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A Cultural Heritage for National Liberation? The Soviet-Somali Historical Expedition, Soviet African Studies, and the Cold War in the Horn of Africa

Natalia Telepneva

The British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Warwick

The paper discusses the conception, execution, and outcomes of the first Soviet-Somali historical expedition, in 1971. In due course, the Soviet-Somali Expedition set out to create a “usable past” for Somali nationalism, rooted in the history of Mohammad Abdullah Hassan, a religious and military leader who had fought against the British in Somaliland between 1900 and 1920. The paper investigates how Soviet ideas about the preservation of historical heritage were grounded in Central Asian modes of practice and how these became internalised by Soviet Africanists in their attempts to help reinforce foundational myths in newly independent African states. The paper argues that the Soviet model for the preservation of cultural heritage, as envisioned by Soviet Africanists, aimed to reinforce Siad’s national project for Somalia. Their efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, however, because of Cold War constraints and misunderstandings of local realities.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Africa, Somalia, Cold War, Somali cultural heritage, UNESCO

Introduction

On 10 September 1971, Siad Barre, the head of the Somali Revolutionary Council (SRC), spoke to a group of Soviet scholars who had arrived to participate in the first joint Soviet-Somali historico-archeological expedition. “Imperialists always wrote lies about us. They collected such materials that had no value; made photographs of those objects which showed us in the wrong light. Your expedition and research should be cardinally different from what has been written by bourgeois authors. You have to be seekers of truth,” Barre admonished the Soviet members of the team (Gorodnov 1974, 77). The Soviet team had arrived in Somalia in July of 1971. The expedition was to be “complex” in its approach in that it comprised a multidisciplinary team, which aimed to study Somalia’s history, economy, and sociology to assist the Somali government with its modernising goals. The Soviet-Somali expedition, then, sought to use Somali cultural heritage to help Barre’s regime construct a national-revolutionary meta-narrative of history—a “usable past” for a new, modern, and unified Somalia (Ranger 1976).

The Soviet concept of heritage and its application in the USSR and the peripheries has been extensively studied. After taking power in 1917, the Bolsheviks sought to create their own her-

itage. Thus, they undertook massive projects in re-shaping urban spaces, destroying and creating revolutionary monuments, buildings, and museums (Gonzalez 2016). The relationship of the Soviet regime with its pre-revolutionary cultural heritage was more complex. Certain monuments were destroyed, but others were “purified” of their capitalist or Orthodox components and appropriated to serve the revolution (Kelly 2012). In Soviet Central Asia, the recovery of the Timurid heritage served a particularly important purpose of constructing Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and Tajiks into nations and nationalities (Gorshenina and Tolz 2016). From the 1960s onwards, the Soviets started using spaces like Tashkent as models for revolutionary transformation, which could be applicable to Muslim countries in the Middle East and elsewhere (Strongski 2010). Historians have recently started to explore the ways that Soviet ideas and practices were picked up, emulated, and adapted outside of the USSR. In the socialist countries, museums played a huge role in framing the nation’s narrative in Marxist-Leninist terms. In Cuba, museums were designed according to a specific template, designed to replicate a scientific meta-narrative of national history consistent with Marxist-Leninist ideology to remould citizens into New Men (Gonzalez 2016). However, we know little about the uses of these ideas and practices outside of the socialist bloc.

This paper looks at the planning, execution, and outcomes of the Soviet-Somali expedition of 1971. First, the paper traces the origins of the so-called “complex approach” of the Soviet-Somali expedition, looking at the ways that large excavation and preservation projects were designed in Central Asia. Second, the paper investigates how and why the expedition was envisioned by Sergey Smirnov, Ivan Izosemovich Potekhin’s deputy at the Institute of African Studies (IAS)—in competition with Western dominance over the production of knowledge on Africa. The expedition was delayed until 1971, as an intensification of Soviet-Somali exchange followed Barre’s proclamation of his adherence to socialism in 1969. Third, the paper traces the goals of the expedition, specifically focusing on the way that Soviet historians employed Somalia’s cultural heritage to construct a narrative of a strong, anti-colonialist, and centralised state.

Since the 1990s, Somalia’s monuments have fallen into disrepute, its tangible heritage neglected by a succession of governments. While continuous civil war remains a crucial factor, archaeologist Sada Mire says the seeming neglect is due to an incorrect focus on physical objects with no value in a nomadic society (Mire 2011). By looking at the Soviet-Somali expedition, this paper draws attention to the link between the disregard for cultural heritage and the failure of the post-war Somali nationalism. The paper is based on the archival records of the expedition at the IAS as well as diaries and field notes from the participants.

1. Origins of the “Complex Approach”: Central Asian Expeditions, the Institute of African Studies, and Decolonisation of Africa’s Cultural Heritage

Central Asia has played a central role for Russian preservationists and heritage experts since the nineteenth century. Andreas Schoenle argues that Russian intellectuals of the nineteenth century believed that “European Russia” lacked historical monuments comparable to those of Western Europe. In the Russian Empire, efforts at preservation thus focused on the spectacular Timurid monuments of Turkestan as part of a “civilising mission” in the East. These buttressed the status of the Russian Empire as one of the leading European powers. While many monuments were damaged or put to other uses during the years of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent civil war, the Bolsheviks considered preservation to be of utmost importance in soliciting indigenous support for revolution in Central Asia. In 1924, Soviet Central Asia was divided into national republics and corresponding titular nationalities: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.

