

April 3, 1977

**Transcript of Meeting between East German leader
Erich Honecker and Cuban leader Fidel Castro, East
Berlin (excerpts)**

Citation:

"Transcript of Meeting between East German leader Erich Honecker and Cuban leader Fidel Castro, East Berlin (excerpts)", April 3, 1977, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Foundation for the Archive of Parties and Mass Organizations of the Former GDR under the Federal Archival Service (Berlin), DY30 JIV 2/201/1292. Obtained by Christian F. Ostermann and translated by David Welch with revisions by Ostermann.
<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111844>

Summary:

Transcript of a meeting between East German leader Erich Honecker and Cuban leader Fidel Castro, East Berlin (excerpts) regarding Castro's visit to Somalia and Ethiopia, criticizing Siad Barre and discussing the need to help the revolution in Ethiopia

Original Language:

German

Contents:

Translation - English

Transcript of Meeting between East German leader Erich Honecker and Cuban leader Fidel Castro, East Berlin,
3 April 1977 (excerpts)

Minutes of the conversation between Comrade Erich Honecker and Comrade Fidel Castro, Sunday, 3 April 1977 between 11:00 and 13:30 and 15:45 and 18:00, House of the Central Committee, Berlin.

Participants: Comrades Hermann Axen, Werner Lamberz, Paul Verner, Paul Markowski (with Comrades Edgar Fries and Karlheinz Mobus as interpreters), Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, Osmany Cienfuegos, Raul Valdez Vivo, Jose Abrantes

Comrade Erich Honecker warmly welcomed Comrade Fidel Castro and the Cuban Comrades accompanying him to this internal conversation on behalf of the Central Committee.

We are very pleased about your visit to the GDR and the opportunity to exchange views about the result of your visit to several African and Arabian countries. On behalf of the Politburo I want to repeat that we consider your visit to these countries as important. I ask Comrade Fidel Castro to take the floor.

[first 16 pages omitted--ed.]

Statements by Comrade Fidel Castro: [...] Before my departure from Aden we discussed with the PDRY leadership the need to do everything possible to arrive at an understanding between Somalia and Ethiopia. I was well received in Somalia. I had asked them not to have any public demonstrations. Siad Barre was very friendly during our first dinner. Prior to my arrival, I had received his reply to a letter of mine regarding the question of relations between Somalia and Ethiopia. I had also sent an envoy to Somalia for discussions with Vice President Samantar and Interior Minister Suleiman. Samantar held to leftist positions, while Suleiman was a representative of the right wing. The discussion of our representative with him was very severe. I had already received considerable information in the PDRY regarding the situation in Somalia. The power and influence of the rightist group continue to increase. The Interior Minister, Suleiman, is doing everything possible to bring Somalia closer to Saudi Arabia and the imperialist countries. Samantar is losing influence. Everything seems to indicate that he is being driven into a corner by the right.

My first evening I wanted to clarify my thoughts about Siad Barre and the Somali revolution. No serious political discussion took place at this dinner; [Siad] Barre explained to me the evolution of the Somali revolution. The next day, we had an extensive sight-seeing program. We went to a Cuban-built militia training center, an agricultural school, a school for nomad children, etc. We were taken around for hours, although we had not yet had a political discussion, and a mass demonstration had been scheduled at noon in the stadium. I understood that they wanted to avoid such a conversation prior to the demonstration. As the demonstration began, Siad Barre and I had still not had a private conversation, and because of this I was very careful. Siad Barre was very arrogant and severe; maybe he wanted to intimidate us.

In my speech to the mass meeting I talked about imperialist policy in the Middle East, the reactionary role of Saudi Arabia, and the actions of other reactionary powers. I did this even though I knew that there was a considerable trend in the country in favor of closer relations with these countries. I talked about the PLO's struggle, the Ethiopian revolution, and the Libyan revolution, and of progressive Algeria that they want to isolate. I talked about Mozambique, and only at the end about how imperialism is doing everything to reverse the progressive order in Somalia. Siad Barre introduced me to participants of the mass meeting without

saying a political word.

Before the mass meeting they had played half of a soccer game. It is unknown whether the soccer game was simply an appendage to the demonstration or vice versa. My speech went against the right wing tendencies and supported the left wing. We observed that almost all of the Central Committee members applauded, with the exception of Suleiman and his people. Samantar was very satisfied, and even Siad Barre seemed content. Nevertheless, the mass meeting was not broadcast live on radio or TV.

