

**Notes on the Impact of the Disintegration
of the USSR on the Third World**

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Introduction

For me it is important that the major changes in the world are analyzed from an African point of view, and more pointedly from the point of view of African liberation. This will be the focus of my discussion since the essential issues of self-determination and independence in the third world are as important today as they were in 1917 at the time of the Bolshevik revolution.

This discussion will attempt to understand some of the implications of the disintegration of the Soviet Union for the Third World from both the point of view of the importance of revolutionary transformations, their potentialities and their limits; and from the point of view of the historical meaning for the peoples of the world in the period of the so-called new world order.

In brief, we have to understand the Bolshevik revolution and its impact on the world system, the forms of social organization which were called socialist, the phase of the national liberation movements in the period after World War II, and the new phase in the world where there is the threat of the recolonization of the Third World who fought for national independence. It will also be important to grasp the possible implications of the disintegration of the Soviet Union for the peoples of the advanced capitalist countries at a time when the ruling elements cannot use the bogey of anti-communism to place large resources into the military industrial complex.

The African point of View on the Bolshevik revolution

The disintegration of the Soviet Union makes it more vital that we study the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and its impact on international politics. The study of the social forces which were able to organize this revolution in what was considered one of the most backward countries in Europe can clarify to us that revolutions are not always carried out by the most advanced societies. After the

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end of World War I the major expectation was that there would be revolutionary breakthroughs in Western Europe, particularly in Germany.

One of the immediate problems of the break up of the Soviet Union is the rise of metaphysics and idealism as there is a retreat from Marxism by progressive intellectuals. From the outset, therefore, one of the fundamental issues posed by the current situation is the methodological issue. The tools that we use to study this important episode of the twentieth century will help to sharpen and clarify our methodological skills. These methodological tools are necessary to liberate humanity from the immediateism and crude empiricism of the intellectual culture of the cold war characterized by geo-politics, super power posturing and balance of power theories.

Walter Rodney, one of the foremost intellectuals of Third World and African liberation, embarked on a study of the historical importance of the Bolshevik revolutionary process. It was his view that Africans needed to rise above the idealism which either simply rejected this intervention of the Russian workers as "mobs in action"; or those who glorified the revolution without analyzing the real contradictions in the society leading to the experiments in the period of the consolidation of power in the hands of the communist party. He was attempting to deepen the understanding of the tools of historical materialism even though at that time he was aware of the problems of developing the so-called materialist analysis. Hence he stressed that while there was the debate between materialism and idealism - and the materialist position was superior - it was still necessary to develop an African position on key issues in international politics (Rodney, 1975)

In stressing the importance of this revolution, Rodney was making it clear that the African people had to interpret major international changes to see how they affected the pace of their liberation and dignity. In his yet unpublished study, Rodney had underscored the tremendous job of economic transformation faced by the Soviets after the major political feat of defeating the Czar and the old ruling classes in Russia. The problems of economic backwardness and the limits on socialist reconstruction are as important for the peoples of the Third World today as the polarization of the world intensifies in this era of the third technological revolution. Rodney, in his analysis, understood that the task of combatting economic backwardness, corruption and illiteracy was a major undertaking.

Prominent theoreticians of African liberation recognized that revolutionary breakthroughs are necessary in Africa and the Third World if we are to undertake a similar path of social reconstruction which central for the

consolidation of the independence of Africa. This issue of economic independence and the ideas, organization and political organization necessary for social emancipation is now more urgent in the changed world economy³ especially in this period when the whole tenor of intellectual inquiry in the Western academy is to deny the importance of revolutionary transformations. Since 1989 there has been a major debate on the validity of even bourgeois revolutions such as the French Revolution.⁴ Such is the climate of the conservative ideology of the West.