The national delimitation of Central Asia, argue Svetlana Gorshenina and Vera Tolz, was a key moment, when an imperial project of preservation became an ethnocentric one, with local elites increasingly engaged in the process of using heritage to build formulations of “national culture” for the titular nationalities (Gorshenina and Tolz 2016). To aid in the process, major Soviet expeditions were dispatched to Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan in the 1930s to excavate and study the ruins of ancient civilizations. The expeditions reflected the rise of the autochthonist concept, which interpreted the heritage of all previous epochs as the possession of a particular nationality, thus providing basis for the 1924 delimitation. For these reasons, these were the so-called “complex expeditions,” which involved historians, philologists, and anthropologists working together—a multi-disciplinary approach that aimed to bridge the study of the ancient, medieval, and modern periods (Bustanov 2015).

The biggest and longest-standing of these was the Khorezmian Expedition, directed by Soviet ethnographer Sergey Pavlovich Tolstov. “Khorezm” was an ancient Iranian civilisation that occupied a large oasis in the Amu Darya River in western Central Asia, located in present-day Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. The development of Central Asia had started in the 1930s and gained momentum in the late 1950s and 1960s, not least because the region was to serve as an example of successful socialist development, an actionable model for the Third World (Kalinovsky 2018). Tolstov’s recipe for success was to marry scientific research, heritage preservation, and Soviet developmental goals. He became passionate about the idea of restoring water supply to a section of the Amu Darya River, which had fuelled the Khorezmian civilization in ancient times. Thus, he became involved in the grandiose (and ultimately, unfulfilled) project of supplying water to Central Asia by reversing the flow of the Siberian Rivers (Arzhantseva 2013). In practical terms, Tolstov’s “complex approach” included many teams of experts—archeologists, ethnographers, and technical developmental experts—working in Khorezm on their separate tasks.

The success of the Khorezmian expedition made Tolstov a powerful figure within Soviet academe. In 1942, he became the Director of the Institute of Ethnography at the Soviet Academy of Sciences. In the 1950s, Tolstov worked to reappraise the research activities of the institute, since interest in ancient culture had to give way to mandated explorations of contemporary life on collective farms and among urban workers (Klejn 2012). Through the success of the Khorezmian expedition, however, Tolstov's "complex approach" gained currency in the Soviet academy. One of the Soviet academics who worked closely with Tolstov in the 1950s was Ivan Izosemovich Potekhin, the first director of the IAS, established in 1959 in Moscow.

Potekhin believed that the "complex approach" should be one of the organising principles for the IAS. This meant that the institute should be multi-disciplinary, that it should encompass the study of contemporary African economics and society, but also languages and history (Davidson 2003). Potekhin was adamant that the IAS should engage in the study of African history as an anti-imperial and anti-colonial exercise. In his 1961 article for the magazine *Kommunist*, Potekhin argued that the study of history, including pre-colonial history, was not only a scientific but a political task. Soviet historians of Africa were to uncover the "truth about the historical past" of the African people and it was to become a powerful tool to undermine the ideological cover for the "new forms of colonialism" (Potekhin 1961). The lack of primary resources for the new Marxist history of Africa remained a continuous concern for men like Potekhin, who attributed great importance to the study of history at the IAS. Speaking at the meeting of the IAS in 1962, Potekhin admitted that knowledge of Africa was still quite shallow because Soviet researchers almost never did field work in Africa and thus did not possess primary materials of their own; their work was almost exclusively based on materials collected by "bourgeoisie Africanists from imperialist countries" (Transcript of Third IAS Coordination Meeting, 23–24 April 1962).

One of Potekhin's allies at the IAS and a defender of the "complex approach" was Sergey Rufovich Smirnov. A student of the famous linguist Dmitriy Olderroge, Smirnov in 1946 defended his PhD on the Mahdist Uprising. He became the first Soviet Africanist to analyse the history of the region from a Marxist perspective. He worked with Tolstov and Potekhin at the Ethnography Institute and became the first head of the History Section at the IAS in 1960 (Davidson 2003b, 152–69). Like Potekhin, Smirnov believed that the IAS should adopt a multi-disciplinary approach and that the study of history should include experts in various sub-fields, including archaeology. He believed that the Soviet Union should organise archeological expeditions to Africa to explore the continent's pre-colonial history. These Soviet Academy of Sciences were sceptical of these proposals because there were only a few Soviet Africanists and no Soviet archeologists who specialised in Africa (Transcript of Presidium Meeting, 12 December 1960). In addition, the Soviet leadership wanted the IAS to focus

on “contemporary” social and economic problems, providing research notes and briefings for developmental projects. After Potekhin’s death in 1964, the focus of the institute shifted to the study of contemporary problems, especially Africa’s economic development. Smirnov remained the head of the History Section, however, and continued to defend the importance of historic research in Africa (Davidson 2003b). One country that became particularly interesting to him in this regard was Somalia.

