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THE MILITARY TRAINING CAMP

Co-constructed Spaces: Experiences of PAIGC guerrillas in Soviet Training Camps, 1961-1974

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The late 1950s was a period of dramatic change in Africa, with thirteen countries scheduled to achieve independence in 1960 alone. In Portuguese colonies—Angola, Mozambique, and Portuguese Guinea and Cape Verde—a struggle against white power emerged in the 1960s, as it became clear that Portugal's prime minister António de Oliveira Salazar was not prepared to surrender control. In Guinea-Bissau, the Portuguese army fought against a guerrilla movement, the Party for Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC; *Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde*). The PAIGC was led by Amílcar Lopes da Costa Cabral (hereafter Amílcar Cabral), a Cape Verdean agronomist educated in Lisbon who would become a famous theoretician of African revolution. The guerrilla war in Guinea-Bissau started in January 1963 and would last until the coup of 25th April 1974 overthrew the Portuguese dictatorship and led to domestic reforms, paving the way for the independence of Guinea-Bissau and the other Portuguese colonies in 1974-75.¹

The Soviet Union was a crucial ally of the PAIGC. Between 1963 and 1974, the USSR supplied 21.7 million roubles in military, and 4.4 million roubles in humanitarian aid to the PAIGC.² The USSR also provided the bulk of training in various training facilities across the Eastern bloc. Between 1963 and 1973, the Soviets trained two thousand PAIGC recruits, the

¹ One of the most comprehensive works on Cabral's life in English remains Patrick Chabal, *Amilcar Cabral: Revolutionary Leadership and People's War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For a more recent study, see: Julião Soares Sousa, *Amilcar Cabral (1924-1973), Vida E Morta de Um Revolucionário Africano* [Amílcar Cabral (1924–1973): The life and death of an African revolutionary] (Coimbra: Edicao de Autor, 2016).

² Kulikov to CC CPSU, 18 July 1973, Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (hereafter RGANI), Fond (F.) 5, Opis (Op.) 66, Delo (D.) 1190, 133.

majority of them at Perevalnoe, a large facility in Soviet Ukraine.³ This chapter uses oral history and memoirs to compare the experiences of PAIGC guerrillas who underwent military training at Perevalnoe and Skhodnia, a smaller facility near Moscow. The chapter argues that Soviet training camps were in large measure ‘co-constructed’ spaces, operating around a set of modernizing goals shared by African elites and their Soviet interlocutors.

Training and education were fundamental to Cabral’s modernizing project in Guinea-Bissau. Having worked as an agronomist across the Portuguese empire, Cabral accepted a Marxist-Leninist framework for the analysis of Portuguese colonialism. He believed that capitalism and imperialism were closely intertwined, and that socialism was the only way to achieve true liberation. The armed struggle was, Cabral believed, an essential part of such liberation, and armed men were therefore to become the agents of modernity in the countryside. He thus famously paid a great deal of attention to the education and training of recruits, teaching not only practical skills, but also educating revolutionaries to achieve the requisite level of ‘political consciousness’, which was necessary to achieve genuine emancipation.

These goals fitted well with the Soviet objectives for the military training programme. At least some Soviet instructors saw the training camps as sites for turning Africans into modern subjects. These modern soldiers would be able, they hoped, to adhere to Soviet standards of *kul’turnost’* (culturedness), which entailed a basic set of skills and habits, but also political consciousness—the ability to interpret their local struggles in terms of the Marxist-Leninist theory on imperialism. As a result, the ‘space’ of the training camp was co-constructed by the Soviets and by the African elites, who held similar modernizing objectives. In a practical sense, the military training followed the demands of guerrilla struggle in Guinea-Bissau, with both Perevalnoe and Skhodnia allowing for practical instruction in Soviet weaponry. In a metaphysical sense, the content and meanings of the political instruction were shaped by Cabral’s ideological agenda. Overall, educated and thus higher-status soldiers

³ For the full story of Cuba’s involvement with the PAIGC, see: Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

tended to possess a greater sense of agency over their immediate environment and served as ‘translators’ and ‘re-translators’ of meaning for their less educated colleagues.

Thousands of soldiers from the Global South went for military training in the USSR after 1945. In recent years, scholars have started to examine the daily lives at the military training camps, with many underlining the transnational or ‘un-national’ nature of these spaces, and thus of the ‘national liberation’ movements in Southern Africa overall.⁴ However, we know very little about the content, structure, and intended outcomes of these programmes. To date, there is not a single study of the Soviet military training programme for the PAIGC, despite the scale of the support offered between 1961 and 1974. We also know little about the experiences of African guerrillas who were trained across the Soviet bloc; the little we do know comes almost exclusively from memoirs of select soldiers who underwent specialized training at facilities in Moscow.⁵

By looking at the Soviet programme and training camps in spatial terms, we can start to comprehend the relationship between African actors and superpower donors on a number of levels. First of all, by analysing the Soviet training programme at Perevalnoe and Skhodnia in comparative terms, we can begin to understand the goals behind these programmes from the Soviet perspective. Second, examining the physical and ideational encounter between African soldiers and their hosts allows us to better understand the power hierarchies between the two sides. Third, the comparison of the two sites will allow us an insight into how trainees related to the physical environment. By examining these two sites in a comparative perspective, we can hope to better understand the power dynamics between Africans and their hosts, as well as untangle the power hierarchies within the PAIGC.

This chapter is based on archival evidence, memoirs, and selected interviews with former trainees in Soviet training camps. Some of those interviewed—Osvaldo Lopes da Silva,

⁴ Miles Larmer Luise White, ‘Introduction: Mobile Soldiers and the Un-National Liberation of Southern Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40, no. 6 (2014): 1271-74.

⁵ Some examples of memoir literature, see: Barry Gilder, *Songs and Secrets: South Africa from Liberation to Governance* (London: Hurst and Co, 2012), chap. 2, Kindle; Hugh Macmillan, *Chris Hani – a Jacana Pocket Biography* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2014), 27-9. The only study known to us that tackles the experiences of African trainees is: Jocelyn Alexander and JoAnn McGregor, ‘African Soldiers in the USSR: Oral Histories of Zapu Intelligence Cadres’ Soviet Training, 1964–1979’, *Journal of African History* 43, no. 1 (2017): 49-66.

Júlio Carvalho, Olívio Pires, Silvino da Luz, António Leite, and Pedro Pires—underwent training at Skhodnia in 1967. Others, including João Pereira da Silva, Fode Cassama, Brandão Bull da Matta, Arafan Mane, and Afonso Manga Badganny were trained at Perevalnoe at different points in time. Differences arose on account of the diverse backgrounds of the interviewees. Almost all interviewees who studied at Skhodnia in 1967 were born and interviewed in Cape Verde. Many among the group became prominent war-time figures and occupied positions of power after Guinea-Bissau became independent in 1974. Most notably, Pedro Pires became President of Cape Verde in the 1990s. Osvaldo Lopes da Silva, Júlio Carvalho, João Pereira da Silva and Silvino da Luz would also later occupy governmental posts at ministerial level. Those who studied in Perevalnoe (with the exception of João Pereira da Silva) were born in Guinea-Bissau. Although the men in that group came to hold less senior posts, their entire professional careers remained connected with the armed forces. The specificity of the interview evidence means that the narrative presented here inadvertently tends to prioritise elite experiences, often of those men whose lives were firmly connected to the PAIGC and Cabral’s modernising project.

