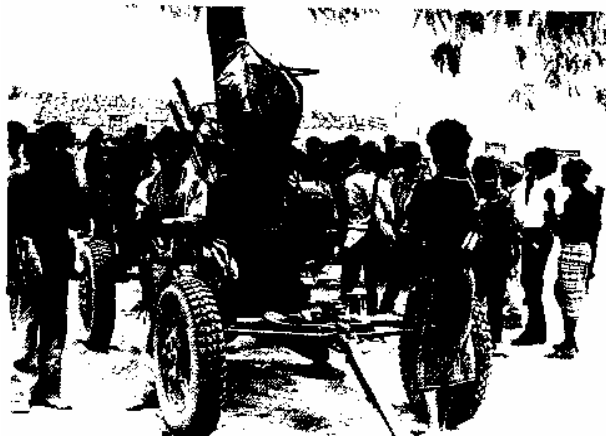


The Arab State gripped by a Soviet reign of terror

Christopher Dobson has just returned from the Gulf, where he found harrowing evidence of the Communists' Gestapo-like control

Aden, the former British colony and naval base, now turned into a massive Russian springboard for Soviet imperial adventures in Africa and Arabia, is being transformed into a repressive police state run by the East German security police on Gestapo lines. The very fact that the ailing Leonid Brezhnev dragged himself to Moscow airport last week to embrace Abdel-Fattah Ismail, President of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, is an indication of the importance which the Soviet Union attaches to this Arab state.



Russia's arms airlift into South Yemen included this anti-aircraft weapon

Ismail needed this show of support because in the dangerous, confusing world of Yemeni politics where Cabinet changes are usually made with the help of Kalashnikov assault rifles, opposition to him has begun to build through the uncouth, tough figure of the Minister of Defence Ali Ahmad Nasser Antah, an old street fighter who is gaining in stature by identifying himself with the factions who are demanding more consumer goods and a better standard of living. Understandably this increases his popularity while Ismail, the hardline Marxist who suffers from TB, loses support.

Ismail claims to be a North Yemeni by origin and was selected by the Russians partly to push for union between the North and South. This would confer three political advantages on the Russians. They would have a much longer border with Saudi Arabia and would therefore be able to exert more influence on the Saudis. They would gain the port of Hodeida on the Red Sea. And possession of this port would enable them to act against Sudan and Egypt. Ismail has so far been unable to deliver this union either by force or diplomacy, but the Russians have no intention of seeing him overthrown. They have too much at stake. Their involvement in South Yemen is now so great that Russian technicians and military advisers go all the way down to battalion level in the Army, and virtually run the Ministry of Defence.

Orders are conveyed in Russian, Russians occupy top posts in the key ministries and Soviet domination of the country is exercised in three different ways. Moscow controls the politics and the army; the Cubans, now estimated to be 3,000 strong, control the heavily-armed militia and fly the planes supplied from Russian arsenals, and the East Germans run the secret police.

The Russians and Cubans are not popular, but tolerated. The East Germans, however, are hated. Defectors who flee across the desert border to Oman tell harrowing stories of dissidents being dragged through the streets behind trucks, of beatings, torture and

concentration camps. Al Mansour, the old British prison, is the chief interrogation centre, and if a South Yemeni speaks to a foreigner without permission that is where he is taken. The East Germans' power is so great that they can arrest, interrogate and execute without reference to the government.

Typical of their behaviour was a recent incident in which women queuing at a shop for rations complained when the shop shut. They were arrested. When their husbands went to the prison to protest, the women were released but the husbands were arrested.

The fear of being overheard is so great that on one occasion at least, the South Yemenis held a Cabinet meeting paddling out at sea in order to escape "bugs".

Such is the arrogance of the Russians that during one of the periods of upheaval they used their navy to bombard the city of Aden, thus ensuring victory for their protege. It was an act of Palmerstonian gunboat diplomacy which went almost unremarked.

This is entirely in accordance with Soviet plans for South Yemen because Aden, relinquished by Britain in 1967, has become the centre of a great military, naval and air base. When the Russians stripped Yemen of its antiquated weapons to rebuild the Ethiopian army, a brand new arsenal was flown in on Antonov transports. The Second World War T34 tanks were replaced by T52s and artillery parks of guns up to 130mm were created. A ground-to-air missile system was set up. The air force was given MiG 21s and possibly MiG 23s. Soviet Marines were flown in to guard sensitive installations and the South Yemeni army was bolstered by two Ethiopian battalions which formed a flank guard for the army when it undertook its abortive invasion of North Yemen.

These Ethiopians have also been used to guard the vast Russian stores complex at Khormaksar. With these stores and the stockpiles of arms - far greater than the South Yemenis could ever use, the Russians have turned Aden and its environs into a logistics springboard.

Such expeditions require the use of sea power and this is probably the most impressive development since the Royal Navy sailed away. The Russians have a modern cruiser, three destroyers which can be used as command ships, and three Styx missile patrol boats based in Aden. They have three conventional submarines based on Socotra island and by early 1981 will have completed 12 nuclear submarine pens in Aden.

All this entails a strong presence from the KGB to handle the more subtle aspects of security. It works from a closely guarded compound within the main army compound at Khormaksar and it is run by an extraordinary figure, Vladintir Ivanovitch Sharayev, a swarthy, stocky, man who has an Ethiopian girl friend and, for a KGB chief, is unusually gregarious. He arrived on the scene with more extensive powers than is usual for the normal "resident". He is responsible for the whole of the Arabian Peninsula and for the Indian Ocean. That, in itself, is a measure of the importance of this once British colony to the Soviet Union.

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