

# **The Somali-Soviet Expedition of 1971-1972**

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## **I. Introduction**

The joint Soviet-Somali expedition of 1971-72 was the first and the last expedition of Soviet academics to Somalia. Its main target was to strengthen Soviet influence in the Horn of Africa via ideological impact and technical assistance. The expedition garnered the support of the governments of both countries. Considering the lack of knowledge about Somalia at that time in the USSR, for the Soviet part, the expedition turned into a kind of educational tourism – the first steps to get academic contacts and create the foundation for Somali studies in the Soviet Union.

## **II. Preparation of the Expedition**

The expedition was organized by the Academy of Sciences of the USSR with the support of the Ministry of Education of the Somali Democratic Republic (SDR). Soviet academics who specialized in African studies stayed in the SDR for five months. These were researchers from the Africa Institute – Kosukhin Nickolay D. (the head of the expedition and head of the Department of Ideology in Africa Institute, 1932-2014), Kupriyanov Petr I. (specialized in agrarian problems and class formation in African countries, 1925), Nikiforov Alexander V. (specialized in agrarian problems and traditional societies' structure in East African countries, 1937-2004), Gorodnov Valentin P. (specialized in political science and class formation in South Africa, 1929-2009), and

Sherr Evgeniy S. (specialized in ideology and state building in African countries). Two Somali researchers were assigned to assist the Soviets – Aw Jama Omar Isse, author of several books on Somali history, and a young archeologist Said Axmed Warsame, graduate of Leningrad State University.

It must be said that the first time the expedition was mentioned was in the plans of cultural cooperation for 1966-67, and the expedition project was officially approved by the Academy of Sciences on March 20, 1968 but could not be realized then due to political reasons.

The plan for the expedition was to find and study historical evidence of the national liberation movement in Somalia in 1899-1920. The researchers intended to conduct interviews with some combatants' relatives, as well as do field research studying social, economic and political processes in modern Somali society. The expedition also planned some archeological works in the northern regions of the country (two Soviet geologists Kozerenko V.N. and Savadsky O.A., who were involved in UNO projects in Somalia at that time, joined the Soviet expedition).

The idea of the expedition initially belonged to Sergey R. Smirnov, a Soviet researcher, and a specialist in the history of Sudan, particularly in the Mahdist movement of the 1880s. In March-April, 1963, he visited Somalia in order to start negotiations to organize an expedition. This trip came as a result of the Agreement on Cultural Cooperation signed between the USSR and the SDR. Smirnov was one of the first Soviet academics to ever visit Somalia. Inspired by his own research of the Mahdist movement in Sudan, Smirnov thought to explore the causes and consequences of the national liberation movement headed by Seyyid Mohammed Abdille Xassan in Somalia during the late 1880s-1920. S. Smirnov considered the book by British historian D. Jardine *Mad Mullah of Somaliland*<sup>1</sup> to be written from a pro-imperialist point of view, outdated and vague.<sup>2</sup> Smirnov didn't find any documents or written evidence about the Seyyid during this short trip to Somalia, but he met some relatives of Mullah's fellow-fighters and documented some oral chronicles of the events with the assistance of a translator, historian and linguist Muusa Galaal. The idea of a comparative study of the Mahdist movement in Sudan and "Mad Mullah" struggle in Somalia was also supported by Commander-in-chief of the Somali Republic, General Daud Abdille Hersi, during his visit to Africa Institute in Moscow in 1963.

During his trip to Somalia, Smirnov also visited the Exhibition of Soviet Education, organized by the Soviet Embassy, and later reported to the Soviet authorities that the Exhibition lacked quality presentation materials. He contrasted it with the collaboration between Somalia and Great Britain in the sphere of culture and education, which included sponsoring the construction of new buildings including a museum, National Library, and an archive, as well as the collection of folk and ethnographical materials. It also included academic exchange between School of Oriental and African Studies (London University) and Somali universities and institutes. Smirnov wrote in his diary about a strong need for the USSR to develop economic and academic relations with the Somali Republic, despite its existing connections with former colonial rulers – Italy and Great Britain. He wrote that he envied the opportunities that were given to a senior lecturer, I. M. Lewis, who had three years of fieldwork in the Northern regions of the Republic collecting historical and ethnographical materials.<sup>3</sup>

During his stay in Somalia, Smirnov gave a lecture on “African Studies in the Soviet Union” and talked about the First Congress of Africanists and the academic achievements of the Africa Institute. S. Smirnov could not take part in the expedition he had been preparing – he died in 1969, two years before the expedition left for Somalia.