2. The Inception of the Soviet-Somali Expedition and the Cold War in the Horn of Africa

Somalia became an independent country in 1960 as a result of the merger of British Somaliland and the Trust Territory of Somaliland under the premiership of Abdirashid Ali Shermarke of the Somali Youth League (SYL). One of the key objectives of the SYL was unification of what they regarded to be Somali territories—in northern Kenya, French Djibouti, and the Ogaden (eastern Ethiopia)—into “Greater Somalia.. The idea had originated with the British in 1946, as a way to consolidate their interests in East Africa, with Somalia (and the Ogaden) at that point under the British Military Administration. The “Greater Somalia” idea quickly acquired enormous popularity with the SYL, originally a self-help organisation of government clerks and gendarmes that now promoted educational and social improvement programs and tried to move beyond the divisive clan system. The idea also spread among the Somali Ogaden clans. However, the USA, USSR, and France opposed the proposal. In 1954, Britain returned the Ogaden to Ethiopia. Once in power, the SYL continued to campaign for the unification of all Somali territories—in northern Kenya, French Djibouti, and the Ogaden (Barnes 2007, 277-91). As Kenya was about to achieve independence, in 1963 the British decided to incorporate the Northern Frontier District, inhabited by ethnic Somalis, into Kenya, prompting President Shermarke’s urgent request for military assistance to defend the country against “imperialist aggression.” The SYL leadership first turned to the US for military assistance to build up its army, but, unhappy with the quantity of aid, promptly turned to the USSR in 1961 for assistance. In 1963, Soviet military assistance to Somalia expanded to include arms transfers and scholarships for Somali officers. This was the moment when Sergey Smirnov arrived in Mogadishu as part of the Soviet-Somali agreement on cultural cooperation. His main aim was to collect documents about the history of Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan and his campaign against the British in northern Somalia (1900–1920).

By the 1960s, Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan (1856-1920) had become the key figurehead for SYL’s nationalist aspirations. Born in the interior of British Somaliland, he first left for Aden in the 1870s, where he worked as a fireman for one of the steamships. He then travelled to Egypt, where he apparently heard stories about the leader of the Mahdist Uprising in the Sudan—Muhammad Ahmad ibn el-Sayed. After performing a hajj to Mecca and joining the Salihyya Sufi

order, he returned to Somalia, where he started to preach and established a dervish (Sufi-based) movement. In 1899, he declared jihad against the British, operating from a capital in Taleh, and managed to dispel a number of British raids against him. His rule in Somaliland only ended in 1920 after the British bombing of Taleh; he retreated and died of illness in the same year. By the 1960s, many Somalis and in particular the SYL nationalists had come to consider Sayyid Mohammed an independent and proud leader, unwavering in his stance against the British. Hassan's patrimonial Ogaden lineages and his links to the region also brought legitimacy to nationalist claims to "Greater Somalia." He also became venerated as a man of "great words," lambasting his enemies in succulent classical verse, crucial to the Somali oral tradition, which would form the basis of the Somali anti-imperialist cultural heritage. He became a symbol of national unity, transcending "tribal divisions" yet remaining true to Islam. President Shermarke spoke of Sayyid as "a visionary, the father of the modern Somali nation" (Laitin 1979, 95-115).

Smirnov's objectives during the 1963 trip to Somalia dovetailed with those of the Somali nationalists. The British were wrong to call Sayyid Hassan a "Mad Mullah," argued Smirnov, who arrived in Mogadishu to collect primary sources on the uprising to "fill in the gaps" in the Soviet literature on the subject and revise the narrative of the campaign, which had been written by Western scholars from an "imperialist point of view." He also wanted to make a trip to Taleh—the centre of Sayyid Mohammed's uprising in Somaliland—where he expected to look at and record the ruins of the military structures erected, before they "fell into ruin." While Smirnov could not make the trip, his visit quickly bore fruit. In particular, with the support of an official in Somalia's Ministry of Education, Moussa Galal, he managed to organise a meeting with Sheikh Abdurahman, the son of Sayyid Mohammed. According to Smirnov's account, the sheikh was "strongly opposed to cooperation with any English or Italian scientists" but was sympathetic to the USSR. He thus agreed to meet Smirnov and tell the story of his father's struggles. Smirnov and Sheikh Abdurahman met regularly in 1963, with the latter telling Smirnov the latter's version of the war in "great detail." Apparently, he also promised to share his father's archive, which contained a number of highly valuable documents, including Sayyid Abdurahman's correspondence with British generals, the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik, the German consul in Harar, and the Turkish generals. Smirnov thus recommended that the IAS should organise a joint Soviet-Somali archeological expedition to trace the history of Sayyid Mohammed's campaign. According to Smirnov, Somali authorities were open to such a plan, and were willing to provide transportation and interpreters (Davidson 2003b, 158-61).

