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## GDR Involvement in South Africa: When Does Solidarity become Engagement?

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# **GDR Involvement in South Africa**

## **When Does Solidarity become Engagement?**

By Edward Vaughan

### **Abstract**

The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was one of the most influential forces during the Cold War in Southern Africa. Thanks to their assistance, revolutionary groups such as the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) and the African National Congress (ANC) were able to stand up against the Apartheid government in South Africa aided by the United States. This project examines whether the GDR actions are perceived as support and solidarity during the Cold War, or if the involvement of GDR constitutes active engagement with the conflict. However, since the German reunification, research into the specific policies of the GDR and its connection to these groups has been minimal and is still not readily available to an international audience since most of the ground research is in German. This leaves many of these questions as unexplored territory. This project aims to help begin to fill in some of the holes by further discussing an already highlighted but less thoroughly discussed topic in the existing literature and providing a closer examination of the actual programs and support the GDR provided, specifically during the Namibian War of Independence.

### **Introduction**

When Sam Nujoma, then head of the South West African People's Organization, described the importance of the support given to them by the German Democratic Republic (GDR), also referred to as East Germany, one sentence said it all: "These supplies literally saved us from starving." Indeed, there is little doubt that this area was

one of the most prioritized initiatives of East German foreign policy. In fact, in certain areas, East Germany's support was second only to the Soviet Union. From the first talks and discussions in the 1960s all the way to the Namibia's independence in 1990, East Germany played a vital role in the successful fight against the South African regime. Dr. Ilona Schleicher argued that thanks to this engagement, "the GDR succeeded in connecting their advocacy for mediation in the conflict in Southern Africa with their continuing and unconstrained support for SWAPO, and because of this, their stance towards SWAPO was never cast in doubt."<sup>1</sup> However, due to this cooperation throughout the conflict, and the issues with gathering completely accurate estimations of the assistance provided, there is some doubt about how extensive the support for the movement in Southwest Africa was. Ulrich van der Heyden, in his dissertation from Rhodes University in 2011, expressed his concern about the future of the discussion around this topic:

Supposed GDR military deployment in Africa during the Cold War will probably continue to be cited to slander the involvement in Africa policy, which was mostly supported by the GDR citizenry, as well as the support efforts of any kind, much appreciated by the African partners as they may have been.<sup>2</sup>

His worry is well-grounded: many of the initial research in this field was carried out by those from East Germany who had been either directly involved or had access to sources and documents from the East German government. However, current research on this topic out of Germany would likely be framed within the West German understanding of the war, which sees the GDR's actions in the Cold War negatively. In addition, there is a

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<sup>1</sup> „Dabei ist es der DDR gelungen, ihr Eintreten für politische Konfliktregelungen im südlichen Afrika mit der fortgesetzten und uneingeschränkten Unterstützung für die SWAPO zu verbinden, so daß ihre Haltung von der SWAPO nie in Zweifel gezogen wurde.“ (Die beiden deutschen Staaten in Afrika, p.336)

<sup>2</sup> See van der Hayden, *GDR Development Policy with special reference to Africa, c. 1960-1990*, p. 209

lack of research from the African side to counterbalance this. This raises the question: just how involved was the GDR in this area, especially during the Namibian War of Independence? Due to the limited amount of research in this area, this project does not aim to provide a final answer to this question; rather, its aim is to provide a concise overview of the information available at this point in order to make further research into this area easier. This paper will focus on three areas of the German Democratic Republic's assistance: education and training, medical assistance, and material support. These constituted the bulk of the GDR's aid projects with SWAPO, and therefore warrant the most attention. All of this assistance also assisted in the ability for SWAPO to continue the fight against the South African security forces.