The report of the expedition and its outcomes were published in *The Academic Notes of the Soviet-Somali expedition, 1971-72*. The editor, Vasily G. Solodovnikov wrote in the introduction to the book: “Before this expedition took place, African Studies in the Soviet Union were based mainly on written sources and local literature. From that time on African studies have become not theoretical but rather practical ... before that only scientists, specialised in geology and botany used to do fieldwork...”<sup>4</sup> Later several members of the expedition shared their observations and memories in publications,<sup>5</sup> while others donated their archives to Soviet centers of African studies. Solodovnikov also called the expedition “an experiment” and the first step to further studies. He also thought it to be an example of organizing international academic expeditions.

### **III. Images of the Somali in Soviet Media**

What ideas about Somalia did the Soviet people have at that time? In the early 1960s, Soviet mass media created the image of post-independent Somalia as a “poor, backward, banana republic, robbed by English and Italian colonialists.”<sup>6</sup> During the visits to the USSR, Somali politicians spoke of great economic and strategic potential of the young Republic, asking for more economic and military aid.

Gradually, Somali authorities began to use the confrontation between the West and the Soviet Union, trying to benefit from both. Such policy was within the framework of Somali traditional nomadic ideology of “Me and my brother”<sup>7</sup> and suited the circumstances well. Moreover, in the early 1970s, Somalis were inspired by the revolutionary changes in their country, its economic success and its growing importance on political arena. The USSR, also in search of an ideological ally on the African continent and motivated not to let “imperialists” set a foot in the region again, was among the biggest supporters of the newly named Somali Democratic republic (SDR). Soviet exaggeration in providing aid that Somalis could not use or benefit from was obvious but nevertheless such was the Cold War confrontation.

The Soviet Embassy, which was opened in Mogadishu in December 1960, promoted the image of the Soviet system, the Soviet education, as well as Soviet approaches in dealing with national issues, ideological policy, etc. Somali parliamentary, governmental, military and other delegations regularly visited the Soviet Union in search of ideas for Somali policy and exploring opportunities for Somali-Soviet collaboration and cooperation. Considering the lack of information about Somalia in the USSR, Soviet filmmakers produced some films about the country: “The Country on the Equator” (1964), “Good Morning, Somalia!” (1968), “The Sun above Somalia” (1970), “USSR – Somalia: the friendship is getting stronger” (1974) and others, translated into English and Somali.

Starting from 1960, Somali students began to arrive to study in the Soviet Union. In turn, this development brought forth the necessity to learn more about Somali society.<sup>8</sup>

Until the end of the 1970s, the Soviet Union managed to maintain friendly relations with all post-independent Somali governments, despite the Somali-Ethiopian border conflict that arose in the international arena after the Second World War. The Soviet Union, both then and in the 1960s, tried to stay neutral and keep friendly relations with both sides, supporting peaceful negotiations. Thus, when in 1964 a Somali politician was giving a talk on Moscow Radio on the occasion of the Somali Independence anniversary, he was asked to avoid discussing the role of Ethiopia in the colonial partition of Somali territories.<sup>9</sup> In the film, "The Country on the Equator," produced by Soviet operators in 1964, Soviet authorities recommended not to show the map of the Somali peninsula and not to give any comments on Somali territorial disputes.<sup>10</sup> In 1961, Soviet authorities in Somalia had a problem with sponsoring a guidebook on Somalia, written by the head of Department of Culture and Tourism of Somalia J.F. Siyaad. The sponsorship was promised but the guidebook in fact turned into a reference book on Somali history with author's views on territorial claims disputed by neighboring countries, Kenya and Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup> The author refused to make any changes and the Soviets refused to print the book. The Somalis tried to do it themselves, but later asked the Soviets again. The manuscript is still housed in the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation<sup>12</sup> and most likely has never been published.

#### **IV. Somali realities as Seen by the Members of the Expedition**

The atmosphere in the SDR for the Soviet researchers was quite favorable, and the idea of organizing the expedition was fully supported by Somali president General Siyaad Barre. The USSR greeted the Independence of the Somali Republic in 1960, as well as the October Revolution in Somalia in 1969. Groups of Soviet geologists, doctors, teachers and military assistants/advisors were regularly sent to Somalia.

The expedition visited Somalia at the right moment – the country was making progress in educational, political and economic spheres. The locals themselves were inspired by Barre reforms and eager to review the past of the country, based on their own findings, not colonial historiography.