Rivalry with British scholars played a part in Smirnov's justification for the expedition. Smirnov stated that the Soviet acquisition of Somali primary sources would raise the prestige of Soviet African Studies, especially since access to archival documents in Sudan, Ethiopia, and the United

Arab Republic was closed off to Soviet researchers. To Smirnov, who had spent most of his professional life analysing the Mahdist Rebellion without access to primary sources, the “find” of primary sources in Somalia must have been exciting, especially given that access to Mahdist files in the Sudan in the mid-1950s, he complained, had been dominated by Peter Holt, a British historian and Head Archivist at that time. The deterioration of Somalia’s relations with Britain (in 1963, the Somali government broke relations with the UK and Kenya over the Northern Frontier District) thus offered opportunities for Soviet Africanists to shape the meta-narrative of history for the young republic (Davidson 2003b, 158-61).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also played a role in Smirnov’s calculations. The British-backed UNESCO plan for Somalia, reported Smirnov, included the provision of £220,000 for the construction of a new museum, national library, a building for the archive, and so on. Smirnov worried that UNESCO had apparently already agreed to collaborate with Mogadishu on joint study of historical monuments, ethnography, and the oral tradition, with Somali students slated to attend courses in London for scientific research. All of these measures, reported Smirnov, were backed by the “widely famous” School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS), which had close links to the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To Smirnov, there was no doubt that the SOAS- and UNESCO-backed plan for the preservation of Somali heritage was a Trojan Horse for British influence in the region: “In this case we can witness an active British attempt to use scientific contacts for the ideological expansion in a county of its political influence. England, France, Belgium, and Italy, all former colonial powers, are actively pursuing such a course of action. The USA are not too far behind” (Davidson 2003b, 161).

Smirnov’s justification for the joint Soviet-Somali expedition was motivated by a desire to increase the academic prestige of IAS. To Smirnov, Somalia’s past and its cultural heritage was to be mined to help establish a counter-narrative to the colonialist and imperialist one. Similarly, unlike Western historians of the early post-independence period, like Basil Davidson, Soviet Africanists were motivated by the search of an “authentic” African past worthy of a new nation (Cooper 1994). As a Marxist-Leninist historian, however, Smirnov wanted sources to establish a credible narrative of anti-colonialist struggle for the new nation. UNESCO had been central to post-war contestations around world history, exemplified by its “History of Mankind” book series, to which the Soviets objected early on. Soviet objections to US hegemony in UNESCO meant they only joined in 1954. In the following years, the Soviets would come to collaborate with the organisation, trying to interject the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of world history into projects such as “History of Mankind” (Betts 2015). In his concern over the role of UNESCO in Somalia, Smirnov clearly expressed continuous Soviet reservations about continuous Western cultural dominance. To Smirnov, Somali cultural heritage was to serve as a building block for a new, “scientific” and Marxist-Leninist history of Africa

to break the colonial narratives and forms of domination, now disguised as apolitical UNESCO projects. Soviet-Somali relations cooled down in the following years and the decision on the expedition was delayed for many years. The ideas of the expedition would be revived after a 1969 coup d'état in Somalia brought to power a new military regime, headed by Siad Barre.

3. The 1969 Revolution and the Soviet-Somali Expedition

Upon coming to power in 1969, Siad Barre and the SRC announced a program of far-reaching social and economic reforms under the banner of “scientific socialism.” Barre’s economic program included state involvement in the economy and was partly a pragmatic move to raise production in order to raise living standards under centralised management and increase agricultural production to alleviate the consequences of the 1968 drought. In 1970, the government nationalised all foreign banks, petroleum distributors, and the Italian-Somali electric power company. Nonetheless, the ownership of livestock and bananas, Somalia’s main export commodities, remained in private hands, and Barre assured businessmen that wholesale nationalisation was not on the government’s agenda. Italy remained Somalia’s largest trading partner and provided significant support and investment, such as in the establishment of the Somali National Bank and high-value building projects. Other key investors included Iraq, the European Economic Community, and the World Bank.

The early period of economic reforms was also known for the highly publicised “self-help projects,” which were crash schemes to mobilise the urban population up to seven hours a week to help construct government-designed schools, classrooms, clinics, hospitals, and libraries (Patman 1990). “Scientific socialism” in Somalia represented a variety of radical African nationalism that attempted to combine ways of state interventionism with an onslaught against the clan-based system and “tribalism” that furthered the dream of “Greater Somalia.” The Soviets quickly hailed Siad Barre’s coup as “progressive” and were quick to extend assistance to his regime, especially following setbacks in Egypt and Sudan. In addition to \$100,000 in famine relief, Moscow wrote off \$2 million in past debt and offered a \$5.5 million grant to construct oil depots (CIA Intelligence Memorandum, 1971). Barre himself was expected to visit Moscow in November 1971. It was at this critical juncture that the IAS received final approval for the expedition from the Somali authorities.