‘A golden prison’: secrecy, hierarchy, and control in the training camps

The Soviet tradition of training revolutionaries from abroad grew out of the Comintern. The Soviet military advised the Chinese nationalists in the 1920s and, in the late 1930s, a substantial contingent supported the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War. In the 1950s, the Soviets launched a massive programme to build up and rearm the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in China, supplying technical expertise, organisational models and modern weapons at the request of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁶ The Cold War and decolonisation lent new impetus to providing training and advisory support to clients in the Global South. Henceforth, Soviet military advisors became active in Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser, in Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s, and in the People’s Democratic Republic of

⁶ On Soviet military support for China, see: Sergei Goncharenko, ‘Sino-Soviet Military Cooperation’, in *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963*, ed. Odd Arne Westad, (Washington, D.C: Stanford University Press, 1998): 141-164.

Yemen.⁷ In the wake of Patrice Lumumba's murder in 1961 in the Congo, the Soviets negotiated to train the Ghanaian army as part of Nkrumah's ambitious plan to create an all-African army.⁸

A series of military coups that swept across Africa in the mid-1960s exacerbated the trend towards the militarisation of Soviet engagement with the continent. The Soviets believed they had overlooked the importance of the military and security actors in post-colonial Africa and sought to correct their mistake by strengthening their links with, and providing support for them.⁹ By the 1980s, the training of soldiers from the Global South had become a massive logistical enterprise, employing hundreds of military instructors, interpreters, and support staff in multiple training facilities across the Soviet bloc.

Perevalnoe was the largest training facility in the USSR for soldiers from the Global South. Constructed in 1965, it contained all the necessary facilities: headquarters, a cultural club, a Russian sauna, two-storied houses for officers, a canteen for officers and one for trainees, a library, a two-storied medical centre; a four-storied building for housing trainees, and a five-storied house with flats for officers and their families with a nursery and a shop. Nearby there was also a building for driving lessons, an obstacle course, and a shooting range. By the late 1960s, the facility had been extended to allow for the education of 500 trainees at the same time. The majority came from Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau.

Most trainees at Perevalnoe were rank-and-file soldiers, often with limited levels of education. Many could not speak Portuguese or Creole (the local, Portuguese-derived dialect). That meant that there were often many layers of translation, with Soviet instruction often translated into Portuguese, then Creole and then African languages, such as Mandinka and Balante. To assess the educational level of the trainees, Soviet instructors at Perevalnoe administered basic numeracy and literacy tests.

⁷ Artemy M. Kalinovsky et. al., *Missionaries of Modernity: Advisory Missions and the Struggle for Hegemony in Afghanistan and Beyond* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 2016).

⁸ Nikolai Debrukha, 'Iz Dnevnika Marshala I.V. Kulikova,' *Ogonek* 26, (2001): 8, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2288946>.

⁹ For the militarization of Soviet involvement in Africa, see: Natalia Telepneva, 'Saving Ghana's Revolution: The Demise of Kwame Nkrumah and the Evolution of Soviet Policy in Africa, 1966-1972', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 20, no. 4 (2018): 4-25.

Arafan Mane arrived for training at Perevalnoe in 1968. Born in 1950 in a Balante village in southern Guinea-Bissau, Mane was the son of a fisherman who was also a musician and made musical instruments. His father sent him to school, but many of his peers were illiterate. The Soviet instructors were very patient, Mane recalled, as they realized it was not the trainees who were at fault, but rather the Portuguese colonial system, which did not allow access to healthcare or education for the majority of people.¹⁰ Brandão Bull da Matta and Afonso Manga Badganny arrived at Perevalnoe in 1971. Brandão's father had managed to enroll him in a Portuguese school, but once the war started, in 1963, his family had had to move.¹¹ For his part Afonso had had no schooling before the guerrillas took over his village in 1965. The main occupations were fishing and cattle-herding.¹²

Secrecy was a fundamental feature of Perevalnoe. The small village of Perevalnoe is located off the main highway that connects the capital of Crimea, Simferopol, and Alushta, a famous holiday destination on the Black Sea. It was protected from view on all sides by picturesque mountains. The men were flown to Perevalnoe with several transit stops. They often arrived at night and were driven to the school in a special bus with drawn curtains. They were also not allowed to venture off the premises unless in organized tours. There was a concern to keep trainees well away from the prying eyes of Western intelligence services, but evidently not with complete success. In fact, the Portuguese secret police, the PIDE, knew about the location of Perevalnoe and regularly compiled lists of men who underwent training at the centre. Still, the Soviets tried to protect the identity of the trainees. Arafan Mane recalled that they were advised never to identify themselves as guerrillas from Guinea-Bissau during sightseeing tours outside of the training grounds.¹³

The daily lives of the trainees and their instructors were governed by strict rules of military discipline and hierarchy. This entailed waking up and going to bed at a certain time,

¹⁰ Arafan Mane, conversation with the author, 1 April 2019, Bissau (hereafter 'Mane, 2019')

¹¹ Brandão Bull da Matta, interview with the author, 25 March 2019, Bissau (hereafter da Matta, 2019).

¹² Afonso Manga Badganny, conversation with the author, 24 March 2019, Bissau (hereafter 'Badganny, 2019')

¹³ Mane, 2019.

marching to the canteen in military formation, and observing rank.¹⁴ Soldiers lived and ate in separate quarters to Soviet instructors. Vladimir Sukhorukhov worked as an interpreter at Perevalnoe in the early 1970s. He recalled in a 2012 to a local newspaper that among the PAIGC soldiers, there were many educated, older men from relatively well-off families who had received higher education in Portugal, France and England. There were also very young men, only seventeen or eighteen years old, with little education. However, they respected the military hierarchy of the camp.¹⁵ Military hierarchy at Perevalnoe applied to all personnel. Iurii Gorbunov arrived at Perevalnoe in 1966 to work as translator. He recalled it was not easy for him to adjust to the strict military regime of the camp:

Military bases are the same everywhere: we wore military uniforms, saluted to the senior in rank, knocked our heels at the approach of the commander, marched in unison across the central square, engaged in square-bashing, carried out exercises for shooting from personal weapons, threw grenades and hit targets with the Kalashnikov assault rifle day and night. I admit, it was not easy for me to get used to an officer's duty after attending a civilian university and [after living a] less controlled life abroad! There we wore civilian clothes and addressed the senior in rank by their name and patronymic.¹⁶

João Pereira Silva was twenty-five years old when he arrived at Perevalnoe in March 1971. Originally from Boa Vista, Cape Verde, he had studied at the Liceu Gil Eanes in Mindelo, Sao Vicente, the only high school in the archipelago. In 1963, he left for Portugal on a scholarship to study Agronomy at the University of Lisbon, where he became involved with the PAIGC. In 1970, he received an order to leave for Conakry. Before spending some time as a teacher at a local party school, he was dispatched to Perevalnoe where he was put in charge of a group of PAIGC soldiers in training. He also recalled that trainees' life at Perevalnoe was strictly regimented. However, he did believe that the military discipline was important for

¹⁴ João Pereira Da Silva, conversation with the author, 6 January 2017, Praia, Cape Verde (hereafter 'João Pereira da Silva, 2017').