In the first month, the expedition worked in Mogadishu and its neighborhood, establishing contacts with Somali authorities and visiting factories and farms, doing research in the National Library,

Archives, educational establishments, ministries and UN offices. The Culture Department of the Ministry of Education took the activities of the expedition under its patronage with full support of President Barre. Later, the expedition left for Hargeisa-Burao – Taleh - Las Anod to collect some archeological evidence. The members of the expedition visited historical sites in the northern areas (former British Somaliland) to get an idea of its past, exploring the ruins of fortifications and some caves. They took photos, made maps of the area, and recommended further archeological research of the area. The advice was not followed by any actions, but at least it enhanced the interest of Somali authorities in certain aspects of the past of Somalia.

The members of the expedition witnessed the cult of Siyaad Barre in its full swing: his portraits together with portraits of Marx and Lenin could be seen in the streets, everywhere there were slogans promoting socialist ideas, proclaiming devotion and loyalty to the country and its president, containing calls for participation in collective farming, crash programs, etc. Everywhere there were posters praising achievements of the Revolution. The fact that the members of the expedition didn't know much either about Somali culture or Somali language prevented their understanding of distinctive psychological and communicative features of Somalis. The Soviets, in their studies, had to rely on and cite the works of "colonial bourgeois historians," as they called them and whom they denounced.<sup>13</sup>

Several researchers conducted a sociological query among high school students. The questionnaires were compiled according to Soviet academic interests at that time, mostly ideological and very restricted in terms of their worldview. Its results were published in *The Notes*. The researchers asked the students what they knew about the USSR, Lenin, socialism and communism, about the most important events and personalities in Somali history, etc. In their answers, the students put great emphasis on socialist achievements in Somali society and stressed the role of the Soviet Union in the development of their country. Some questions were really confusing for the students, especially those about religion: students who previously shared socialist ideas in their answers always ended questionnaires with the words praising Allah. Paradoxically, the researchers came to the conclusion that some socialist ideas were indeed compatible with Islamic ideology that nevertheless they confirmed that Islam slowed down the progress of the SDR. The members of the expedition, with the assistance of

several geologists, conducted geological and archeological research in the Northern areas of Somalia and drew detailed plans of Taleh (Mad Mullah premises) and its fortress. The results were reported to Somali ministries accordingly.

In September 1971, the members of the expedition met President of Somalia Siyaad Barre. The president gave a speech (in Italian) about socialist orientation of his politics and scientific socialism in particular.<sup>14</sup> The President gave them this advice: *"not to follow the imperialist approach of studying Somali history. According to his words, they lied about Somalis. They collected rubbish material, searched historical evidence in wrong places, made shameful pictures of Somali realities. You have to be different from them. Just show the truth"*.

Taking into consideration the lack of information about Somalia in the Soviet Union at that time the members of the expedition could not make any sensational discoveries. The search of exotic features and striking differences was not the aim of the Soviet researchers. More precisely, they wanted to show a country that was on its way to progress and development under the leadership of socialist-orientated General Siyaad Barre.

## V. The Outcome of the Expedition

By conducting interviews and discussing historical issues with Somalis, Soviet academics confirmed their idea that the fierce resistance led military by Sayyid Mohamed Abdille Xassan in the late 1880s-1920 was a part of national liberation and the anticolonial movement in Somalia, and not only a religious rebellion as it was stated in "imperialist" writings (see Chapter *"Some aspects of National Liberation Movement 1899-1920 headed by Mohammed Abdille Xassan"* by V. Gorodnov in the Notes).

The Soviet researchers recorded some interviews, poetic verses, collected manuscripts of local historians (Dahir Afgarshe, Axmed Arten, Axmed Abdullahi and others), and made a film about modern Somalia. A. Nikiforov and S. Warsame explored the caves in El-Afweyn and photographed some rock carvings found there. Their findings were published in *The Notes of the Expedition* in the chapters "Archeological Evidences in Northern Somalia" and "The Folklore in the Life of Somalis." P. Kupriyanov wrote a chapter on "Agrarian Changes in the SDR," and A. Nikiforov – "Problems of Nomadic Population in Somalia." N. Kosukhin – "Revolution of 1969 and Ideas of Scientific

Socialism in Somalia” and “Sociological Research among Workers and Young People in Somalia.” E. Sherr – “The Structure of the State Sector in Somalia,” geologists Kozerenko, Lartsev and Savadsky contributed to *The Notes of the Expedition* a detailed study of “Mineral Resources of Somalia.”

The Soviet expedition to Somalia 1971-72 showed that academic collaboration between the two countries could be effective and successful. In principal it could lead to stronger potential ties between Somalia and the Soviet Union. However, in practice political issues such as the territorial conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia could intervene. Nonetheless, the visit generated political and academic interests to study the history and the language of the Somali people. The first groups of students studying the Somali language (who had already been taking lessons in Amharic) were introduced in 1964 at the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Moscow State University. Nonetheless, the language remained elusive due to the then lack of an official orthography of Somali language (Latin script was adopted only in 1972) and major difficulties of travel to Somalia. The only way to apply and improve speaking abilities of the language was to work for Radio Moscow where some Somali newsmakers worked (according to the Agreements of 1961 and 1970 about collaboration in mass-media communication between Somalia and the USSR).