The preceding years were a turbulent period for the IAS. After the death of Ivan Potekhin, debates continued about the purpose of the institute and the role of its History Section. Speaking to the Presidium at a meeting on 4 September 1964, the new director, Vasilii Solodovnikov, argued that the time had come for the IAS to become more engaged in investigations of contemporary African problems, in line with recommendations from the government. As for the History Section, Solodovnikov believed that Soviet Africanists should use original archival materials to appeal to African elites (Transcript of IAS Scientific Council Meeting, 4 September 1964). As the IAS proceeded with

the new practical agenda, criticism of this practical approach was fairly common (Transcript of the IAS Scientific Council Meeting, 28 April 1967, 21). Nonetheless, Solodovnikov insisted the History Section should provide solutions to practical problems: “I believe that historical research have meaning if they give us an answer to contemporary problems and allow [us] to look into the future” (Transcript of the IAS Scientific Council Meeting, 3 July 1970, 93). The 1969 Revolution in Somalia offered opportunities not only to fulfil Smirnov’s original plan for conducting research into the history of Sayyid Hassan’s movement, but also to show it could make practical recommendations on current issues pertaining to Somali-Soviet relations.

The 1971 programme of the Soviet-Somali “complex historico-archeological expedition” was updated in line with such logic. One part was retained from Smirnov’s recommendations: Soviet and Somali historians were to travel to the north of the country to collect documents, oral history data, and other evidence pertaining to the history of Sayyid Mohammed’s war. The historians were particularly to focus on the ruined forts constructed by the Dervishes in Taleh and Medeshi in northern Somalia. However, the new objective of the expedition was to analyse the “social structure” of Somali society, alongside a survey of state involvement in the economy. This was to be done by way of a massive survey among various groups, such as university and high school students and factory workers. In terms of outcomes, the expedition was to produce concrete results and advice about the development of Soviet-Somali economic and political cooperation; problems in the work of enterprises built with Soviet assistance; and the conditions for the distribution of publications in the country. The revision of the programme, argued Solodovnikov, was justified because of the “progressive coup in Somali” and new practical tasks in the work of the IAS (Solodovnikov 1971, 13-15). These aims were reflected in the mixed nature of the group, which included several historians (Vlentin Gorodnov, Alexander Nikiforov, Petr Kupriyanov), a political scientist (Nikolay Kosukhin), and an economist (Evgenii Sherr). On the Somali side, the expedition included Sheikh Jamaa Umar Issa, a collector of Sayyid Hassan’s poems, and Said Warsame, a Somali archeologist, an alumnus of the Leningrad State University (Solodovnikov 1971, 68-70).



Figure 1. The routes and sites covered by the 1971 Soviet-Somali expedition. The northern sites covered included Taleh, Zeila, Borama, Hargeisa, Erigavo, Bokhotlekh, and Eyl. (Nikiforov, Gorodnov 1976).

The Soviets arrived in Mogadishu in 1971—the height of Siad Barre’s campaign against “tribalism,” Somalia’s divisive clan system. That year, tribalism was outlawed, with Siad Barre instructing all Somalis to “wage war against tribalism.” The slogan “Tribalism divides – Socialism unites” was continuously repeated in speeches and aired on national radio. The former local lineage village headmen were replaced by elders with the titles of “peace-makers” and the payment of blood money was abolished, with swift fines and prison sentences assigned to those who were deemed to engage in ‘tribalist behaviour’. The word *ex* (clan) was outlawed for its tribalist connotations and replaced with *jalle* (friend, comrade), which was launched into common parlance. The anti-tribalism campaign of 1971 culminated in a mass demonstration and the burning of effigies associated with “tribalism, corruption, nepotism and misrule” (Bakonyi 2015). Under Siad Barre, the lionisation of Sayyid Hassan’s struggle against the British reached new levels, largely due to his clan affiliation, which linked him and Barre to the Darood clans and thus to the Ogaden. According to the literary scholar Ali Jimale Ahmed, there was a complete “Dervishisation” of Somali historiography under Siad Barre’s regime, with the Sayyid hailed as the hero of the national resistance struggle (Barnes 2006). In the course of their five-month stay, the Soviets attempted to use the heritage of Sayyid Hassan’s struggle against the British as the foundation for Barre’s new Somalia, free of “tribalism.”

The Somali authorities were clear that the goals of the Soviet-Somali expedition had to chime with their modernising agenda, where Sayyid Hassan was to play the role of a unifying figure

in a nationalist-revolutionary narrative that connected the Dervishes' struggle to Siad Barre's government. That much was clear from a conversation between General Mohamed Ali Samatar, a General in the Somali National Army and a member of Siad Barre's Supreme Revolutionary Council, and the members of the expedition on 23 August 1971. Like Siad Barre before him, Samatar argued the goals of the expedition should be practical; they should involve decolonisation of Somali history, which had been "falsified by the colonisers" (Kosukhin 1973). To Samatar, this meant not only writing the history of Sayyid Hassan as a national hero, but also linking him to the revolution of 1969 and to Siad Barre himself. Speaking to the delegation on 25 September, Samatar recommended that the expedition should make a trip to Luuq Ganaane, an old town close to the Somali-Ethiopian border. There, he claimed, the Somalis had fought against the colonisers and the Ethiopians. Sayyid Hassan had also visited Luuq Ganaane, where he wrote a poem about wanting to reach Kismayo, in the south of the country. To Samatar, this was proof that Sayyid Hassan wanted to build a unified state. Most importantly, he continued, it was in Luuq Ganaane that Siad Barre had spent his childhood (Kosukhin 1973).