Only that evening did we begin to discuss specific problems, at my residence. It was clear to me that we had to be careful because surely the interior minister had installed bugs. This same evening Siad Barre finally talked about Ethiopia. He compared it to the Tsarist Empire and said that Ethiopia was the only surviving colonial power. Thanks to Lenin's wisdom, the Tsarist Empire had disappeared, but it lived on in Ethiopia. He had proposed to the Ethiopians, some time ago, to establish a federation or even a unification of the two countries. Ethiopia had not reacted then, but was now itself proposing this solution. He spoke very enthusiastically about his efforts to reach a solution with Ethiopia. I used the occasion to tell Siad Barre that I would travel to Ethiopia the next day and asked him if he would be willing to meet with Mengistu. He agreed.

The next day I flew on to Ethiopia. We had earlier agreed that there would be no great reception for me, since at the time they were still fighting the civil war. Shots constantly rang out. Mengistu took me to the old Imperial Palace and the negotiations began on the spot. I found the information that I already had to be confirmed. We continued our negotiations on the following day. Naturally we had to take extensive security precautions. The Ethiopians had come up with a division, and I had brought a company of Cuban soldiers with me. The day of my arrival there were rumors of a coup. It did not happen.

I developed the impression that there was a real revolution taking place in Ethiopia. In this former feudal empire, lands were being distributed to the peasants. Each farmer got 10 hectares. There were also reforms in the cities. It was established that each citizen could only own one house. Plots were made available for housing construction.

There is also a strong mass movement. In the capital, 500,000 people can be rapidly mobilized. In February, our study delegation, after inspecting the army divisions, had determined that of the hundreds of generals, all but two should be chased out. The officers and NCOs have taken over the leadership of the country. Currently, the leadership is considering creating a Party. There is a harsh class struggle against the feudalists in the country. The petit bourgeois powers are mobilizing against the Revolution. A strong separatist movement exists in Eritrea. Threats are coming from the Sudan, while Somalia claims 50% of Ethiopia's territory. There have been border clashes in this area for 500 years.

Mengistu strikes me as a quiet, serious, and sincere leader who is aware of the power of the masses. He is an intellectual personality who showed his wisdom on 3 February. The rightists wanted to do away with the leftists on 3 February. The prelude to this was an exuberant speech by the Ethiopian president in favor of nationalism. Mengistu preempted this coup. He called the meeting of the Revolutionary Council one hour early and had the rightist leaders arrested and shot. A very consequential decision was taken on 3 February in Ethiopia. The political landscape of the country changed, which has enabled them to take steps that were impossible before then. Before it was only possible to support the leftist forces indirectly, now we can do so without any constraints.

I asked Mengistu whether he was willing to meet with Siad Barre in Aden. We agreed. After concluding my talks I flew on to Aden.

Siad Barre had arrived in Aden that morning. Mengistu did not arrive until the afternoon. I had a conversation with Siad Barre in which he bared his claws. He told me that if Mengistu was a real revolutionary he should do as Lenin, and withdraw from his territory. Siad Barre took a very hard position. I asked him whether he felt that there had been no real revolution in Ethiopia and that Mengistu was not a real leftist leader. He told me that there had been no revolution in Ethiopia. While in Mogadishu he had shown me a map of Greater Somalia in which half of Ethiopia had been annexed.

After my talk with Siad Barre, I told Mengistu about Barre's attitude, and asked him to remain calm. I already felt bad about having invited Mengistu to Aden while there was still a powder keg situation back in his country and that in such a tense situation he was to hear out the Somalis' territorial demands.

With regards to my question about the situation of the Ethiopian army, Mengistu said that there were still difficulties but that he didn't think that there was an acute danger of a coup.

When the meeting started, Siad Barre immediately began speaking. Siad Barre is a general who was educated under colonialism. The revolution in Somalia is led by generals who all became powerful under colonial times. I have made up my mind about Siad Barre, he is above all a chauvinist. Chauvinism is the most important factor in him. Socialism is just an outer shell that is supposed to make him more attractive. He has received weapons from the socialist countries and his socialist doctrine is [only] for the masses. The Party is there only to support his personal power.

In his case there is a bizarre symbiosis of rule by military men who went through the school of colonialism and social appearances. Something about socialism appeals to him, but overall there is still a lot of inequality and unfairness in the country. His principal ideas are nationalism and chauvinism, not socialism.