Rodney had recognized this conservatism and was walking a tightrope between the crude anti-communism which informed western scholarship, and the crude glorification of the form of governance in the Soviet Union after 1924 which was called socialist. The conception that socialism was equal to nationalization plus the one party apparatus was seductive to many Third world leaders. Part of the crisis of the bureaucratic leadership in the Third World was that they accepted the commandism of the party form in the USSR as a form of holding on to power. This limited conception of socialist transformation was given legitimacy by Soviet scholars who developed ideas such as the non-capitalist path to support the foreign policies of the USSR, especially Progress Publishers. In the process, the ideologues of the Soviet state robbed socialism of its inspiration for the oppressed peoples of the world. Instead, dictators from Ethiopia to Burma, and governments from Algeria to Tanzania were able to demobilize and depoliticize the working people using the rhetoric of one-partyism.

The disintegration of the command economies and the anti-democratic practices which were justified under the guise of the dictatorship of the proletariat now open scope for the clarification that democratic politics is an important component of social transformation and the building of a new social system. No form of dictatorship can now be justified. Not even the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, disguised as democracy, can now hold sway in the Third World. Temporarily, there is the effort to define democracy by the number of political parties but the issues of survival for the people of the Third World has the capacity to raise the issue of democracy in a manner that will repoliticise the whole of humanity.

The disintegration of the USSR has opened up the debate whether there is an alternative to the capitalist form of organization. The Western media, in the typical triumphalism of the capitalist class in Europe and America, has proclaimed that capitalism has succeeded. The intelligentsia follow to proclaim that capital is equal to democracy, and that the market is equal to rationality. In

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a world where capitalism is the rational choice and where Africans are not rational but emotional, the old ideas of civilizing Africans will again reappear as one component of the rise of racism in Western Europe and North America.

Given this new imperialist ideological thrust it is important to critically examine how the changes in the Soviet Union can have an impact on the struggles for liberation. In this enterprise it is always important to see the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 as a crucial contribution to the anti-imperialist struggle. The promise of socialism as an alternative needs to be explored in a creative manner by intellectuals who want to rise above the wretchedness of poverty and exploitation.

Stressing the importance of revolutions in the process of social transformation, Samir Amin states:

The analysis of economic alienation provided by Marx, central to any scientific and realistic understanding of capitalist production, rehabilitates the crucial function of revolutions, moments of qualitative transformation and crystallization of potentialities inconceivable without them. In each of the three great revolutions of the modern world, the play of ideas and social forces at moments of radicalization succeeded in moving far beyond the requirements of historical, objectively necessary social transformation.⁵

Amin additionally reasserts the importance of socialism:

The values of socialism have scientific justification, not merely moral justification, in rejecting the three liberal theses - that economic rationality requires the market, that democracy requires capitalism, and that development requires free trade. All currents of socialist thought are primed to go beyond the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which sought to establish a 'rational' basis that would serve society for all time. Socialism comes from an analysis of the historical limits of the 'rationality' in question, namely its capitalist form. Socialism therefore offers the project of a qualitatively more advanced society, aiming at a more complete mastery over human destiny. Here again, the Marxist theory of alienation returns to centre stage: the scientific and social project of socialism is to liberate humanity from alienation in its bourgeois economic form. The project cannot be defined more precisely in advance.

The crucial aspect of socialist transformation which is stressed in this analysis

is that although it is possible to be precise on what must be abolished (such as private ownership of the means of production), it would not be possible in the absence of concrete social praxis - to delineate new methods of socialist management. "Any attempt to do so would militate against the liberation project itself, whereby the responsibility for shaping their destiny can only lie with the succeeding generations that will make their own history."⁶

To underline the fact that the task of the liberation project lay with succeeding generations is to centralize the idea that oppressed peoples take themselves from one stage of consciousness to the next through organized struggles. This is a fundamental tenet of the principle of self emancipation. Vanguardism over the working people which was legitimized under the rubric of democratic centralism had robbed the producers of their own experience in the struggle against imperialism. This conception of revolution and social transformation continues to be important for the self emancipation of the oppressed peoples of the Third World.

