by native compradors.

The Danger of Neocolonialism

Only ossified Cold War thinking rejects the term “neocolonialism” as a “Communist slogan.” The All-African People’s Congress in Tunis, which spoke for African countries of all stripes, energetically opposed this “modern” replacement for colonial enslavement. It urgently warned against “petty reforms,” “fictitious independence” and economic and political ties that rob independence of its “revolutionary content.”

In fact, the degree of new-won independence varies widely from state to state. What they all have in common, however, is that their independence is a direct result of the overall African independence movement, which is the motor of continuing political forward motion on the continent.

There is no question that the imperialists have laid many obstacles along Africa’s path to freedom. Leaders who advocate close collaboration with the governments of the “motherlands” and allow themselves to be misused for the admitted politics of “Balkanization” in Africa, of which events in the Republic of Congo offer an example, figure among the catalog of difficulties and dangers.

But even political independence does not yet guarantee complete liberation from the yoke of imperialism. The economic positions that it still occupies even in countries like Ghana, Morocco and Tunisia are very prominent.

Western capital investment in Africa, with strong participation by American and notable activities by West German monopoly capitalism, has increased rapidly since the end of the war, not without revealing severe conflicts of interest. Africa, which the American author John Gunther characterizes as “this fabulous ... continent ... vital to the Western world, not merely because it is important strategically and is packed with raw materials,” was intended to compensate for the loss of Asia and the narrowing of the capitalist world market. It is openly referred to as the white man’s “final frontier,” as a key arsenal of aggression for the Western powers against the socialist states, which also explains the strikingly close connection between the West’s economic and strategic plans.

An Important Stage in the Fight for Peace and Progress

The current political situation in Africa, however, the awakened and rising national self-awareness of Africans, are absolutely inconsistent with such “white men’s” concepts. The more [Westerners] invoke the “danger of world Communism,” the more Africans resist such paternalism.

A delegate from Northern Rhodesia told the Tunis conference that they were often assured that the detested governance by foreigners was necessary in order to fight against Russia. “But why,” he asked, “must we allow ourselves to be exploited when two foreign tribes are fighting? We have problems of our own: poverty, freedom, justice...”. It is a difficult undertaking to defame the Soviet Union and the socialist states in Africa. Everyone there knows the role they played during the Suez Crisis, the building of the Aswan Dam and many other popular instances of economic and political aid.

Africa’s struggle for freedom is also a struggle against the politics of military bases and for neutrality—the same objectives we have set ourselves for Germany. With disarmament as its consequence, this is the first answer by the peoples of all continents, not yet surpassed by Western thought, to their anxious question about peace and social progress.

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