¹⁵ Larisa Kucherova, 'Nad Yemenov-bezoblachnoye Nebo' [Cloudless Sky Above Yemen] *Armiya*, no. 1 (January-February 2012): 24-31.

¹⁶ Iurii Gorbunov, 'Partizany Dlya Afriki' [Partisans for Africa], 16 December 2013, *Voennoye Obozrenie*, available at <http://Topwar.Ru/37349-Krym-Partizany-Dlya-Afriki-Chast-1.Html> militari, Accessed 12/07/2016 at 17:55.

constructing group solidarity among the trainees. By the end of one year of training, the group had integrated as a single military unit, bridging regional divides.¹⁷

Perevalnoe’s isolation was underlined by the high fence that surrounded the training site and the Soviet soldiers who guarded it. Although the trainees sometimes saw these soldiers, they were permitted no contact with them.¹⁸ The fence was supposed to protect the trainees from inquisitive civilians and also to serve as a physical means of control. The commandant Vladilen Kinchevskii remembered that the strict discipline and isolation caused some problems: ‘It used to happen that one [trainee] would help the other over the fence, said Kinchevskii, “and one could see black heads above the fence. Civilians, those who did not know, would take fright. So, I had to [pull] their trousers like some kind of teenagers: ‘Come down!’”¹⁹

It is difficult to ascertain whether the trainees objected to such a restricted lifestyle. A few would scale the fence, go to the shops nearby, buy alcohol and come back. However, one could be punished with disciplinary measures if caught in the act.²⁰ Others, however, emphasized that the lack of physical autonomy was not a problem. As Arafan Mane recalled, they were ‘revolutionaries’, and as such they grasped that the training would help them liberate their own country, especially since the Soviets treated them well and provided all the support staff, such as cooks, cleaners, doctors, nurses—all inside the camp.²¹

The Soviet Union was dotted with similar ‘secret spaces’. These were mainly research laboratories and military installations, but there were also dozens of towns, the ‘closed cities’, where one could only gain access with a special permit. Information about these towns was closed to the general public, too: ‘closed cities’ were absent from maps and media coverage. Akin to these Soviet spaces, the training camps for African soldiers were usually secluded sites, where an individual’s power depended on his place in set hierarchies.

¹⁷ João Pereira Da Silva, 2017.

¹⁸ João Pereira da Silva, 2017.

¹⁹ ‘Shkola Terroristov S Marksistskim Uklonom [A School for Terrorists with a Marxist Angle],’ *Segodnya*, 22 April 2005, available at <https://www.segodnya.ua/oldarchive/c2256713004f33f5c2256fea00516140.html>.

²⁰ Da Matta, 2018.

²¹ Mane, 2019.

To João Pereira da Silva, these Soviet hierarchies were obvious. That ultimate authority lay with the military leadership in Moscow was not in doubt. He recalled an episode in their artillery training when his cohort went out to the fields to learn how to identify distances topographically. It was winter, however, so the fields were covered in metres of snow, making the exercise quite pointless. On a different occasion, they were taught to use churches and power lines to identify distance, which was of limited use since the interior of Guinea-Bissau had few of either. When da Silva raised an objection, the instructors admitted the shortcomings, but told him that it would be easier to cut the page out of the textbook than to argue with Moscow about changing it.²²

Another obvious hierarchy concerned the position of the ‘political representative’, most likely a KGB officer, stationed at the camp. Silva remembered him as a ‘nice young man from Moscow’ who liked sports and boxing. Yet at the same time, he was also clearly the most powerful man at Perevalnoe, who was entitled to take one for a ‘nice walk outside, invite one to a restaurant in the town or for a late night drink in his quarters’. He argued that the experience opened his eyes to the reality of Soviet hierarchies: ‘It’s one thing what you read in the books-- the reality is you have big guys, small guys, medium guys, powerful, less powerful. I was very impressed by how different it was from the idea you have that the army is something where everybody is equal. Not really. Even in the fabric they use in the uniforms, the General’s clothes are better [sic].’²³

However, the strict regimen at Perevalnoe could be adjusted in line with the requirements of the PAIGC leadership and the status of the incoming group. Fode Cassama’s contingent arrived in November 1972 as part of a group of twenty-four men handpicked to learn how to operate *Strela-2* (Arrows), a new Soviet shoulder-fired air-defence system that

²² João Pereira Da Silva, 2017.

²³ João Pereira Da Silva, 2017.

would, it was hoped, break the military stalemate in Guinea-Bissau. Cabral argued that time was of the essence, and the Soviets had agreed that a group of select recruits could come for a three-month crash course. Fode Cassama recalled that the special importance of their mission meant that their group was treated like officers rather than regular trainees. They did not have to line up at regular intervals, only in the evening to check attendance. They would also regularly go to the city after class, accompanied by Soviet officers. The commanders would also regularly check up on their health and morale.²⁴ Although groups like Cassama's had a special status, Perevalnoe was designed mainly for the training of rank-and-file soldiers. Thus, it functioned in a similar fashion to Soviet military schools with a strict set of rules and hierarchies.

Skhodnia, by contrast, was a site suitable for the training of small groups for special missions. In 1968, Skhodnia hosted a cohort of thirty members of the PAIGC. The majority had arrived from Havana, Cuba, where the group had been undergoing training for a mission to launch armed struggle in the Cape Verde archipelago. Although the war in Guinea-Bissau started in 1963, the PAIGC attracted many Cape Verdeans, including in leadership positions. In 1963, the Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara met Cabral, and the two discussed the prospects for guerrilla struggle in Cape Verde. Guevara believed that the conditions in Cape Verde were similar to the Sierra Maestra mountains, and offered Cuban help. After their conversation, Cuba offered training to a group of Cape Verdeans who were supposed to launch armed struggle in the islands. By 1967 however, it became clear that the mission would prove too risky. As a result, the group of thirty-one Cape Verdean volunteers aborted their mission to sail from Cuba to Cape Verde and was flown from Havana to Moscow for an artillery training course at Skhodnia.