The starting point for the reflection on the disintegration must be the different forces contending inside and outside the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik Revolution. An analysis of the impact of the disintegration must grasp some of the important historical lessons of the existence of the Soviet Union for the liberation struggles of the Third World. For the purposes of this paper, the phases of the impact of the Soviet Union on world politics are divided into four phases:

- (a) 1917-1924: the period of the revolution and the reversals induced by the civil war, and the crisis in the party form.
- (b) 1924-1945: the phase of the consolidation of the idea of socialism in one country. This included both the negative impact of the forms of accumulation in the process, and the positive lessons of organizing the society to defeat fascism.
- (c) 1945-1975: the period of the decolonization process in the Third World, and the positive role played by the USSR in international fora such as the United Nations in supporting anti-colonial struggles.
- (d) 1975-1991: the period of decay and decline in the USSR when the bureaucratic and commandist practices of the second period became dominant in the politics of the society. The military build-up that was justified in the name of defence together with the foreign policies of the state compounded the problems of the cold war in the Third World.

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The rise of the commandist and bureaucratic strata and their relations to the workers now need to be studied deeply. It is fashionable in the USSR and the West to vilify an individual such as Stalin, but we need to study the political economy of the second period to see how the political culture of this period provided the seeds for the anti-democratic practices which were defended as socialism. Moreover, what was called socialism was an economic form of management which was integrated into and subordinated to, the world market.⁷

It is now possible to reflect on how the political culture of this period has contributed to the disintegration of the form of government which held the territories of the USSR together. Many of the issues which plagued the central government of the USSR will be important in the fight for democracy and self-determination in the Third World. Some of these issues that are not only relevant for the past, but will inform the relations in the future between the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Third World are:

- (a) The whole conception of which class will lead the struggle for democracy in the Commonwealth of the Independent States;
- (b) the issues of nationalities and the struggles against great Russian Chauvinism;
- (c) the relationships between religion and politics, and
- (d) whether the former territories can maintain their independence.

For the purposes of this discussion it is important to examine the importance of the existence of the former USSR in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

The impact of liberation: the experience of Vietnam

The Chinese revolution immediately after the Second World War, following the war and the victory of the Chinese Communist party inspired numerous struggles around the globe. The independence movements in India, Africa, the Arab World and the Caribbean were all influenced by the victory of the Chinese. This euphoria created the spirit of Bandung and laid the foundations for the non-aligned movement. The positive lesson of the victory led nationalist leaders to take up arms to fight for self-determination. From Malay to Algeria, and from Kenya to Vietnam, the National liberation movements became the major force in international politics. The majority of these movements were anti-colonial movements, but in order to inspire their people to break with the cultural values

of the West many of the parties called themselves socialist.

It was the rise of the national liberation movements which precipitated the developments of new military tactics by the former imperial nations. France and Britain started this project which was later taken over by the USA when the political leaders in that country decided to become the international police for capital. Low intensity warfare to unleash violence and roll back real independence was experimented with in Kenya and Malay. The Western media was mobilized to portray liberation movements as stooges of Soviet subversion. Propaganda which painted all liberation movements with the brush of communism became the mainstay of the psychological warfare in the period of the cold war.

While there was relative peace in Europe during the tension of the cold war there were wars all over the Third World. It must be stated that this psychological warfare was carried most forcefully against the workers in the advanced countries so that they could support both the military build-up in their societies, and military intervention and coups in the Third world.

In the cases where the liberation movements had the requisite organization, ideology and leadership to withstand the forces of imperial domination these liberation movements had some success. The struggles for liberation in Mozambique and Guinea also demonstrated that African peoples could successfully organize an anti-colonial battle. The struggles for independence in Africa, the Caribbean and Oceania were anti-colonial struggles. Even now we still need to raise the problem of colonialism in a world where there are still colonies such as Martinique, Guadeloupe, Puerto Rico, the Western Sahara and East Timor. The existence of these colonies determine that the struggles for national liberation are still urgent. However these colonies are fighting for independence when they can learn concretely some of the negative lessons of the forms of political power which were developed by leaders of the most radical liberation movements. The experience of liberation movements inspire both positive and negative lessons. That the peoples of the Third World can still learn positive lessons from the independence struggles can be grasped most clearly in the victory of the Vietnamese people over the American military intervention in South East Asia.

The experience of a poor Third World country defeating the military super power in the world is worth recollecting in a period where the triumphalism of the West proclaim the inability of the peoples of the Third World to intervene in international politics. That the Vietnamese were able to organize politically, militarily and socially to withstand a war, first against France and then against

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the United States, remains one of the most important lessons of liberation in the twentieth century. It is also important to note that while the Vietnamese may have obtained arms from the Soviet Union, they were able to determine their own methods of fighting. They mobilized their people based on the history and culture of Vietnam.