### **Historical Background**

To understand the relationship between East Germany and Namibia, it helps to understand how the relationship developed in the first place. The relationship between Germany and Namibia started off as an uneasy one following the establishment of the colony German South-West Afrika (Deutsch-Südwestafrika) in 1884, during which time the German occupiers committed the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century against the Herero and Nama people. The First World War cut their occupation short; however, the result was not much better. At the war's end, the colony was classified as a Class C colony, meaning a protectorate in the area could administer it until it was ready to become independent. This is how South Africa became the administrator of the former German colony. Despite the given expectation that Namibia would eventually become independent, South Africa interpreted this handing over of the colony as simply a veiled

transferral of a colony from one power to another.<sup>3</sup> After the Second World War, the UN officially declared the country to be under their purview, the South African government denied this announcement and subsequently declared Namibia the 5<sup>th</sup> district of the country. With the outbreak of the Cold War, given that Namibia was one of the top suppliers of uranium in the world, the fight to gain influence in the area increased dramatically. The South African Department of External Affairs also added that "on this account alone, therefore, South Africa is bound to be implicated in any war between East and West"<sup>4</sup>. In fact, this area became a flashpoint not only due to natural resources, but also because of the decades-long Namibian War of Independence, which quickly became a proxy war between the two ideological powers of the Cold War.

Naturally, both East and West Germany were involved in the affairs of Southern Africa, since they were two of the strongest countries in their respective spheres of influence. However, in the first phase of this support, from about 1960-1977, much of this debate was dominated by the Hallstein Doctrine, or the official West Germany policy that East Germany was not to be recognized as a sovereign state. In doing so, West Germany's hoped to isolate East Germany in the international arena and drive them towards reunification. Rather, this drove East Germany to develop more unofficial ways of gaining international support and allies. This also gave them the freedom to fully pursue the Soviet agenda, and to work toward assisting in the fight against imperialism and capitalism, which also included support for the many *Befreiungsbewegungen* and *-kriege*<sup>5</sup> that were happening throughout the world,

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<sup>3</sup> Louis, William Roger. *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez, and Decolonization*. 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Berridge, G.R. *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and African Defence: The Rise and Fall of the White Entente, 1948–60*. Palgrave Books, 1992, pp. 1–16, 163–164.

<sup>5</sup> Freedom movements and wars

including the one in Namibia. According to Lothar Brock and Hans-Joachim Spanger, both researchers at the Hessen Institute for Peace and Conflict Research, the East German view on these movements was that they were a necessary part of the battle against imperialist powers, and whether or not it was the goal to protect past gains from being threatened or challenging the status quo in favor of the oppressed, the GDR felt itself duty-bound to stand in solidarity with these movements.<sup>6</sup> This support also extended to the freedom movement in Namibia, with the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) developing their closest relationship to Berlin. By the 1960s, the UN and the International Court of Justice had both found the South African occupation of Namibia illegal, yet South Africa refused to give up control, so the country descended into civil war.

In the mid-1970s, a couple of major developments occurred that changed the relationship between Namibia and the GDR and allowed them to develop closer political ties. The first was the collapse of the Portuguese colonial empire in 1974, which also allowed Angola to gain independence in the same year. This was also a blessing for SWAPO as it allowed them a chance to use Angola as a base to run their operations. It also provided a safe haven for those who had to flee from the fighting. Following these developments in Angola and the increasingly uncertain situation of SWAPO in the conflict, the GDR made a big step to help out, raising their planned support from 100,000 Ostdeutsche Mark to 500,000 for 1974, and doubling the planned 500,000 for the following year to 1 million Mark.<sup>7</sup> However, even more important than this was the visit by Sam Nujoma, the leader of SWAPO, to Berlin at the end of 1977. This meeting

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<sup>6</sup> See Brock and Spanger, *Alternative Deutsche Politik*, p. 187

<sup>7</sup> See Engel und Schleicher, *Die beiden deutschen Staaten in Afrika*, p.313

changes the arrangement between the two countries and begins the next phase of their cooperation. This new cooperation agreement included a considerable increase in the GDR support for the SWAPO cause. From this meeting alone, Nujoma was able to secure help in the areas of education, medical assistance, and military support. These would also constitute the majority of the GDR's support until 1989. This became even more important following the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. The implementation of his "constructive engagement" policy arguably extended the conflict for another 10 years.<sup>8</sup> In the following sections, each of these areas of support (education, medical assistance, and material support) will be discussed in more detail. This will shed some light on the actions of the GDR in the conflict and make it easier to ascertain the extent of their involvement to see if the description of "standing in solidarity" is a fitting description, or if this information points to a deeper engagement in the war.