The explorations of Sayyid Hassan's history started in Mogadishu. Although Sayyid Hassan's son Abdurrahman Mohammed Abdullah had died in 1966, thereby depriving the expedition access to his father's archive, the expedition interviewed the rest of his family resident in the capital—his brother, young son, and grandson. These conversations apparently filled in certain gaps in Sayyid Mohammed's biography. For example, the expedition found out that, Hassan's uprising had only a tentative one to the Mahdist Uprising in the Sudan (1881-1899). Unlike the leader of the Mahdists, Muhammad Ahmad, Sayyid Hassan had never proclaimed himself a "*mahdi*" (a religious messiah). He was only a "*sayyid*", which the Soviets defined as "chief, religious leader" (Solodovnikov 1971, 47). This confirmed to the Soviet delegation that he did not want to put himself above his followers. While this was not entirely true since the honorific title '*sayyid*' denoted someone who claimed descent from Prophet Mohammed. However, it was important for the Soviet delegation who wanted to establish Sayyid Hassan as the fundamental figure in Somalia's nationalist-revolutionary narrative, where Sayyid Hassan was not primarily a religious leader, but a nationalist, anti-colonial fighter. The Soviet-Somali expedition sought to strengthen the link between Sayyid Hassan and Siad Barre's revolution, to establish a new, "usable" version of the past for a new, revolutionary Somalia. In his introduction to the volume on the expedition, the Soviet historian Nikolay Kosukhin articulates just such a nationalist-revolutionary meta-narrative:

The information allows to shed the light on the organic connection between the heroic past of the Somali people and the current stage of revolutionary development in the country... The liberation movement under the leadership of Sayyid Mohamed Hassan was one element in a chain of events, connected with the struggle of the Somali people against colonizers and oppressors, which found its clearest expression in the revolution of 21st October 1969. It served as the beginning of

liberation from socio-economic backwardness, putting it on par with other countries of socialist orientation. (Kosukhin 1974, 13)

Since the history of Sayyid Hassan's struggle was crucial to the foundational narrative of the Somali state, the expedition focused its investigation in the north, where the Dervishes built a series of forts in their struggle against the British in 1900–1920. Somalia's cultural heritage was to serve as the main symbol for the nationalist-revolutionary narrative.

The focal point for reconnaissance was Taleh, an important location for Sayyid Hasan and his army of Dervishes between 1910 and 1915. Bombed by the British in 1920, Taleh was home to a number of buildings, which the Soviets described in some detail: a fortress, built as a series of forts in a circle (Silsilat), surrounding a collection of tombs; a watch-tower built on a hill (*dar-ilalo*); a house for Sayyid and his family (*Falat*); a hotel tower for guests (*Tale*). Besides, the Taleh ruins contained a large storage space for provisions and armaments and a weapons repair workshop. The Soviets also discovered that the Dervishes had tried to grow grains for the army in the lands surrounding the forts. In contrast to the perception of "stateless" Somali nomads, the Soviets believed that these farming practices of the Dervishes were evidence that Sayyid Hassan was in the process of establishing a unified state. The Soviet expedition also argued that evidence of state formation was clear from the development of the Dervishes' army, which had a clear four-tiered hierarchical structure. The formation of the army and the development of agriculture, trade, foreign relations, and the legal system at Taleh—all this showed that Taleh was fundamentally a centre of political life, the "political centre for a young state." The reconnaissance of ruins at Mereshi and Eyl also led to the same conclusion. Sayyid Hassan's fortress in Eyl, a grandiose structure, was never used for military



purposes. It was built for prestige, as a military headquarters for Sayyid Hassan (Gorodnov 1974, 32).

Figure 2. A photograph, depicting panoramic view of the Taleh ruins, taken by the Soviet members of the expedition. On the right we see the main fortress of Silsilat.



Figure 3. A photograph of the Dervishes' fortress in Eyl. Photograph taken by the Soviet members of the expedition.

The main recommendation of the Soviet expedition was to entrench the nationalist-revolutionary narrative of Sayyid Hassan and Somalia's struggle in a museum. According to Nikiforov and Gorodnov's popular account of their expedition, "A Trip to Taleh", the expedition made a number of recommendations to codify the memory of Sayyid Mohammed. One of them was the construction of a museum dedicated to Sayyid Mohammed and the national-liberation struggle. While we don't know to what extent the Soviet recommendations indeed lay behind the decision, a statue was erected in Mogadishu (Nikiforov 1976, 143), constructed in socialist realist style, of Sayyid Hassan sitting on his horse atop the Silsilat fortress. The monument itself was decorated with murals, representing Somalis' struggle against colonialism. By visually reconstructing the Taleh ruins, Siad Barre aimed to establish a new symbol for a nationalist-revolutionary paradigm.



Figure 4: A statue of Sayyid Hassan atop “Taleh fortress” in Mogadishu.