The Cape Verdeans who arrived at Skhodnia in 1968 thus had considerable military experience and a high level of education. The leader of the Cape Verdean group in 1968 was

²⁴ Cassama, 2019.

Pedro Pires. A thirty-four year old from Fogo, Cape Verde, in 1956, Pires went to study engineering at the University of Lisbon where he became involved in the underground anti-Salazarist movement. After a major anticolonial uprising in Angola in 1961, Pires, like many African student activists in Portugal, feared conscription into the colonial army. He thus joined a large group of African activist who fled Portugal in 1961. He officially joined the PAIGC and was dispatched to Dakar, Senegal, where he recruited volunteers to join the movement. Another member of the group was Osvaldo Lopes da Silva. Also an engineering student who fled Portugal in 1961, da Silva received a scholarship to study economics at the prestigious Plekhanov Institute of the National Economy in Moscow. Due to his language skills acquired through long study in the Soviet Union, he doubled as a translator at Skhodnia. The 27-year old Silvino da Luz had for his part taken an officers' training course in Portugal in 1960 and was among the first recruits to undertake military training in China after fleeing the Portuguese army and joining the PAIGC. Júlio Carvalho studied engineering at the University of Lisbon before joining the PAIGC and going for military training to Cuba.

Like Perevalnoe, Skhodnia was a secret space, and the life of trainees there was strictly controlled. Trainees would have their classes as a group and would go outside to practice, walking through the fields, but were never unaccompanied. As Olívio Pires recalled, they were not allowed contact with anyone. 'It was almost like a golden prison', he jokingly recalled about his time at Skhodnia.²⁵ However, it seems that the isolation was to a great extent imposed by the trainees themselves because of the top-secret nature of the mission. Júlio Carvalho shared: 'We lived in a self-regulatory regime, therefore, we imposed total control upon ourselves. Let us just say that during this period, perhaps not everyone, but the vast majority did not have any contact with their families. No letters, no news. We were totally cut-off'.²⁶ Silvino da Luz, however, believed that their group was controlled by their Soviet hosts. There were 'invisible eyes', watching over them; the Soviets certainly monitored the

²⁵ Olívio Pires, conversation with the author, 13 January 2017, Mindelo, Cape Verde (hereafter 'Olívio Pires, 2017').

²⁶ Júlio Carvalho, conversation with the author, 13 February 2018, Sal, Cape Verde (hereafter 'Carvalho, 2018').

internal dynamics of their group. As the Minister of Defence and Security for Cape Verde many years later, da Luz tried to apply the same principle of surveillance to foreigners.²⁷

The special status of the 1968 group was reflected in their daily lives. At Skhodnia, the trainees lived in a spacious villa outside Moscow, with two per room.²⁸ Meals and housekeeping were provided by the Soviet staff. Júlio Carvalho recalled that living arrangements at Skhodnia contrasted sharply with those in Cuba, where their group had to prepare their own meals and do their own cleaning. In the Soviet Union, their only role was to study. Their relations with their Soviet instructors were also less hierarchical than was the case for regular trainees at Perevalnoe: they were ‘treated as equals’.²⁹ The course at Skhodnia was very brief. They spent only a couple of months learning artillery before moving on to Baku, the capital of Soviet Azerbaijan on the Caspian Sea. There, they spent a few more months, learning the basics of navigating a boat—a crucial means of transportation in Guinea-Bissau.³⁰

The spaces of Perevalnoe and Skhodnia differed according to function. Perevalnoe most of all resembled a ‘regular’ Soviet training establishment, which was run on the basis of military hierarchy and other unspoken rules, where one’s power depended on role and status. While the soldiers’ daily lives were strictly regulated, these Soviet hierarchies were visible to some of the former trainees. In contrast, the trainees who underwent training at Skhodnia had far less direct access to Soviet realities, their physical environment being much more easily managed by their hosts. Nonetheless, the testimony of soldiers in Perevalnoe and Skhodnia suggests that they saw themselves as having some control over their environments and, in this sense, as co-constructors of the space of the training camp.

‘The greatest contribution’: Soviet military technology and African liberation

²⁷ Silvino da Luz, conversation with the author, 14 January 2017, Mindelo (hereafter ‘Da Luz, 2017’).

²⁸ António Leite, conversation with the author, 13 January 2017, Mindelo (hereafter ‘Leite, 2018’).

²⁹ Osvaldo Lopes Da Silva, conversation with the author, 9 January 2017 (hereafter ‘Osvaldo Lopes da Silva, 2017’); Leite, 2017.

³⁰ Carvalho, 2018; Leite, 2017.

The nature of the armed struggle in Guinea-Bissau evolved in the course of the 1960s. While early stages of guerrilla warfare mainly involved brief hit-and-run raids against Portuguese contingents, by 1967, the PAIGC had started to launch attacks against heavily fortified Portuguese installations such as at Madina do Boe in the east of the country. These required access to new types of heavy weaponry, which would be supplied by the Soviets. In a 1968 interview with the *Tricontinental* magazine, Cabral emphasised the importance of ‘modern weapons’ and training to armed struggle: ‘But today we must wage a modern war. A guerrilla war, but a modern one, with modern tactics’.³¹

The PAIGC leadership supervised most parts of the course, selected trainees for particular specializations and oversaw final exams.³² Each trainee also received grades for exams and personal reports, which would be communicated to the PAIGC leadership. João Pereira da Silva remembered that these would be sent on to headquarters in Conakry. However, their content was not made available to the trainees.³³

The content of the military training programme at Perevalnoe evolved to reflect the shifting tactics of anti-colonial war in Guinea-Bissau. In the first year after the initial establishment of Perevalnoe, recruits were taught to handle Soviet weapons, mainly light artillery. They also learnt how to blow-up railway tracks, bridges, and buildings—all fundamental to guerrilla warfare. Much emphasis was placed on the rapid arming and disarming of weapons. The Soviet instructors would take trainees to the polygon, and teach how to disarm mortars and cannons quickly—an important skill in mobile warfare. In terms of guerrilla tactics, the Soviets would cite certain examples from Cuba, Soviet Union during the Second World War and Vietnam.³⁴

However, as the war progressed, the Soviets adjusted their training accordingly. By the 1970s, Perevalnoe operated three main specializations: artillery; mines and explosives; and anti-aircraft defence. Those who specialized in artillery were taught how to operate

³¹ Amílcar Cabral, ‘Practical Problems and Tactics’ in *Selected Texts by Amílcar Cabral: Revolution in Guinea. Revolution in Guinea. An African People’s Struggle*, trans. Richard Handyside (London: Stage 1, 1969), 108-122, available from <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/cabral/1968/ppt.htm>.

³² Mane, 2019.

³³ João Pereira Da Silva, 2017.