But the very same war in Vietnam clarified major limits of the relationship between liberation movements and the former USSR. Records show that in the period of the split between the USSR and China (1960-1980) support for liberation movements in the Third World was also constrained by the Sino-Soviet split. This could be seen in the tragedy in Cambodia (Kampuchea) and in the quagmire of the Vietnamese intervention. This intervention had a negative effect on the ability of the Vietnamese people to consolidate new social relations after the defeat of the USA. Moreover relations between the USSR and China created serious problems, not in the least the fact that the Chinese supported the callous leadership of the Khmer Rouge.

Many progressive movements in Africa and Latin America were affected in a negative manner by the Sino-Soviet split. There was however one positive impact in that the reality was that both the experience of detente and the Sino-Soviet split forced many movements to be more self-reliant. For in many cases in Latin America, the authentic communist parties tied to the Soviet Union became conservative organs which stood in the path of social movements fighting dictatorships. This was the concrete experience of El Salvador and Guyana.

The Sino-Soviet split profoundly affected the pace of liberation in Africa for not only did the rivalry lead to liberation movements deriving their authenticity from their relationship to the USSR or China, but dictators could use their relations to crush real forces of self-determination. One lesson of self-reliance which can be learnt was that of the Eritrean peoples. Not only did the USSR support a military dictatorship in Ethiopia which used Marxist-Leninist slogans, but many liberation movements in Southern Africa refused to support the Eritreans because of their relationship with the USSR.

The split between the USSR and China was also manipulated by the West to sow confusion in Africa. The ideological confusion was compounded by the concrete reality that dictators such as Idi Amin or Sekou Toure could get assistance from the Soviet Union. During the seventies Africa was faced with the prospect of the USSR supporting a government because of neighbouring country had relations with China. This problem was most evident in 1975 when China and North Korea supported the South African regime and the mercenary forces

from the West because the USSR and Cuba supported the MPLA in Angola.⁹ The experience of the Angolan people have demonstrated the struggles for self-determination must be based on the organizational capacities of those with a vested interest in the long-term liberation of African and the Third World.¹⁰

The Soviet Union, the Third World and the international working class

The problems of the cold war and the Sino-Soviet split were bound to have repercussions in the Soviet Union itself. No society which presented Idi Amin and Mengistu to their people as progressive could in reality be progressive. The transfer of military capital from the Soviet Union had an adverse effect of the form of accumulation in the USSR itself. The Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan had demonstrated the path that the Soviet bureaucracy had taken toward solving international problems through force.

Successful anti-communism in the West rested in the ability to portray the absence of democratic participation in Eastern Europe as intrinsic to socialism. The shortages of basic consumer goods in the USSR together with the poor living standards of the Soviet working peoples was added ammunition not only against the working poor in the Third World, but the working peoples of Western Europe and North America. It was this virulent anti-communism which legitimized the arms race and guaranteed the support of the working peoples of the West for military interventions in Chile, Grenada, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Iran and palestine.

The problems of the militarism of the Soviet economy and its impact on social reproduction must be viewed dialectically. The very same military build-up which was justified as essential for the defence of the Soviet Union proved a drain on the resources for social reproduction. Shortages, the adoption of capitalist production techniques such as scientific management -- all these reflected the fact that the factory was the site of politics and not the community. The diversion of resources away from the civilian sector was the political manifestation of the alliance between the party bureaucracy and the military.

Bureaucratic commandism in the workplace compounded the problem of technological backwardness of the Soviet economy. Nowhere was this more evidence than in the sphere of the destruction of the natural environment with the supreme example of the disaster at Chrenyboyl. The whole experience of the ecological destruction unleashed by the form of factory production in both Eastern and Western Europe had to be grasped by the peoples of the Third World. In this period of changing technology there is the effort to locate the worst polluting industries in the Third World.