Somalia’s medieval cultural heritage was also to serve the new nation. In November, Nikiforov and the Soviet-trained archeologist Said Warsame visited several sites related to the history of the *Adal Sultonte* (Kingdom of Adal), which had reached its peak between 1415 and 1577. On 17 November, having arrived at Zeila, one of the important towns for the Adal Kingdom, Nikiforov and Warsame found the city in ruins since the majority of citizens had crossed over to the French Djibouti. They found that the city could not be restored, with the exception of the two mosques. “One of the most unique historical architectural heritage sites of Somalia is almost completely lost for the next generation and represents a point of interest only from an archeological point of view”, wrote Nikiforov in his diary (Kosukhin 1973, 195). On the same trip, Nikiforov and Warsame also visited the island of Saadin. Located opposite Zeila, Saadin was an important ancient site for trade, where Eastern African slaves, ivory, and glassware were exchanged for goods coming from all over the world, including Chinese porcelain. The Soviets recommended that both Zeila and Saadin should be subject to a detailed archeological survey as a rich source of materials for the study of the Somalian coast (Kosukhin 1973, 196). Such archeological study had important political meaning. As Nikiforov and Warsame argued, the study of the Adal Period could be used by the young Somali Democratic Republic in building national consciousness and eradicating the “worst aftermath of colonialism—tribalism” (Warsame, Nikiforov and Galkin 1974).



Figure 5. A medieval mosque in Zeila. Photograph taken by the Soviet-Somali expedition.

While Sayyid's struggle represented a good foundation for modern statehood, research into various aspects of society showed that there were still many obstacles to socialist transformation in Somalia. Nikolay Kosukhin, who conducted the sociological surveys together with economist Evgeniy Sherr, complained that they had placed the surveys in the local newspaper twice, but only received five answers. Using Marxist analysis, Kupriyanov recorded a process of "class differentiation" among sedentary peasants, but many of them had not yet felt any positive outcomes from the 1969 revolution. Capitalist exploitation still dominated village life, with harsh working conditions and low wages. In his study of the Somali nomads, Alexander Nikiforov reported that many nomads would be willing to settle down as agriculturalists. However, climatic conditions and lack of arable land require high levels of state-funded investment. While the movement towards sedentary life was central to any modernisation project in Somalia, any "hasty measures" in this regard would lead to "dangerous tensions" in the country (Individual Reports 1971, 57). While the Soviets were extremely cautious about the sedentisation of the Somali nomads, they believed without a doubt that agriculture was superior to a nomadic lifestyle on the scale of human civilisation and associated the former with

statehood. A very similar set of beliefs with regard to Central Asia had not only led to crash sedentisation of nomads, but also to the archeological search to prove an ancient urban and agricultural heritage for peoples of the region (Bustanov 2015, 61).

Many of the Soviet recommendations remained on paper. Initially, the prospects for long-term Soviet-Somali cooperation in cultural heritage preservation seemed bright, as Moscow approved plans to make the expedition a permanent joint venture. Writing up the summary of their research project, Kosukhin stated that the expedition involved the Somalis in the process of “reconstructing the heroic past” and contributed to the “development of its national consciousness” (Kosukhin 1974, 10). Two members of the Soviet team went back to Somalia for a follow-up trip in 1973. However, plans for a permanent expedition in Somalia never materialised. Soviet-Somali relations cooled down again after the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia. Emboldened by Ethiopia’s weakness, Siad Barre established the Western Somali Liberation Front to take control of the Ogaden. The Soviets first tried to negotiate with both sides, but finally switched their support to Ethiopia in 1977, and Soviet relations with Mogadishu broke down.

However, UNESCO work in Somalia continued to follow at least some of the goals of the Soviet-Somali expedition. The emphasis of UNESCO activities in the realm of cultural heritage had always been on museums. The focus was the famous Garesa museum in Mogadishu. Opened in 1933 during Italian rule, Garesa had been one of the oldest museums in Tropical Africa, boasting a collection of 3,000 artefacts from all over Somali territory. A string of UNESCO officials in 1966, 1976, and 1978 had written up detailed reports and recommendations for the improvement of facilities at the Garesa museum. In 1976, Dr. Nazimuddin Ahmed from Pakistan advised the establishment of an Antiquities Service and the building of a new museum to host Garesa’s artefacts. Siad Barre’s regime was not particularly interested in Garesa, which, to them, was a relic of the country’s colonial past. They were interested in establishing a new cultural heritage for their revolution. The Somali government was not interested in following UNESCO’s advice for the preservation of cultural monuments and did not ratify the 1972 World Heritage Convention. UNESCO officials recognised these limitations and tried to adapt them to the needs of Somali nation-building. In a report for UNESCO from 1979, Merrick Posnansky lamented the fact the public paid little attention to the work of the museum and that there was little effort to use the museum as an instrument of nation building. Well aware that the government was engaged in constructing a “museum of revolution,” Posnansky tried to pitch his view that the restoration of the Garesa Museum and preservation of its artefacts could contribute to the goal of nation-building:

The potential of a museum is grasped in the Museum of the Revolution currently being arranged in Mogadiscio, but a dynamic approach to museum still has to be realised. Museums should preserve all the important objects of today—the broadsheets of Revolution, photo-

graphs of wall slogans, tools used to initiate projects, breakthroughs in intermediate technology such as the looms or agriculture implements. All will be treasured by tomorrow's generation. (Merrick Posnansky 1979, 6)