³⁴ Badganny, 2019; da Matta, 2019.

mortars, while those in anti-aircraft defence would learn how to handle heavy machine guns, such as DShK 1938. By 1970, the Soviets had started to supply more advanced weapons, such as Grad-P, a lightweight version of the multiple rocket launcher BM-21, which was developed in the 1960s for the North Vietnamese.

The content of the programme at Skhodnia in 1968 reflected the PAIGC's decision to switch from mainly hit-and-run guerrilla tactics to certain aspects of conventional warfare. In fact, artillery training was the main focus for the Skhodnia group, who were taught how to operate cannons and 120mm heavy mortars that could be used to destroy fortified buildings. This type of training, recalled Júlio Carvalho, differed significantly from that received in Cuba where the emphasis had been on navigation, disembarkation in Cape Verde and classic guerrilla training which prioritized the handling of light weapons, thus allowing the guerrillas to adapt to the terrain.³⁵

The commander of the 1968 cohort, Pedro Pires, recalled: 'The training in Cuba was mainly focused on the organization of a guerrilla movement. In the Soviet Union, we worked mostly with weapons, the mastery of certain weapons'.³⁶ Another participant, Olívio Pires, confirms: 'Cuba gave us basic training in guerrilla warfare. At the basic level. It was our first training. The Soviet training was complementary. And they gave us, let's say, training to a more advanced level'.³⁷ The majority of the 1968 cohort returned to Guinea after their training in Moscow where they took charge of artillery units, including during the assault on Madina do Boe.³⁸

The mastery of advanced Soviet military technology was thus the main focus of the training programmes. Silvino da Luz recalled that they had become trained artillery commanders by the end of the course at Skhodnia, able to shoot heavy weapons, which could be deployed anywhere in the world with only a little knowledge of trigonometry.³⁹ Osvaldo Lopes da Silva remembered that the focus of their programme was on artillery

³⁵ Carvalho, 2018.

³⁶ Pedro Pires, conversation with the author, 13 January 2017, Praia, Cape Verde (hereafter 'Pedro Pires, 2017')

³⁷ Olívio Pires, 2017.

³⁸ Osvaldo Lopes de Silva, 2017

³⁹ Da Luz, 2017.

training; they received the kind of knowledge that was universally applicable, but that they used immediately against the Portuguese army in Guinea-Bissau.⁴⁰ According to Pedro Pires, who was in charge of the PAIGC training programme for a while, technology was the main Soviet contribution to the struggle: ‘Every guerrilla, from South America to Africa, passing through Asia, used this weapon. The great weapon of the guerrillas was the automatic machine gun AK of the Kalashnikov [AK-47]. That is the great contribution of the Soviet Union to the national liberation struggles’.⁴¹

The importance of Soviet military technology for liberation was embodied in the Soviet anti-aircraft system Strela-2 (Arrows). The Strela-2 complex was developed by the Soviets specifically for guerrilla warfare in Vietnam; and Cabral held high hopes that it would serve to end the war with minimum bloodshed. In 1972, he brokered a deal with the Soviets to train a small group of guerrillas to operate the Strela-2 complex at Perevalnoe. On 20 January 1973, Cabral was murdered in Conakry in the course of a failed coup d’état. The crisis notwithstanding, the war continued. In 1973, Fode Cassama’s group started hitting Portuguese airplanes with Strela-2, putting significant pressure on the armed forces. After the PAIGC shot down the Fiat G-91 belonging to Almeida Brito, the chief of the Portuguese air force, the Portuguese suspended all aerial operations.⁴² According to Pires, Strela-2 was the ‘fatal weapon’ that liquidated Portuguese air superiority, thus effectively ending the war.⁴³

To the trainees, Soviet weapons were a means and a symbol of liberation. Although the African revolutionaries were inspired by a number of revolutionary examples and practices—the Cuban, the Vietnamese, the Chinese— it was the Soviets’ military technology that had the capacity to drastically change the outcome of the war. Overall, the trainees derived their own meanings from the training programme; and their choice was

⁴⁰ Osvaldo Lopes da Silva, 2017.

⁴¹ Pedro Pires, 2017. In general, the most common type of weapon was probably not the AK but a less advanced RPK, hand-held Kalashnikov machine gun.

⁴² Interview with Manuel dos Santos (*nome de guerre* ‘Manecas’) in João Paulo Guerra, *Descolonização Portuguesa - O Regresso das Caravelas* [The Portuguese Decolonisation-the Departure of the Caravels] (Alfragide: Oficina do Livro, 2009), (Alfragide: Oficina do Livro, 2009), loc. 778, Kindle.

⁴³ Pedro Pires, 2017.

often determined by a number of factors, including pre-existing political beliefs and experiences. Many of the soldiers who came to train in the USSR were attracted to the Soviet system because they saw socialism as something that equalled liberation from the colonial past and promised rapid modernisation. However, as we shall see, it was the individual soldiers who shaped the ways in which they interacted with the ‘political training’, often using their previous experiences as a benchmark.

‘Who shoots whom’: politics and culture in the training camps

Cabral believed that the campaign in Guinea-Bissau required not only a guerrilla war to achieve independence, but a political struggle for true national liberation. Like the ideologue of the Algerian Revolution, Frantz Fanon, Cabral was concerned that capitalist countries had acquired vested interests in maintaining exploitative relationships with African countries after independence. Therefore, one had to destroy the capitalist structures imposed by imperialism and choose the path of socialism. Cabral thus put special emphasis on developing a ‘united vanguard’, conscious of the objectives of the anti-colonial struggle. Unlike Fanon, Cabral did not believe the peasantry could lead the revolution; the driving force behind revolution was, to his mind, the educated ‘native petty bourgeoisie’ who would be prepared to commit ‘class suicide’ once independence had been achieved.⁴⁴

The series of military coups that ousted some of the first post-independence leaders lent further credence to Cabral’s theory about the lingering influence of colonial powers. Speaking at the funeral of Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, deposed in a coup d’état in 1966, Cabral wondered how much the army’s betrayal was linked to questions of class struggle and social structure. Nkrumah had discovered these too late, Cabral believed, and it was thus crucial for the anti-colonial movements to educate their members that only with the

⁴⁴ On distinctions and similarities between Cabral and Fanon, see: Robert Blackey, ‘Fanon and Cabral: A Contrast in Theories of Revolution in Africa’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 12, no. 2 (1974): 191-209.

instruments of Marxism-Leninism could one build truly independent, internationalist and economically viable states.⁴⁵

Cabral therefore paid close attention to the political preparation of the military cadres. The majority of young people, having mobilized to join the guerrillas, would receive the basics of political instruction. Such education often started in the bush, and then continued at bases such as Madina do Boe, where young men would be trained by Guinean and Cuban instructors. Cabral himself would often explain the reasons for the struggle to young recruits. The volunteers had to abandon their 'tribal' affiliations and prejudices and embrace Cabral's vision of a bi-national future, a unity of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, based on ideas of social justice and equality. The subordination of the military commanders to the 'political leadership' in Conakry would nonetheless prove to be a problem. By 1964, reports started to come in that some guerrilla commanders had behaved like 'warlords' in areas under their control and were harassing the civilian population. At the Cassaca Congress in February 1964, those military commanders who refused to submit were arrested and put in prison. Some were executed.⁴⁶

To Cabral, the development of soldiers' political consciousness remained a crucial aspect of the liberation struggle. As he told an interviewer in 1966: 'We are political people, and our Party, a political organization, leads the struggle in the civilian, political, administrative, technical, and therefore also military spheres. Our fighters are defined as armed activists'.⁴⁷ By sending volunteers for military training to the Soviet Union, Cabral wanted his men to come back with some theoretical and practical knowledge so that they could act as agents of modernity in the countryside.

