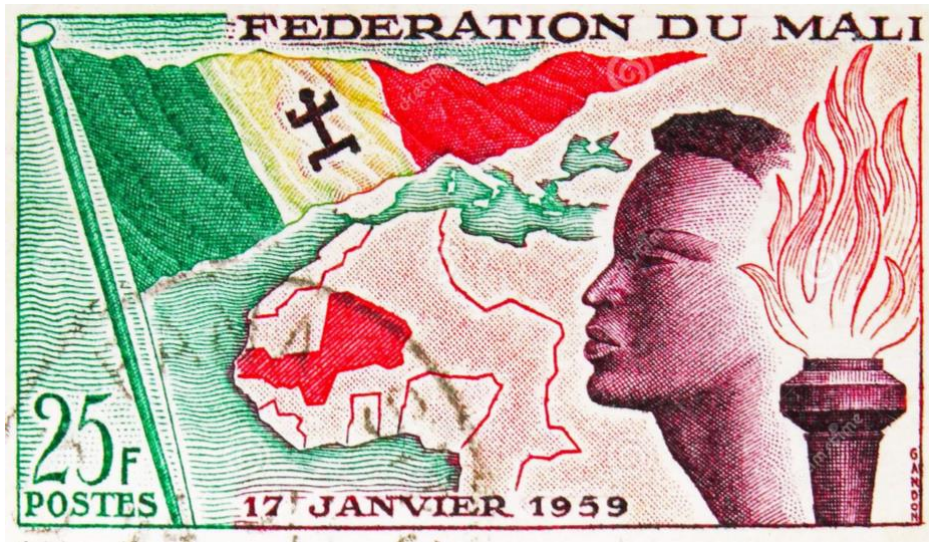


“L'option socialiste”: Mali’s non-capitalist development and the international communist movement

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A stamp commemorating the short-lived Mali Federation

From 1960 to 1968, the Republic of Mali was at the forefront of social revolution in Africa. The country’s governing party, the *Union Soudanaise*, had refused to settle for formal political sovereignty and declared in 1960 that the republic would opt for “*l’option socialiste*” to secure economic independence from imperialism and social liberation for the Malian people. Since its inception, the national movement in “French West Africa” had maintained close links with the international communist movement. Many of its leaders had organised the *Groupes d’Etudes Communistes*, study cells that had spread throughout West and Equatorial Africa in the 1940s with the help of the French Communist Party. After Mali and Guinea won independence with anti-imperialist parties at the helm in the late 1950s, this relationship took on new dimensions. The socialist camp now began to support these young state projects in their endeavor to overcome neocolonial exploitation and, ultimately, circumvent the capitalist stage of development.

This brief episode of revolutionary upheaval in Mali offers insights into several central aspects of anti-imperialism in the 20th century. Firstly, it gives an idea of the nature of relations between the socialist camp and progressive governments in the newly liberated states. Both shared a common enemy in Western imperialism, but how far did they go in coordinating their actions and discussing tactics? Secondly, developments in Mali help to reveal the internationalist strategy of communist forces at this historical crossroad in the 1960s. Theories such as “non-capitalist development” and “national democracy”, which would become central concepts in the communists’ analysis of the former colonies, were fleshed out at the beginning of this decade. Finally, the trajectory of Mali’s ruling party, the *Union Soudanaise*, from an anti-colonial mass movement towards a vanguardist party is illustrative of how class struggle unfolded during the second stage of national liberation. As explored below, the question of finding an appropriate form of political organization for the

struggle against neocolonialism was at the centre of debates amongst revolutionaries in Africa at the time.

Any conclusions drawn from just one example will of course be preliminary; it will be necessary to compare experiences in Mali with those in other national democratic states.¹ Mali is, however, a significant instance, for the *Union Soudanaise* was the first governing party in the newly liberated African states to identify Marxism-Leninism as its ideological basis and *de facto* align with the socialist camp by the mid-1960s. Research for the following article was based largely on DDR and SED documents found in the *Bundesarchiv* (German Federal Archives), articles in communist journals such as the *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, and analyses by both liberal and Marxist historians. Specific sources, longer quotes, and additional information can be found in the footnotes for those interested in further research.