The Somali government indeed built a “National Museum” as part of the Mogadishu cultural centre in 1987. It was a four-storied building with four exhibition floors, adjoining a four-storied building for technical and administrative offices. The exhibition rooms formed the shape of an oval ring, with a concentric corridor outside. According to a 1988 UNESCO report, the building of the National Museum was a substantial achievement, through which one could “sponsor national identity and knowledge of the past threatened with disappearance due to the growing acculturation process” (Crespo-Toral 1988, 3). Here again, UNESCO believed the construction of the museum was crucial to the identity of the Somali nation—an objective with similar underlying goals to the Soviet-Somali expedition, albeit deprived from its specific ideological content.

Since the late 1980s, Somalia's cultural heritage has fallen into oblivion. One important reason was the ongoing civil war. In an influential piece, Sada Mire has also argued that the reason why the Somalis, including on an official level, neglected cultural heritage lies in the values of Somali society. What Western experts failed to realise, argued Mire, was that the Somalis' understanding of culture and cultural heritage focused not on preserving objects, useless in nomadic life, but of knowledge and skills, transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Therefore, any efforts at heritage protection in Somalia should be focused on the preservation of oral heritage rather than physical objects (Mire 2011). The story of the Soviet-Somali expedition and cultural mission of UNESCO in Somalia shows that these efforts were shaped by similar modernising assumptions, assumptions that prioritised the writing down and museumification of Somali history. The politics of cultural heritage in Somalia was closely connected to Somalia's nationalism. While the Somali government did neglect objects that were connected to the colonial past, they tried to use selective cultural heritage to construct a new foundational myth for the Somali state. The failure of that narrowly defined nationalist project does much to explain the failure to establish a new framework for Somalia's cultural heritage. Mire's concept of a “knowledge-based” cultural heritage is now entrenched in UNESCO's recommendations for Somalia. In Somalia, UNESCO is now concerned no longer with museums, but with preserving and promoting an intangible heritage and community-based initiatives to promote peace building (Padilla and Trigo-Arana 2013).

Conclusions

The story of the joint expedition gives us an insight into the ways that the Soviets tried to apply their ideas and practices of cultural heritage in the context of post-independent Somalia. As

Marxists-Leninists, the Soviets saw the world in terms of stages of development, with history evolving in stages, hurried along by a revolutionary vanguard. From this perspective, national development, with all of its gimmicks—national culture, heroes, myths, and heritage—was central to development of a nation. In Central Asia, the Soviets had engaged in active nation-building projects, with Timurid heritage acting as one of the crucial building blocks for the new Muslim Republics. In Somalia, Soviet Africanists acted to recreate the required template, as they sought to reinvent Somali cultural heritage in a Marxist-Leninist vein. This included the narrative of a Somali nation as a series of struggles against foreign invaders, culminating in the victory of Siad Barre's revolutionary regime. Sayyid Hassan was a central figure in that narrative, as he played a crucial role in the nationalist-revolutionary meta-narrative for the new nation. That is why the Soviets encouraged the codification and museumification of a narrative of "national-liberation struggle" not unlike what was done in Cuba and other socialist countries. These aims coincided with those of Siad Barre's regime, which was in the process of constructing a new state built on a selective reading of Somalia's history.

Many of the ideas and practices of the Soviet Africanist had practical antecedents in "complex" multi-disciplinary expeditions in Central Asia. These included the prioritisation of towns over the countryside, of agriculture over nomadism. To the Soviets, the cultural heritage of Dervishes in Taleh became a particularly important site of nation-building because it contained evidence that Sayyid Hassan was a national and an anti-colonial leader. As in Central Asia, Somalia's medieval cultural heritage, centred around the mythology of the Adal Kingdom, also had to be connected to the contemporary history of Somalia. To aid economic development and modernisation of Somalia was the ultimate goal of the Soviet-Somali expedition. Hence, no wonder it was a multi-disciplinary expedition, engaged in a multitude of practical developmental tasks. With the transformation of the IAS into an institute for the solution of practical problems, its staff used some of the methods adopted by Tolstov in Khorezm to marry Soviet goals in Somalia with their desire to raise the prestige of the Soviet African Studies.

Barre's revisionist reading of what constituted a Somali nation ultimately led to a bloody and costly war with Ethiopia and a break with the Soviets. However, the fundamental nation-building ethos of the Soviet-Somali cultural expedition remained the central focus of Western experts, including those from UNESCO. Much more research needs to be done into the design, objectives, and outcomes of Somalia's national museum, established in the 1980s. It could provide useful insights into the evolution of Siad Barre's regime and Somalia's official nationalism. The oblivion and destruction of "revolutionary" heritage associated with Siad Barre such as the national museum and the monument to Sayyid Hassan are at least partial testament to the failure of Barre's nationalist project.

Sada Mire's "knowledge-based" approach provides the best prospect of community-based reconciliation in the region. The reconstruction and preservation of Somalia's "tangible" cultural heritage may have to wait for the recovery of a stronger state.

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