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The question of the environment is also tied to the continued production of nuclear weapons. One positive impact of the disintegration will be that there will be greater political pressures for demilitarization internationally. There is the need for the people of the Third World to raise their voices against the military build-up which continues in the West even after the end of the cold war. There is now clearly the necessity for an international alliance for real demilitarization and the conversion of the factories and enterprises devoted to making weapons of destruction. In the absence of the cold war there will be efforts by NATO and the West to develop interventionist forces to prevent the consolidation of independence in the Third World. These interventionist forces will be legitimized in the so-called fight against terrorism and the war on drugs.

The debt crisis and militarism in the Third World

One of the immediate negative impact of the disintegration of the USSR will be the ability of the West to dominate the Third World in the period of the new phase of capitalism. This phase is characterized by the decline of the United States as the major economic power, the rise of an integrated European market, and the consolidation of the Japanese form of capitalism in the Pacific. This new international division of labour will have major consequences for the Third World, and compound the economic weaknesses of the period of the debt crisis.

The issues of the debt crisis in Latin American and Africa are well-known and need not be repeated. What is less well-known are the various schemes for recolonization by the IMF and other social forces from the West that want to use the issue of the debt to undermine the limited sovereignty of Africa today.¹¹ It is known that the debt cannot be paid but the political leadership in the Third World cannot organize to challenge the inequalities of the international system. The United States of America is the largest debtor in the world but there is no structural adjustment program in that country. This reinforces the fact that the problem of the debt crisis cannot be solved by tinkering with exports and government expenditure, but by a fundamental restructuring of the world economy.

What has to be stressed is how the crisis provided the basis for international agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank to devalue the return for labour in the Third World. The IMF intervention in the Third World is an essential element of undermining the sovereignty of the former colonial territories after they had waged struggles for independence. This lack of sovereignty is the prelude to recolonization. The ideas of the market and liberalization are code words for the economic domination of the Third World by the enterprises of the

competing centres of capital accumulation. The fact that the disintegrated economies of Eastern Europe are seeking membership in the IMF at a time when the poor countries of the South are calling for the restructuring of the monetary and trading institutions will only set back the calls for a new International Economic Order.

Debt, remilitarization and the manipulation of the United Nations are some of the immediate effects of the disintegration of the USSR. The alliance of the USSR with the USA in the fight against the people of Iraq is only one clear lesson of how the world will be polarized along racial lines. Already one of the results of the break-up of the Soviet Union has been the rise of chauvinism, overt racism in the West, along with the exacerbation of regional problems. The break-up of the USSR will usher in a period of violence and instability in Europe. Already there is the dress rehearsal in Yugoslavia.

The rise of regional wars in Eastern Europe is at the same time providing the cover for new forms of colonialism. This is most evident in the attempt to resettle refugees from Eastern Europe in other territories. In January 1922 the Institute for European Defense and Strategies Studies estimated that in the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union there could be more than three million refugees in Europe.¹² Since the last century Europe has always settled its surplus population in areas where this population could spread the ideas of capitalism and European superiority. The experience of Cecil Rhodes in the last century and the impact of European settlers in Southern Africa is well-known, and should be recalled as the present dying regime in South Africa seek to attract skilled white labour from Eastern Europe.

The outbreak of rabid racism in Western Europe is leading to even more restrictive immigration practices, and there is real consternation of the impending problems which will arise from the crisis of the break up of the USSR. One alternative has been to settle refugees and persecuted persons in the Third World. This is the basis for the plan to resettle one million Soviet Citizens in Palestine.

It is the right of persecuted persons to flee repression in Eastern Europe, but it is another matter for these persons to undermine the self-determination of an oppressed people, in this case the Palestinians. The Western media uses psychological warfare to mobilize humanitarian sentiment on the side of settling one million Jews from the Soviet Union in the occupied territories of Palestine. This humanitarian colonialism is to be supported by a grant of ten million dollars from the United States government to build houses for these settlers. Thus far this plan is stalled by considerations of the domestic politics of the United States, but the instalment of Russian Jews in the occupied territories of Palestine

continue.