This is a condensed version of the full article; it excludes an overview of socio-economic developments in Mali prior to independence, details around certain aspects of the *option socialiste* (such as the cooperative programme in agriculture), and the ideological debates in the communist movement regarding the question of vanguardism in the 1960s. The full article can be found at <https://ifddr.org/en/studies/friendship/>

The *Union Soudanaise* and the international communist movement

In the 1870s, France began to establish fixed fortifications and outposts along the Niger River, taking direct control over large swathes of West Africa. European slave traders had, however, already been exploiting the region for over two centuries prior to colonisation. Following a long struggle, the anti-colonial movement had been able to wrestle significant concessions from France by the end of the 1950s. The *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA), a coalition of parties from throughout French West and Equatorial Africa founded in 1946, played a crucial role alongside the French Communist Party (PCF) in pressuring the French establishment to accept political autonomy for the colonies. The RDA section in “French Soudan” (modern-day Mali) was the *Union Soudanaise* (US-RDA). The party had been co-founded by Modibo Keïta, a young teacher from Bamako who had been active in the PCF-affiliated “Communist Study Groups” (*Groupes d'Etudes Communistes*) in his home city. Keïta came to lead the independence movement in French Soudan and won autonomy for the new Sudanese Republic through a referendum in 1958. As a pan-Africanist, Keïta advocated for the integration of the former colonies of French West Africa. The Mali Federation, a union between the Sudanese Republic and Senegal, was formed in early 1959, but the leaders of the two countries had divergent visions for the future, with the Senegalese favoring a capitalist development and closer relations with France. After only a few months, the union disintegrated, and the US-RDA declared an independent Republic of Mali in September 1960. The failure of the Federation marked a significant blow to the US-RDA, as Senegal represented Mali’s gate to the world. The capital (Bamako) was now separated from the coast by almost 1000 kilometers, a fact that would plague the Malian economy for decades to come.

¹ To name a few examples: Egypt, Algeria, Syria, and Afghanistan. And, to a different degree, also the Central Asian Soviet Republics, Mongolia, China, and Korea.



The US-RDA was a mass party operating as a national front. It had formed after a series of mergers between various political groupings influenced by the social democratic *Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière* (SFIO) or the Marxist-Leninist PCF. 90 percent of US-RDA members were peasants, while the leadership predominantly came from petty-bourgeois backgrounds (e.g., teachers, doctors, and clerks).² The nascent working class, which made up only 2.8% of Mali's working population at the time of independence, had a relatively minor presence in the party but was able to exert some influence through the *Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Mali* (UNTM), the party-affiliated trade union. Immediately following Mali's independence, a US-RDA congress announced a second stage in their struggle for national liberation, stating that the country must "immediately and resolutely undertake economic de-colonization, to establish as soon as possible a new economic structure and, on the basis of the concrete possibilities of the African countries, to develop trade relations within the framework of socialist planning."³ Now that formal political sovereignty had been achieved, the task was to drive the country towards economic independence and social emancipation to "rid the people of the legacy of colonialism".

As Mali's first president, Keïta initiated a series of measures as part of this *option socialiste*: key sectors of the formerly colonised economy were nationalised and integrated into a five-year plan (1961-66), a new currency was created to break away from France's neocolonial CFA franc zone, and an "*action rurale*" was launched to transform the semi-communalist villages into modern agricultural cooperatives. These initiatives were to be the

² Ernst, *Tradition und Fortschritt im afrikanischen Dorf*.

³ Extraordinary Party Congress of the US-RDA on 22 September 1960, quoted in *Economie et politique*, Nr. 96, 1962, p.89 (Bundesarchiv DQ_1_23938)

first steps in a three-stage revolution in Mali: an initial “socialist transformation” of existing conditions, followed by the “construction of socialism”, and finally the “consolidation of socialist society”.⁴

While the US-RDA had been the first non-communist party in Africa to identify Marxism-Leninism as its ideological basis, it remained a socially and ideologically heterogeneous “patriotic front”.⁵ Prior to independence, all classes and social groups in Mali (with the exception of the corrupted chieftains) had found themselves in contradiction with foreign imperialism. After political independence had been secured and national construction was underway, class differentiation began to intensify, and factions started to crystalize within the party. A right-wing tendency held a relatively strong position in the party’s leadership, with roughly half of the seats in the politburo and several key ministerial posts. This group did not openly challenge the *option socialiste* but pushed for more moderate reforms and a less antagonistic relationship with France. A left wing of the party was sustained by those who had been active in the PCF’s Study Groups that had merged with the US-RDA in the late 1950s. This leftist tendency soon drew support from the party’s youth wing (the JUS-RDA) and trade union members. They did not have an independent political platform and instead advocated for the rigorous implementation of the *option socialiste*.