### **Education and Training**

The first area of focus are the multiple education and training programs the GDR sponsored for Namibians. This was one of the largest and most comprehensive cooperation efforts between the GDR and SWAPO during the Cold War. While the GDR provided valuable education opportunities, but their training mostly focused on intelligence and military training for SWAPO officials. This not only allowed SWAPO to expand and adjust their strategy against South Africa, but this put GDR experts in direct contact with the SWAPO leaders conducting the guerilla war against South Africa,

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<sup>8</sup> See Hitchens, Christopher. *For the sake of Argument: Essays and Minority Reports*. Verso, 1993, p. 99.

allowing them to directly affect the direction of the conflict. Even the former SWAPO Secretary for Education, Nahas Angula, substantiated this in an interview in 1996.<sup>9</sup>

This was one of the first areas where the GDR really intensified its cooperation with SWAPO. For example, in 1978, the GDR expanded the number of places for continued education in East Germany for Namibians to 130, and by 1989, as many as 1,400 workers had gotten training in the GDR. The financial support for educational programs also grew as well, increasing from about 1 Million Mark in 1981 to over 6 Million Mark by 1989.<sup>10</sup> Much of this education took place within the GDR itself; however, there was also support for Namibians in Africa as well. Following the critical meeting between Nujoma and Honecker in 1977, the GDR agreed to bring five teachers into the SWAPO camps in Angola in order to provide education for the refugee population.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the East Germans also helped in the area of youth education. One of the most important examples of this was the group of 400 Namibian children who were moved out of the refugee camps at a very young age for their own safety to the GDR where they grew up to become more German than Namibian.<sup>12</sup> For SWAPO members, but also for Namibians in general, these programs showed the GDR's interest in their country's long-term success, as most of this technical training was in areas such as communications and electronics, which were not only valuable during the conflict, but after as well.

This support not only included civilian education, but also provided military training for SWAPO officers and officials for their fight against South Africa. This cooperation actually began before the meeting in 1977. Starting in 1971, leaders from

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<sup>9</sup> Die beiden deutschen Staaten in Afrika, p.316

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.; although support was given before, official statistics are not available

<sup>11</sup> Die beiden deutschen Staaten in Afrika, p.314

<sup>12</sup> Alternative Deutsche Politik, p.125



multiple freedom movements, including SWAPO and the ANC, were invited to study covert intelligence at the *Institut für Internationale Beziehungen der Juristischen Hochschule des MfS*.<sup>13</sup> This military training continued to expand, and by 1979, members from SWAPO and the ANC, along with the ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union), were receiving military instruction in Angola. SWAPO and the ANC were also receiving further military assistance in other locations in Africa.<sup>14</sup> By 1984, there were reports from Western sources of upwards of 3,000 military advisors from the GDR training SWAPO and ANC personnel, although this figure is likely somewhat inflated.<sup>15</sup> However, those that were there do seem to have had a significant role within the freedom movements, as these officers not only provided most of the training for these forces, but those within the SWAPO camps were often rumored to advise SWAPO leaders on decisions in certain situations. This training was mainly conducted by the MfS and focused on more covert strategies. There were also reports of language instruction for NVA troops in the local languages, so there is a possibility they were also assisting SWAPO and the ANC. Although clear evidence of the extent of their involvement has not been found, the value the Namibian conflict had taken on for the GDR was undeniable.

### **Medical Assistance**

The GDR also assisted in providing medical care during the War of Independence. There were also Scandinavian medical personnel and supplies ready to assist the refugees who were forced to relocate themselves to the refugee camps, and their humanitarian

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<sup>13</sup> The MfS (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit) was the secret police service in the GDR, that was involved in covert operations both within and outside the country.