Successful resettlement in the occupied territories will legitimize other forms of occupation in Africa. A similar project is on the drawing board to resettle former Portuguese settlers in Mozambique and Angola. There are over 600,000 former settlers who are claiming the right to return to Mozambique and Angola. Under the present efforts to undermine the independence of Angola and Mozambique¹³ it will shortly be declared that the settlers are necessary for the reconstruction of these countries after war and destabilization. At the same time the dying white regime in South Africa seek to attract white settlers from Eastern Europe to increase the white population of South Africa.

What threatens the peoples of the Third World is that as we approach the end of the twentieth century the ideas of racial superiority and inferiority will be spreading as capitalism seeks the globalization of the principles of apartheid. Restrictive immigration practices in Europe, the imposition of the form of Bantustans in Palestine, and the overt segregation which is accompanying the racial polarization in Europe and America are clear signs of this tendency.

Conclusion

The disintegration of the USSR comes at a point in the transition of the world system from Fordism to Just in time production. These changes in the organic composition of capital have tremendous implications in the sphere of the political struggles between capital and labour internationally. In so far as the Soviet brand of socialism had acted as a break for the conceptualization of the tasks for social transformation, the disintegration of the USSR opens scope for creative analysis by the peoples of the Third World. All the peoples of the territories of the Soviet Union, like those of the Third World, are faced with the choice of the social system most adequate for the dignity of human beings.

The triumph of capitalism which is trumpeted throughout the world disguises deep contradictions. The growing contradictions between the Germans in Europe, the Japanese and the USA, should demonstrate that competitive capitalism is still alive and contain the dangers of war and destruction such as that which was witnessed in 1914 and 1939. What must be said is that the contradictions by themselves are not sufficient for the fight for self-determination and independence by the peoples of the Third World. There is a need for the ideas, the organisation, and political leadership which will succeed in the radicalization of the politics, and move far beyond the historically defined tasks of transformation.

Humanity is now poised for such transformations, and nowhere more so than in Southern Africa. International capital recognizes the revolutionary potentialities of the project of the working people for dignity, hence the attempt to narrowly define the tasks of the democratic struggles. Progressive intellectuals have to define their tasks in relationship to the attempts by the working people to define a program of emancipation. It must be clear who are the social forces with a vested interest in real liberation.

Notes

1. Walter Rodney, unpublished manuscript of "The Bolshevik Revolution: An African Viewpoint." Notes from a series of lectures presented in the United States in 1975.
2. C.L.R. James had underlined the importance of paying attention to these issues in Africa. See his chapter on "Lenin and the Problem" in *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution*.
3. Amílcar Cabral had underlined this point in his development of the theoretical tools to guide the liberation struggle in Guinea. See the chapter, "The Weapon of Theory" in *Revolution in Guinea*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1969.
4. Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, A. Knopf, New York, 1989.
5. Samir Amin, "The Future of Socialism," *Monthly Review*, July-August 1990.
6. Samir Amin, "The Future of Socialism," p. 16.
7. Samir, Amin, *Unequal Development*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1976, p. 370-378.
8. This point was put most forcefully by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York 1966.
9. The alliance between China and the USA in Angola is documented in John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, W. Norton, New York 1978. This book is important for it exposed the equivocal role of Tanzania and Zambia in this period.
10. Despite the victory of the Cubans and the Angolans over the forces of apartheid at

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Cuito Cuanavale, the propaganda machine of the West still portrayed the issues of Angola in terms of the cold war when the problem was one of the destabilization of Southern African by they South Africans. For an analysis of the military defeat of the South Africans, see Horace Campbell, "The Military Defeat of the South Africans in Angola" in *Monthly Review*, April 1989.

11. Susan George, *A Fate Worse than Debt*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1989. See also Jack Nelson Pallmeyer, *War Against the Poor: Low Intensity Conflict and Christian faith, The Politics of Compassion, and Hunger for Justice*, Orbis Books, New York, 1991.
12. *After the Soviet Collapse: New Realities, Old Illusions*, Published by the European Defense and Strategic Studies, London, January 1992.
13. Joseph Hanlon, *Mozambique: Who Calls the Shots*, James Currey, London 1991. This book is indispensable to clarify how aid agencies, the South African Defence Forces and the Renamo forces cooperated to roll back the independence of Mozambique.