It must be mentioned that in 1969 (as an archive document says) there was quite a strange plan to send a Soviet specialist from the educational agency “Soviet Encyclopedia” to visit Somalia and compose a Russian-Somali dictionary, but that didn’t materialize, though in 1969, there appeared a hastily compiled dictionary. It was primitive and not proofread.<sup>15</sup> Amazingly, despite the fact that Somalis didn’t yet have an official script at that time, Somali words, in the dictionary, had already been transcribed in Latin script.

In November 1986, during their official visit to the Africa Institute, the members of a Somali delegation to Moscow invited, in the name of the President of the SDR, Soviet academics to organize another expedition to Somalia. The delegation also suggested academic exchange of doctoral students and researchers between the two countries. The Somali government invited the Director of the Africa Institute, Andrey A. Gromyko, to deliver lectures at Mogadishu University. He agreed to come to Somalia “to study the current political directions in Somali politics and to establish some academic contacts,” but the Central



Committee of the Communist Party recommended that the invitation be declined.<sup>16</sup> It was to become the final step in the ensuing break up of any academic collaboration between the two countries. The USSR was no longer interested in ideological allies on the African continent.

In early 1970s, when the Soviet researchers came to Somalia to witness the building of socialism, they had neither historical nor linguistic preparation for the mission. This resulted mostly in failure to produce deep observations of the reality. To be sure, they managed to set a base for further research and to establish personal contacts with decision-making officials and local educated people. They also contributed to a positive image of a Soviet researcher in Somalia.

The Soviet-Somali expedition has become the only academic tour to Somalia. At the moment, modern Russia seems to have no strategic or economic interests in Somali. The Somali language and Somali history have not been taught to Russian students for decades. Furthermore, there are no radio programs in Somali, though there are still some Somali students who come to study in Russia, they come mostly on private contracts. Nowadays, the Internet remains the only source of information about Somalia for the Russians. Some documentaries about Somalia have been produced under the project "Africa in Cold War (2012),"<sup>17</sup> mostly translated from English with episodes from Western fiction films about Somali realities.

AVP RF – Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.

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**Notes**

1. D. Jardine. *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*. London, 1923
2. R. Smirnov's Diaries. Author's archive
3. I.M. Lewis. *Pastoral Democracy: a study of pastoralism and politics among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa*. London, 1961
4. *Ucheniye zapiski Sovetsko-Somaliiskoi ekspeditsii*. M., 1973
5. N.D. Kosukhin. *Sovetsko-somaliiskaya nauchnaya ekspeditsiya: ekskurs v istoriyu*. M., 2002; E.S. Sherr *Somali v bor'be za sotsialisticheskuyu orientatsiyu*. M., 1974, V.P. Gorodnov, A.V. Nikiforov. *Puteshestviye v Taleh*. M., 1976
6. *Pravda*. 25.05.1961 № 145 Somali Republic (Reference).
7. That sounds the following way – *"I and Somalia against the world. I and my clan against Somalia. I and my family against the clan. I and my brother against the family. I against my brother."*
8. For details of Soviet-Somali relations see L. Ivanova *Somali Students in the Soviet Union* <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/bildhaan/vol18/iss1/8/>
9. AVP RF F. 581. Op.5. P.3. D.10. L.37. A Note to the Counsellor of State Committee of Mass-Media of the USSR S.V. Kaftanov
10. AVP RF F. 581 Op.8 P.7 D.8 L.78 Deputy Minister A. Petrov to the Director of Documentary Films Studio A.G. Semin. July 11, 1964
11. AVP RF F. 581 OP.5 P.3 D.14 L.58 G. Zhukov to Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR V.V. Kuznetsov December 12, 1961
12. AVP RF F.581 Op.5 P.3 D.14
13. See the chapters concerning historical issues of *"The Notes..."*
14. AVP RF F.581 Op.15 P.17 D.8 L.35 Conversation of the members of the Soviet-Somali expedition with the President of Supreme Revolutionary Council of the SDR M.S. Barre, September 22, 1971
15. D.I. Stepanchenko, M.X. Osman *Somali-Russian Dictionary*. Moscow, 1969
16. AVP RF F.581 Op.30 P.34 D.7 November, 1986
17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AoegUv8GbE>