<sup>14</sup> See Winrow, *The foreign policy of the GDR in Africa*, p.142

<sup>15</sup> Compare with Table 7 in Winrow, p.133

support easily outmatched the GDR aid.<sup>16</sup> Although this aid was welcomed, the Scandinavian aid was restricting to aiding those affected by the humanitarian crisis, or the civilian refugees in camps. The GDR aid, on the other hand, could be used for those in SWAPO and those fighting for the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). This was especially important since some of the camps had grown to the size of small villages, such as the Kwanza-Sul camp, which quickly reached a population of about 35,000 following the incident at Cassinga.<sup>17</sup> In addition, this has led to an intensity in the fighting that resulted in even more injured fighters. The East German medical care prevented this from affecting SWAPO's ability to continue the fight. Without this assurance, their ability to keep pushing forward is questionable. Even before the refugee crisis began, East Germany had already begun treating sick and wounded guerilla fighters in 1976/77 in their hospitals. In 1978 40 PLAN-Fighters as well as 40 victims of the attack at Cassinga were flown to the GDR for treatment, and this assistance continued into the 1980s. In addition to this care in the GDR, following the deal in 1977, Berlin also focused on providing better medical care on location as well. At first, there were a couple of doctors that were sent to work in the refugee camps. This team grew quickly, with nurses coming to the camps starting in 1981. By 1989, 14 doctors were actively working within hospitals and medical posts in SWAPO-controlled areas.<sup>18</sup> In addition to sending medical staff, the GDR also agreed to help provide equipment for two hospitals in Namibia as part of the deal with Nujoma, and in the following years there were also shipments of medical supplies to the hospitals and camps in order to provide more medical care within the camps in Angola.

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<sup>16</sup> See Schleicher and Schleicher, *Special Flights*, p.191

<sup>17</sup> The attack of Cassinga was a controversial air attack on a SWAPO base in Angola. SWAPO claims this was a refugee camp, while South Africa claimed it was a military base.

<sup>18</sup> Die beiden deutschen Staaten in Afrika, p.318

The medical care also had benefits beyond just the ability to recover from injury and illness Engel and Schleicher mention how this was a major morale booster for both the civilian population and the liberation army in Namibia. Former SWAPO Secretary for Finance Lucas Pohamba pointed out in an interview that the people who fled from the South African army attacks had been directly exposed to the horrors of war in their hometowns and had seen friends and loved ones dying from their injuries.<sup>19</sup> He stressed the fact that the GDR could usually get them to one of their European hospitals in a week. For those fleeing the war or even fighting in it, was a source of great relief to know their injuries were not an immediate death sentence. This only strengthened their resolve, but also furthered reinforced the already positive image of the GDR in their minds.

### **Material Support**

Erich Honecker, the leader of the GDR, openly expressed his support for a political and diplomatic solution to the “Namibia Question”, such as UN Resolution 435, and actively involved the GDR in the talks on this issue. On the other hand, he also recognized the armed struggle as a necessary part of the struggle against South Africa, especially following the initial failure to put the UN’s plan into motion. Due to this, he also made material support for the Namibians a priority in the cooperation between SWAPO and Berlin, which helped keep the movement alive. This support not only helped SWAPO survive thanks to shipments of supplies like food, but it also was vital in their ability to put the training from the MfS and NVA into action during the 1980s. One area of their support was providing arms deliveries to SWAPO and PLAN fighters. Their first

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<sup>19</sup> Die DDR im südlichen Afrika, p.184

delivery, organized by the MfAA<sup>20</sup> and the MfS, was sent in 1967. In 1977, Honecker granted deliveries of 1 Million Mark's worth of weapons and munitions. In this case, and with many cases of arms deliveries, they came at critical times when the SWAPO desperately needed them.<sup>21</sup> Although these started off rather modest with mainly small arms deliveries in the pre-recognition period, these later grew to encompass more heavy equipment, such as heavy artillery, tanks, and trucks. This growth in the amount and type of supplies also led to a rise in the amount of funds reserved for SWAPO, which later around 3.5 Million Mark.<sup>22</sup> Thanks to their strength in the technology industry, they were also a major contributor of optical, communication, and electronic supplies to SWAPO. Despite this, there are still those who question how much attention these arms shipments warrant. Some argue that the GDR's expenditures indicate the country was not a major exporter of arms, whereas others argue that they were, and the numbers simply don't reflect this investment.<sup>23</sup>

The East German material shipments were not limited to support for the armed struggle. In addition to the arms and equipment provided for the army, the GDR also supplied other necessary material needed to satisfy the daily needs of both the army and the Namibian people. For example, in 1979, Honecker not only approved the delivery of 50 trucks for SWAPO use, but also clothing for 10,000 PLAN fighters.<sup>24</sup> They were also a massive provider of food stuffs not only for the troops fighting against the South African army, but also for those in the camps as well. In fact, during the 1980s, even though the economic situation in the GDR was becoming more dire, one of the components

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<sup>20</sup> Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten (MfAA) was the foreign ministry of the GDR.