His goal is old fashioned politics: sweet, friendly words. Siad Barre speaks like a wise man; only he speaks. He is different from the many political leaders that I know. [Egyptian President Anwar] Sadat, [Algerian President Houari] Boumedienne, [Mozambique President Samora] Machel, [Angolan President Agostinho] Neto and many others are strong characters. They can also listen and do not take a dogmatic attitude. One can speak with them. Siad Barre really thinks that he is at the summit of wisdom. Until now everything has gone smoothly for him. The Italians and the British made him a general. The revolution was accomplished in a minute, with hardly a shot fired. He put on a socialist face and got economic aid and weapons from the Soviet Union. His country is important strategically, and he likes prestige. Barre is very convinced of himself. His socialist rhetoric is unbearable. He is the greatest socialist; he cannot say ten words without mentioning socialism.

With this tone he began to speak in the meeting with Mengistu. He began giving a lecture on Ethiopia and demanded from Mengistu to do as Lenin had done: do away with the Ethiopian Empire. Mengistu remained quiet; he said that Ethiopia was ready and willing to find a solution and that there needed to be the first concrete steps on both sides to achieve a rapprochement.

Siad Barre theatrically responded that he was disappointed with Mengistu and that he displayed the same attitude as the Ethiopian Emperor. The Ethiopian revolutionary leadership had the same mentality as Haile Selassie. The meeting had begun at 11

PM and a solution was not in sight.

[Cuban Vice President] Carlos Rafael Rodriguez then proposed the establishment of a standing commission with representatives from Ethiopia, Somalia and the PDRY to find ways to a solution. All the other participants drafted us against our will into this commission.

Siad Barre carried on with his great wise man act, as the great Socialist, the great Marxist. At the same time he spoke demagogically as only one member of the "collective leadership" with a mandate from the Politburo and the need to consult with them on all matters. After a brief recess for consultations with his delegation he proposed direct talks between Mengistu and himself.

Mengistu, who had already become more insulted and mistrustful during Siad Barre's previous statements, said that he was willing to do so, but not at this time. First the question of the commission had to be resolved.

We continued the meeting at 3.15 in the morning. Siad Barre had prepared the text of an agreement in which the idea of the commission was accepted but which directed that its main purpose should be to solve the outstanding territorial questions between Somalia and Ethiopia. The commission would thus take this approach from the start. How were the Ethiopians supposed to react to such a provocative proposal?

During the break I had spoken with Mengistu, who did not hide his rejection of Siad Barre. I also spoke with Siad Barre and asked him whether he was really interested in finding a solution. He said that Mengistu would have to answer that. He went on with his revolutionary rhetoric, about how real socialists, revolutionaries, and Marxists could not deny realities. He said that Mengistu was in fact a drastic man, one who has taken drastic measures: why could he not decide similarly drastically right here and now to resolve the question?

In this setting I was faced with the complicated question of either speaking my mind about Siad Barre's position or keeping it to myself. I concluded that I had to speak out for the following reasons:

1. Keeping quiet would have meant endorsing the chauvinistic policy of Somalia, and its consequences. It would also have meant supporting the rightists in Somalia.
2. Not responding to Siad Barre would mean that any subsequent aid from socialist countries to Ethiopia, no matter how small, would be termed by Siad Barre as a betrayal.
3. In what kind of a situation would this put the PDRY, about to support Ethiopia with tanks, trucks and artillery with the help of a Soviet ship?

In addition, Siad Barre had not only been insulting, he was resorting to subtle threats. At a certain point he said that one could not know where all of this could lead.

Because of this, I spoke up. I explained that Siad Barre did not believe that there had been a real revolution in Ethiopia, that the events of 3 February had totally answered this question and that Mengistu was a revolutionary leader. I went on to say that we considered the events in Ethiopia as a revolution, that the events of 3 February were a turning point, and that Mengistu is the leader of a profound transformation. I declared that we could not possibly agree with Siad Barre's position. I said that Siad Barre's position represented a danger to the revolution in Somalia, endangered the

revolution in Ethiopia, and that as a result there was a danger of isolating the PDRY. In particular I emphasized that Siad Barre's policies were aiding the right wing in Somalia itself in its efforts against socialism, and to deliver Somalia into the arms of Saudi Arabia and Imperialism.

I said that these policies were weakening Somalia's relations with the socialist countries and would have to lead to the collapse of the revolution in Somalia. I appealed to Siad Barre's and the entire Somali leadership's sense of historical responsibility. I said that I did not think that this would come to a war between Somalia and Ethiopia but that I was worried, since war would be a very serious thing. I do not believe that there are people who would provoke a war between the peoples.

Immediately after my speaking so frankly, Siad Barre took the floor. He said that he would never want war and that as a socialist and revolutionary he would never take this path. If the socialist camp wanted to cut itself off from Somalia then that was the affair of the socialist camp. I had put pressure on him, Siad Barre, but not demanded from Mengistu, to come to this meeting.

