

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION BETWEEN COMRADE PAUL MARKOWSKI  
AND COMRADE BORIS N. PONOMAREV, CANDIDATE MEMBER OF THE  
POLITBURO AND SECRETARY OF THE CC CPSU, ON FEBRUARY 10, 1978 IN THE  
HOUSE OF THE CC CPSU [BERLIN, FEBRUARY 13, 1978]

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[...]

Comrade B.N. Ponomarev thanked M. for the valuable information, said they appreciated the GDR initiative and explained the attitude of the CPSU in this question: the CPSU is also of the opinion that Ethiopia's position in the Eritrean question is different one from its relationship with Somalia. Somalia is an aggressor who attacked Ethiopia. The Soviet and Cuban comrades have declared together with the Ethiopian leadership that no Somali territory will be entered in the course of the Ethiopian counter-offensive. This information was also given to the USA.

In his talk with Comrade Ponomarev, President Carter emphasized the situation on the African horn and pretended to be concerned about Soviet arms deliveries to Ethiopia. In response Ponomarev pointed to the much larger US arms deliveries to Iran, a country neighboring on the USSR. He repudiated Carter's insinuations that Cuban and Soviet troops were fighting in Ethiopia. The Soviet military were advisers who had been sent at the request of the Ethiopian government. Carter said he favored a speedy settlement of the conflict. He explained that the USA would neither now nor in the future deliver arms to Somalia. It was pointed out to Carter and Vance that the Soviet Union had tried over a longer period of time to convince [Somali President Mohamed] Siad Barre, Samantar and other Somali leaders not to begin a war. Their efforts, however, proved to be in vain.

With respect to the situation in Eritrea, Comrade Ponomarev mentioned the conversations between the Soviet leadership and Mengistu Haile Mariam in the course of which it was recommended to Mengistu to aspire to a political solution to the problem and to grant autonomy to the Eritreans. Since then no new discussions between the Soviet side and the Ethiopians have taken place. Mengistu has been silent. Up to now he has not done anything to follow our advice. The Cuban comrades have unequivocally told the Ethiopian leadership that Cuba would not intervene in the Eritrean conflict, in a domestic Ethiopian conflict. The best thing would be a peaceful solution. Both sides need to take the right attitude towards the problem. Mengistu is, however, wavering according to the military situation. As the military pressure of the rebels on Mits'iwa and Asmera was increasing, he was ready for a compromise. Now that this situation has become a bit more stable, he is silent or makes pungent statements. We have to continue to work on him. Any solution has to be found within the framework of the Ethiopian state although this is uncomfortable for the Eritrean movements. Comrade Ponomarev read a telegram from Belgrade on an information [report] by the head of the bureau of the PLO in Baghdad, Abu Nidal (he belongs to the left wing of the Fatah). Abu Nidal has traveled through Eritrea. According to his information, all regions except for Mits'iwa and Asmera are in the hands of the Eritreans. The coastal area is controlled by EPLF under the leadership of Aforki while Western Eritrea is under the control of the ELF (Mohammed Ahmed Nasser). The Eritreans want full autonomy but are also willing to accept an Ethiopian corridor to the sea. The majority of Aforki's organizations consist of Marxist-Leninist

elements. Abu Nidal was informed that Aforki was at a meeting in Berlin. He was willing to meet with representatives of the CPSU. Abu Nidal emphasizes that it would be necessary to quickly find a solution since Saudi Arabia and other reactionary forces were exerting strong pressure upon the Eritrean movements.

Comrade Ponomarev stated that the CPSU did not think a meeting with Aforki was necessary after a meeting between him and the SED had just taken place. The SED was to continue its conversations with the Eritreans.

Comrade Ponomarev informed me that the Ethiopian leadership recently approached the CPSU with a request for support in the build-up of the party. A group of experienced comrades of the CPSU has been selected. Its head is a member of the CC. Later, however, Mengistu requested to hold off the sending of these comrades since military questions were the top priority. Comrade Ponomarev favored close cooperation between the Soviet comrades, the Cuban comrades and the SED group in order to assure maximum efficiency and coordinated strategy.

Comrade Ponomarev expressed his concern over the extremes in the Ethiopian Revolution. In talks with Mengistu, comrade Raul Valdes Vivo has already stated his incomprehension of such occurrences as mass executions of prisoners led by the "Red Terror" which would not be of advantage to the Revolution.

Much now depends what attitude Mengistu himself will take towards the Eritrean problem. It has to be expected that - as L. I. Brezhnev told Mengistu - that the national question cannot be solved militarily.

Comrade Ponomarev agreed with the proposal communicated by Comrade Markovski to consult on the burning African questions among the six close friends at the forthcoming conference of the CC Secretaries in Budapest.

Comrade Ponomarev reported on the recent visit in the USA as head of the delegation of parliament members. In his report to the politburo he proposed to continue to work with the USA Congress. Congress has nowadays greater importance since the prestige of the USA administration has been lower than ever before due to Watergate and Vietnam and since Carter has not shown enough stature ["Profil"]. [...]

[Source: Stiftung "Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der ehemaligen DDR im Bundesarchiv"(Berlin), DY30 IV 2/2.035/127; document obtained and transl. by Christian F. Ostermann (The National Security Archive)]