<sup>21</sup> Die beiden deutschen Staaten in Afrika, p.320

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> See Howell, *The End of an Era: The Rise and Fall of G.D.R. Aid* and Winrow, *Foreign Policy of the GDR*

<sup>24</sup> Die beiden deutschen Staaten in Afrika, pp.320-21

Honecker did not let fail was the delivery of food to Angola for the Namibians. As Hans-Georg Schleicher notes, although other important GDR partners saw cuts in their funding to compensate for the economic issues, the amount given to the SWAPO and ANC stayed unrestricted.<sup>25</sup> Without even adding in the financial support for all of the military-related shipments, the amount of money used yearly to support SWAPO was consistently between around 9-11 Million Mark.<sup>26</sup> As Sam Nujoma pointed out, the deliveries the East Germans got to them literally saved them from starving. However, not everything done for those in Namibia had such a dark undertone. One year, for the children in the refugee camps, East Germans collected over 900,000 toys to be sent to the children in the refugee camps.<sup>27</sup> Although not a crucial item, just as with many other things, it only served to reaffirm the close connection between the two groups.

## **Conclusions**

The examples presented above are not an exhaustive list of all the actions carried out by the GDR during the span of the Namibian War of Independence, rather they serve to show what kind of support was offered by East Germany to those fighting against the Apartheid regime. Looking back to the question of whether this would constitute active engagement or not, from what I have read in these sources, I would concur with Dr. Van der Heyden that the GDR was not actively engaged in the conflict. Compared with the actions of other countries<sup>28</sup>, the GDR was arguably the second most important supporter of the SWAPO cause, but this support did not reach the line of active military engagement. The closest the GDR came to such direct involvement was their

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<sup>25</sup> See Heyden et al, *Die DDR und Afrika*, p.20

<sup>26</sup> Die beiden deutschen Staaten, p.324

<sup>27</sup> Alternative Deutsche Außenpolitik, p.126

<sup>28</sup> One example would be Cuba's support in Angola, where Cuba actually deployed troops into Angola who fought against UNITA and along provided other forms of assistance.

deployment of officers from the NVA and MfS to Namibia to directly work with SWAPO officers on site and the possible deployment of NVA units to the area. As I alluded to earlier, many of the sources discussing the MfS and NVA involvement are not completely reliable because many of them are contemporary sources written during the conflict. Because of the heightened political tensions, reports on both sides tended to exaggerate the truth, which makes developing an accurate picture of the situation with the military advisors difficult. In this way, the best way to understand may be this quote from a member of the Social Democrats, where he explained, “This is indeed no Afrika-Corps..., but there are in many corners military advisors, and these bring nothing positive to this continent, but contribute to more armament”<sup>29</sup>.

There are still however a couple of points that make this an even more complicated question to answer. These also warrant examination but require access to more archival information to get more specific details. One issue is the East Germans’ knowledge or lack thereof of the human rights atrocities that occurred within the SWAPO camps holding prisoners of war, where many were tortured.<sup>30</sup> Along with that, the sudden crossing of PLAN troops into Namibia on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1989 following the agreement to honor UN Resolution 435 for the move towards Namibian independence, an act which jeopardized the entire peace process before it even started.<sup>31</sup> A further issue comes with distinguishing what supplies and personnel were supported following 1978 and involvement in Angola in the Namibian conflict and the GDR presence in both the Namibian and emerging Angolan conflict. While there are official numbers on

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<sup>29</sup> Winrow, p.144

<sup>30</sup> For more information, see the August 1992 Africa Watch Report “Accountability in Namibia”

<sup>31</sup> *Sitkowski, Andrzej (2006). UN peacekeeping: myth and reality. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group. pp. 80–86*

Angolan support, with SWAPO bases being within the country, it is hard to say whether some of that may have also been going to them.

Despite these issues and the likely lack of direct engagement in the conflict, this does not mean that the GDR's support of the SWAPO cause was any less important. On the contrary, their support in many areas was consistently ranked second only to the USSR. Even when the USSR began discussion with the South African government in Pretoria, the GDR refused to cooperate due to their relationship with SWAPO. In addition, thanks to Honecker's affinity to the movement, the GDR often could get supplies and funds released quickly, which also made them a very reliable partner. To this day, many in Namibia hold a very positive image of former East Germany due to this solidarity shown during the Cold War. Even more reason, in my opinion, to make sure we know the whole story about what the GDR did to ensure Namibia gained its rightly deserved independence.

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