Now, I pointed out that I had supported the summit between Siad Barre and Mengistu but did not talk about Siad Barre's insults vis-a-vis Mengistu. I said that Cuba had no intention of cutting itself off from the Somali Revolution, rather, we supported it. The whole meeting ended without any results.

If we now give our aid to Ethiopia, Siad Barre will have no moral right to accuse us of betrayal, etc. I told him very clearly that there was a revolution in Ethiopia and that we had to help it.

In any case I had detected during my meetings with Siad Barre a certain irritation on his part with the Soviet Union. He was agitated that the Soviet Union was not delivering spare parts or tractors and that oil came too late from the Soviet Union, in spite of repeated promises. The Soviet ambassador has explained the state of affairs to us. The Somalis were repeatedly changing their minds about their requests, which had delayed the matter. In addition, unfortunately the Soviet oil tanker had sunk on its way to Somalia.

As I told Siad Barre this, he called the Soviets liars. He said this was not the position of the Soviet politburo, but rather the result of sabotage by bureaucrats. His irritation and criticism of the Soviet Union also showed in other cases. He went on to say that there was not enough drinkable water in his country and that cattle were dying, the bananas were ripening too late, all because the pumps provided by the Soviets did not work.

Because of this attitude of Siad Barre I see a great danger. That is why I considered it appropriate to give you my impressions truthfully, without euphemisms.

I wanted to discuss my point of view frankly. The socialist countries are faced with a problem. If they help Ethiopia, they will lose Siad Barre's friendship. If they do not, the Ethiopian Revolution will founder. That was the most important thing about these matters.

[comments on southern Africa, omitted here, are printed earlier in this Bulletin--ed.]

There were several requests for military aid from various sides: [Libyan Leader Moammar] Qaddafi, Mengistu, and the Congolese leaders. During our stay in Africa we sent [Cuban Vice President] Carlos Rafael Rodriguez to Moscow to confer with our Soviet comrades and to Havana for consultations with our leadership. In order to find

the best solution we must think through this question calmly and thoroughly and consider it in terms of the overall situation of the socialist camp. Above all we must do something for Mengistu. Already we are collecting old weapons in Cuba for Ethiopia, principally French, Belgian and Czech hand-held weapons. About 45,000 men must be supplied with weapons. We are going to send military advisers to train the Ethiopian militia in weapons-use. There are many people in Ethiopia who are qualified for the army. We are supporting the training of the militia. Meanwhile the situation in Eritrea is difficult. There are also progressive people in the liberation movement, but, objectively, they are playing a reactionary role. The Eritrean separatist movement is being supported by the Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Ethiopia has good soldiers and a good military tradition, but they need time to organize their army. Mengistu asked us for 100 trainers for the militia, now he is also asking us for military advisers to build up regular units. Our military advisory group is active at the staff level. The Ethiopians have economic means and the personnel necessary to build up their army. Rumors have been spread lately that the reactionaries will conquer Asmara in two months. The revolution in Ethiopia is of great significance. With regard to military aid for the PR Congo and the Libyans we have not yet come to a decision.

I had consultations with Boumedienne in Algeria and asked for his opinion. He assured me that Algeria would never abandon Libya. Algeria is very concerned with the situation in the Mediterranean because of its security interests. It is in favor of supporting Libya, as long as military aid is confined to the socialist camp. That is not only a question between Cuba and Algeria. If we succeed in strengthening the revolution in Libya, Ethiopia, Mozambique, the PDRY, and Angola, we have an integrated strategy for the whole African continent.

Algeria would move closer to the socialist camp. It bought 1.5 billion rubles of weapons from the Soviets. Boumedienne thinks that Sadat is totally lost to us. In Syria there is also no leftist movement any more, either, especially after the Syrians defeated the progressive powers and the PLO in Lebanon.

[Indian President] Indira Gandhi gambled away the elections.

In Africa, however, we can inflict a severe defeat on the entire reactionary imperialist policy. One can free Africa from the influence of the USA and of the Chinese. The developments in Zaire are also very important. Libya and Algeria have large national resources, Ethiopia has great revolutionary potential. So there is a great counterweight to Egypt's betrayal. It might even be possible that Sadat could be turned around and that the imperialist influence in the Middle East can be turned back.

This must all be discussed with the Soviet Union. We follow its policies and its example.

We estimate that Libya's request is an expression of trust. One should not reject their request. Cuba alone cannot help it.

[remainder of conversation omitted--ed.]

[Source: Stiftung "Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der ehemaligen DDR im Bundesarchiv" (Berlin), DY30 JIV 2/201/1292; document obtained by Christian F. Ostermann and translated by David Welch with revisions by Ostermann.]