The military training programme cannot be understood without reference to *kul'turnost'*, a Soviet concept referring to a set of unspoken rules and norms about proper

⁴⁵ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 108; Jean Allman, 'Between the Present and History: African Nationalism and Decolonisation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern African History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ch. 12, Kindle.

⁴⁶ On the Cassaca Congress, see: Dhada, *Warriors at Work: How Guinea Was Really Set Free* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1993), 18-20; Chabal, *Amilcar Cabral*, 81-82.

⁴⁷ Cabral, 'Practical Problems and Tactics'.

modes of dress, hygiene, public behaviour, and the use of free time, originating in nineteenth-century ideas about European modernity. The Soviets did not speak about ‘modernisation’ or creating ‘modern subjects’, but the whole notion of *kul’turnost’* was a modernising one, meant to turn peasants into good urban citizens, which, importantly, also meant politically conscious socialists. By the 1960s, these notions of *kul’turnost’* had long become fundamental to Soviet identity. *Kul’turnost’* was central to the Bolsheviks’ development projects domestically, in Soviet Central Asia, as well as in the Global South.⁴⁸ African trainees were to become ‘cultured’ agents of change in their country by learning the ropes of modernity.

There were several ways that the Soviet training camps sought to achieve these transformations. One was through classes in political theory. At Perevalnoe, so-called ‘political classes’ were held three times a week and covered the basics of historical materialism, the Leninist theory of imperialism, and its application to Africa. There were also classes on the anti-colonial movement in Africa, including in the Portuguese colonies. The head of political training, Aleksander Antipov, justified the need for his subject with a joke he would repeat very often to his colleagues: ‘First we should teach whom to shoot, and then how to shoot.’⁴⁹ After spending several years at Perevalnoe as a translator, Iurii Gorbunov became a lecturer in ‘political disciplines’. He writes that their main goal was to explain to Africans that their enemies were not the ‘whites’, but the whole system of ‘colonialism and neocolonialism’:

We taught the trainees not only to handle weapons or military leadership, but also sowed the seeds of hatred towards slavery, colonisers, and foreign exploiters, imperialism...We explained to the trainees that besides colonial slavery there is also socio-class slavery, when the white and black bourgeoisie exploit the labour of workers of any skin colour. We talked about socialist revolutions and the victorious war of the USSR against fascism, about the Cold War, launched by the imperialist countries against socialist and newly independent states, about the Western intelligence services setting up facilities in a number of African countries to train black terrorists to fight against the armies of the national liberation movements.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the term, see: Artemy Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018), introduction, Kindle.

⁴⁹ ‘Shkola Terroristov S Marksistskim Uklonom’, *Segodnya*, 22 April 2005.

⁵⁰ Iurii Gorbunov, ‘Partizany Dlya Afriki’.

Political theory classes were supplemented with ‘cultural events’ (*kul’turnye meropriyatiya*) such as guided tours. Trainees at Perevalnoe visited Soviet factories, schools, and sports centres. Fode Cassama even remembered them attending a football match.⁵¹ Another popular destination was the Livadia Palace, the summer residence of the Russian Tsars and the location of the 1945 Yalta Conference in the Crimea. Brandão Bull da Matta recalled being very struck by the beauty of Livadia.⁵² The trainees were also usually taken to visit a *kolkhoz* (collective farm), which many trainees remember being impressed by. Guinea-Bissau was at that time (and remains) predominantly an agricultural country, heavily reliant on the cultivation of peanuts, a cash crop introduced by the Portuguese. The Soviet system of communal farming seemed attractive and, as many former trainees recalled, applicable to Guinea-Bissau and the rapid modernisation of the agricultural sector.⁵³ The trainees from Perevalnoe were also taken to Moscow to visit the main sights, usually during holidays. In Skhodnia, cultural events included outings to the Bolshoi Ballet, the circus, and art exhibitions in Moscow.⁵⁴

A particularly important category in the cultural programme of Soviet training camps was film screenings. Films were fairly regularly shown at Perevalnoe and other sites and were often the main mode of entertainment, especially where trainees could not exit the camp. In fact, film screenings were the most common mode of recreation at the weekends. These included films about Soviet achievements in agriculture and industry. Another important theme included films about the Vietnam War and the role of Soviet military technology, including of anti-aircraft weapons, in the war against the US. Some films revolved around Lenin, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the Civil War. The film screenings would be often matched with the material that was covered during political classes during the preceding week and often paired with real-life visits to agricultural and industrial sites.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Cassama, 2019.

⁵² Da Matta, 2019.

⁵³ Da Matta, 2019; Cassama, 2019; Saia na Breia, conversation with the author, 22 March 2019, Bissau.

⁵⁴ Carvalho, 2018.

⁵⁵ Da Matta, 2019; João Pereira Da Silva, 2017.

Fode Cassama arrived to Perevalnoe in 1972 to take part in training for a specialised anti-aircraft unit. He remembered watching *Chapaev* (1934), a famous and hugely popular Stalinist classic about the Russian Civil War, which revolved around the relationship between a brave, but hot-headed commander (Chapaev) and a sober and experienced political commissar (Furmanov). Cassama argued that *Chapaev* showed the importance of political commissars to ensure appropriate civilian-military conduct (i.e. in the film, Furmanov helps Chapaev by making sure that those Red Army stoldiers who stole from the peasants were punished). The political commisars were crucially important in installing patriotism in the minds of the soldiers, believed Cassama, leading to the adoption of that structure in Guinea-Bissau after independence.⁵⁶

The vast majority of screenings were of Soviet Second World War films. In Perevalnoe, Arafan Mane still clearly remembered watching *Private Alexander Matrosov* (1947), a famous Stalin-era film about a Soviet soldier who sacrificed his life in battle for the common cause. The film stayed with him, continued Mane, because Matrosov was *commandante* (commander), and the basic realities and choices that faced Matrosov were very similar to those of the anti-colonial struggle.⁵⁷ João Pereira da Silva enjoyed the films about the war, as they corrected the Western narrative, which, as he believed, often neglected the Soviet role in the victory against the Third Reich.⁵⁸

Sceenings of World War II films were also a regular feature of life in Skhodnia. Júlio Carvalho especially recalled a film about a Soviet pilot whose plane was shot down; crawling through deep snow, he managed to survive, but lost both feet due to frostbite. Nonetheless, he recovered through sheer willpower and returned to the air force (most likely, the 1948 drama *The Story of a Real Man*, another Stalin-era classic). The story of sacrifice and heroism made a deep impression upon Carvalho.⁵⁹ Film screenenings were often paired with visits to locations of World War II battles and were followed by discussions of the Soviet experience and sacrifice on the Eastern front.⁶⁰ Many of the Soviet instructors at Perevalnoe and

⁵⁶ Fode Cassama, conversation with the author, 22 March 2019, Bissau (hereafter 'Cassama, 2019').

⁵⁷ Mane, 2019.

⁵⁸ João Pereira Da Silva, 2017.

⁵⁹ Carvalho, 2018.

⁶⁰ Badganny, 2019.

Skhodnia were World War II veterans; some even took part in the partisan movement.⁶¹ This fact was well-known to the trainees, who could not only appreciate the sacrifice of the Soviet soldiers on screen, but also learn from the very same people who participated in the war.⁶²

Taken together, the ‘cultural events’ and the ‘political classes’ were meant to serve a number of purposes. First, they were meant to convince the cadets about the practical benefits of socialism, especially of communal agriculture. Second, political education was also meant to depict the Soviet Union as the leading actor in the fight against colonialism, imperialism, and fascism. The role of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazi Germany, which represented the apex of racist and imperialist thinking, was a particularly important part of the classes.⁶³ By watching Soviet movies and attending memorial sites, the trainees were meant to be inspired by the sacrifice and heroism of soldiers on the Eastern front. The collective experience of Soviet soldiers during World War II were also meant to construct emotional bonds with the trainees. As Jocelyn Alexander and JoAnn McGregor have argued based on interviews with intelligence cadres of the Zimbabwe People’s Liberation Union (ZAPU), the engagement with Soviet History was a key part of the Soviet training programme; it served as a ‘lesson in the necessity of sacrifice and political commitment in war’.⁶⁴ The same conclusion can be applied to the interviewed PAIGC recruits, who seemed to internalise some of the key messages about the key role of the Soviet Union as a champion of anti-colonial and anti-fascist cause.

In their reports to their party superiors, Soviet instructors continuously proclaimed the success of the political training programme. Reporting on the first group of PAIGC militants who arrived at Perevalnoe in 1965, General Aleksei Yepishev concluded that the introduction

⁶¹ Vladimir Shubin, ‘Unsung Heroes: The Soviet Military and the Liberation of Southern Africa’, *Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Liberation*, ed. Sue Onslow (London, Routledge, 2009), 156.

⁶² Badganny, 2019;

⁶³ One of the most prominent African thinkers who argued that fascist mentality was rooted in colonial racism was George Padmore. For discussion, see Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁶⁴ Alexander and McGregor, ‘African Soldiers in the USSR’, 60.

to ‘Soviet realities’—trips to factories, communal farms, and museums, along with meetings with former members of the partisan movement in Crimea—heightened the cadets’ sympathies for the Soviet Union. ‘The majority of trainees declared they would build socialism in their countries after independence’.⁶⁵ While some of these evaluations may have been formulaic, there certainly were former instructors like Gorbunov who believed that the programme had been transformational for the African soldiers:

As a teacher, I saw how in a very short time the cadets—those shy and illiterate people—acquired a feeling of human dignity and were spiritually transformed. There arose in them a sense of equality and justice. They gradually became convinced of the righteousness of their struggle for the freedom and independence of their people or ethnicity. They got used to the fact that the Soviet people with white skin—officers, servants, soldiers, civilian workers in the centre, collective farmers, city dwellers whom they would meet during trips around Crimea—did not have racial prejudices and treated them as equals.⁶⁶

Gorbunov’s account is symptomatic of several memoirs written by Soviet employees at Perevalnoe. These emphasize the instructors’ dedication in educating their students, whom they describe as dedicated and effective soldiers. The memoirs are also full of recollections of humorous stories, such as the trainees’ refusal to ‘sleep in proper beds’ or eat the Russian staple buckwheat (trainees believed it was rotten rice).⁶⁷ These recollections do in fact suggest that many Soviet instructors often saw common soldiers in paternalistic ways. They did not satisfy the Soviet criteria of *culturdeness*. Soviet instructors believed it was their duty to help non-European people--what has been referred to as the ‘Red Man’s Burden’.⁶⁸

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of such programmes on the trainees and to separate Soviet from other influences. The majority of trainees who came to Perevalnoe had already received some form of political instruction. The recruits were taught first by senior peers who had often themselves received instruction in China, Czechoslovakia or the Soviet Union. After

⁶⁵ A. Yepishev to CC CPSU, 12 April 1966, RGANI, F. 5, Op. 47, D. 496, 108-109.

⁶⁶ Gorbunov, ‘Partizany Dlia Afriki’

⁶⁷ ‘Shkola Terroristov,’ *Segodnya*, 22 April 2005.

⁶⁸ The term is adopted from Botakoz Kassymbelova and Christian Teichmann, ‘The Red Man’s Burden: Soviet European Officials in Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s,’ in *Helpless Imperialists Imperial Failure, Fear and Radicalization*, ed. Maurus Reinkowski and Gregor Thum (Freiburg: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2012), 163-87.

1967, many received political instruction from Cuban instructors in Guinea-Bissau. In fact, political instruction was a key element in the mobilization of young people, mainly young boys, who first received training at the so-called Centre for Political and Military Instruction (CIPM; *Centro de Instrucao Politico Militar*). To the majority of guerrillas, the ‘political classes’ served as a continuation of their studies, rather than a revelation.

Arafan Mane was only sixteen when he joined the PAIGC in 1966. He spent his first year training at Boke, a PAIGC military base in Guinea. It was there, he recalled, that he received his initial political instruction from older peers and then from Cuban instructors. These were the Cubans who first explained to him the importance of the Russian Revolution for Cuba and of the Second World War for Africa. These were the Cubans who taught him that the PAIGC had to seize the moment and wage revolutionary struggle in the continent.⁶⁹ Before arriving at Perevalnoe in 1971, Brandão Bull da Matta received instruction at the CIPM in Madina do Boe. He recalled that besides the Cuban and PAIGC instructors, Cabral himself would come to a base, where he would teach young recruits about the reasons for the war, and also talk about the countries that supported the struggle: The Soviet Union, China, Russia and East Germany. His was a common experience.⁷⁰ Thus, most trainees who arrived to Perevalnoe with a basic understanding of ‘friends and enemies’ of their liberation struggle, even if many had limited formal schooling.

Moreover, the topics discussed during ‘political training’ classes in Perevalnoe mainly focused on the programme of the PAIGC. As Afonso Manga Badganny recalled, the political training was ‘aligned’ with Cabral’s own ideas. The main emphasis was on teaching ‘nationalism’, that is, the overcoming of ethnic division through the building of a nation-state. The training centre itself had a library, which contained many books, including works by Lusophone African leaders, including by Amílcar Cabral. In fact, the Soviets were not the only—and probably not the key instructors at Perevalnoe. Each group that arrived at Perevalnoe had its own leader who was often an educated and a relatively senior PAIGC commander. The leaders also instructed the trainees in political matters, focusing mainly on

⁶⁹ Mane, 2019.

⁷⁰ da Matta, 2019; Badganny, 2019.

Cabral's ideas. Although some Soviet political instructors knew Portuguese, and a few could even speak African languages, most content had to be translated by one of the trainees.⁷¹ The very act of 'translation' and re-translation' thus limited the ability of the Soviets to control meaning.

Such a sense of control was even more true of the Cape Verdeans who arrived at Skhodnia in 1968. In fact, these were people with high levels of education and wide-ranging experiences they had received in Portugal, China, and Cuba, and the Soviet Union. Osvaldo Lopes da Silva and Pedro Pires had studied in the USSR, having participated in the nationalist movement in 1950s Portugal. As Pedro Pires recalled, Marxism had a large impact on European intellectuals after the Second World War, including on those African student activists in post-war Portugal. He recalled that when he went to the Soviet Union, he had already well-formed ideas about social justice, independence, and the need for the liquidation of colonialism.⁷² Meanwhile, Silvino da Luz had gone for training to China, where he was inspired by the Chinese revolution and its model of peasant-based rebellion.⁷³

Júlio Carvalho was impressed by the Cuban revolution he was able to observe 'in action' during his time there. 'On one hand, we lived nearly every episode of the hard fight in Cuba, even the tensest moments with the United States; on the other, the Cuban Revolution itself: in the fields of education, health, production and in the areas of security organization, military training, homeland defence, etc. For us, that was like an open compendium'.⁷⁴ Once at Skhodnia, they continued studying politics, but opted out of compulsory political classes.⁷⁵ The Cape Verdeans thus already had a great sense of intellectual autonomy; and it is not clear how much their time in the USSR shaped their opinions.

Overall, the aims of the Soviet training programme coincided with the modernizing ethos of the PAIGC leadership. By participating in the daily rituals of European modernity and

⁷¹ Badganny, 2019.

⁷² Pedro Pires, 2017.

⁷³ Da Luz, 2017.

⁷⁴ Carvalho, 2018.

⁷⁵ Da Luz, 2017.

military hierarchy, young recruits had no choice but to start thinking in terms of a nation-state. They thus had to be ‘civilised’ in order to abandon the colonial mindset and embrace new realities. The first preliminary discussion of trainees’ experiences in Perevalnoe shows that many were indeed impressed with the socialist experiment and drew parallels between their own struggle and that of the Soviets in the Second World War. However, the unique Soviet influence is difficult to decipher in this case. In fact, most trainees arrived at the camp with their own experiences of colonialism, as well as ideas about the benefits of socialism, as propagated by Cabral. Once in the camp, their ‘political education’ continued to be shaped by the agenda of the PAIGC, with senior commanders often acting as ‘translators’ and ‘interpreters’ of meaning. Nonetheless, it does seem that the ‘cultural events’—such as the film screenings, the experiences of ‘lived socialism’ through sightseeing tours, and the informal discussions with Soviet instructors—solidified for many notions of the USSR as a champion of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist cause, that the PAIGC had first encouraged via instruction given to young recruits in the bush.

Conclusion

The space of the ‘training camp’ at Perevalnoe and Skhodnia was a co-constructed space in both a practical and a metaphysical sense. Although the training camp was constructed according to the rules of the Soviet military hierarchy, the programme itself was shaped by the aims of Cabral’s modernizing project. Like the Soviets, Cabral saw himself as training modern men who would not only learn practical skills but also attain the requisite level of political consciousness in relation to his revolutionary project. Far removed from the everyday realities of war and survival in Guinea-Bissau, training in the USSR was supposed to provide recruits with an ideal educational experience, where soldiers could grow and develop. The spaces were also co-constructed because both the military and the political training programme were shaped by the needs of the war in Guinea-Bissau, with senior PAIGC figures acting as ‘re-translators’ of Soviet terms and concepts. In fact, many trainees who came to the camps were not the ‘empty vessels’ that some Soviet instructors imagined them to be. They were often young men with their own ideas and experiences, including some political instruction they had received from senior peers in the bush or in other socialist countries.

What united most of the men who went for training in the USSR was their appreciation of Soviet military technology and its contribution to liberation. The Vietnam War was crucial to the ways these men saw the Soviet Union. These young men of high status within the PAIGC definitely saw themselves as the active subjects of their own liberation. The more highly educated, and thus higher status, trainees saw themselves as autonomous subjects with the capacity to shape the content of the political discussions and wield a degree of control over their physical environment. In fact, they believed they were co-creators of their own spaces, picking what served best from the menu of Soviet military experience. The desire to emphasize one's own agency comes through in many interviews with former trainees. Pedro Pires summarizes such feelings thus:

The Soviets were our allies in this struggle, given that they provided us with the means and trained our people, but the fundamental objective was ours, it wasn't the Soviets'. We weren't Soviet agents, as the story goes. We were actors of our independence and we were going to get the means wherever they were, because those who were against us and ruled our country were going to take them wherever they pleased as well.⁷⁶

The voices of these elite soldiers often exercise control over the historical record, and they do dominate the narrative in this paper. However, the comparative study of training sites in Perevalnoe and Skhodnia starts to reveal how these programmes differed from each other and the power disparities that came with them. While the high-status soldiers who went to Skhodnia for artillery training may have shared in the values of the training programme, we lack the perspective of thousands of 'common' soldiers, many of them from Guinea-Bissau, who filled up the barracks at Perevalnoe each year from 1965 till 1974. As we know, Perevalnoe was the one training site where Soviet hierarchies were visible for some to see. We have yet to find out if they were able to co-construct the spaces of the training camp to the same extent as their higher-status comrades had done. We also have yet to find out whether they shared the modernizing imperative to the same degree, or in the same way, as their hosts. Given the history of long-standing tensions among men with origins in Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, we are yet to discover how much (if at all), the military training camps became sites of conflict and dissent among African soldiers. A further examination of the

⁷⁶ Pedro Pires, 2017.

The military training camp: co-constructed spaces—experiences of PAIGC guerrillas in Soviet training camps, 1961–1974

training camps could lead to fruitful new insights not only into the ways the Soviets interacted with Third World subjects, but also into the politics of anti-colonial movements, whose politics and culture often developed in ‘un-national’ spaces such as the training camp.