The US-RDA had been more defiant than most other governing parties in neighbouring states, but it had never broken with France entirely. To maintain their influence in the country and exacerbate disagreements in the US-RDA, the Western powers began to offer financial credit to Keita’s government in the early 1960s. Mali subsequently joined the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank in 1963 and signed an association agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1964. The socialist camp had few illusions regarding this question, recognizing that colonial maldevelopment and the limitations of Soviet resources put Mali in a difficult position in which the US-RDA sought to “manoeuvre politically between the two world systems.”⁶

⁴ See Idrissa Diarra, “Massenpartei und Aufbau des Sozialismus”, *Probleme des Friedens und des Sozialismus*, iss. 01, 1967.

⁵ The following summary is based on Ernst’s 1973 book and documents found in the German Federal Archive (Bundesarchiv DY 30/98101 and DY 30/98099). Both sources based their analyses on primary research in Mali and on reports in *L’Essor*, the US-RDA’s newspaper.

⁶ Quoted from an internal East German assessment from 1965 (DY 30/9810).



In 1961, Mali joined Ghana and Guinea in the Union of African States, which sought to overcome the balkanization of West Africa by gradually integrating the economies of the three states. Yet it too proved short lived after disagreements led to its disbandment in 1963. From left to right: Modibo Keita, Kwame Nkrumah, and Sékou Touré.

The international communist movement at this time was still enfeebled by the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943 and then the Cominform in 1956. In an attempt to revive the international coordination of the movement, several meetings were organized in the late 1950s, culminating in the “1960 International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties”, with 81 parties convening in Moscow. They there developed the rather nebulous concept of the “national democratic state” to capture the complex processes unfolding in many newly liberated states. As the “1960 Declaration” described it:

“The urgent tasks of national rebirth facing the countries that have shaken off the colonial yoke cannot be effectively accomplished unless a determined struggle is waged against imperialism and the remnants of feudalism by all the patriotic forces of the nations united in a single national-democratic front. The national democratic tasks – on the basis of which the progressive forces of the nation can and do unite in the countries which have won their freedom – are: the consolidation of political independence, the carrying out of agrarian reforms in the interest of the peasantry, elimination of the survivals of feudalism, the uprooting of imperialist economic domination, the restriction of foreign monopolies and their expulsion from the national economy, the creation and development of a national industry, improvement of the living standard, the democratization of social life, the pursuance of an independent and peaceful foreign policy, and the development of economic and cultural co-operation with the socialist and other friendly countries.”⁷

As the communist movement understood it, the US-RDA had set Mali on a path of “non-capitalist development”, which entailed an anti-imperialist transformation and

⁷ “Moscow Declaration” (1960). <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sino-soviet-split/other/1960statement.htm>

thorough democratization of society. An initial phase of “national democracy”⁸ would be necessary in most liberated countries, for decades of colonial maldevelopment had made an immediate socialist revolution impossible. Since the working class was still numerically weak in these countries, this endeavor could not be led by the dictatorship of the proletariat, but rather a transitional form of political organization: an anti-imperialist front consisting of workers, peasants, the petty-bourgeoisie and even elements of the national bourgeoisie.⁹ At the helm were often “revolutionary democrats”, members of the intelligentsia or military officers who came to embody the national movement. They were exemplified by figures such as Modibo Keita in Mali, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, and Abdel Nasser in Egypt. While maintaining the necessity of this cross-class alliance, the communists also recognized its precarious nature:

“In present conditions, the national bourgeoisie of the colonial and dependent countries unconnected with imperialist circles, is objectively interested in the principal tasks of anti-imperialist, anti-feudal revolution, and therefore retains the capacity of participating in the revolutionary struggle against imperialism and feudalism. In that sense it is progressive. But it is unstable; though progressive, it is inclined to compromise with imperialism and feudalism. Owing to its dual nature, the extent to which the national bourgeoisie participates in revolution differs from country to country. This depends on concrete conditions, on changes in the relationship of class forces, on the sharpness of the contradictions between imperialism, feudalism, and the people, and on the depth of the contradictions between imperialism, feudalism, and the national bourgeoisie.”¹⁰

It was also asserted that the assistance of the socialist camp could enable these national democratic regimes to create the political, material and socio-economic pre-conditions for socialism without having to pass through a capitalist stage of development.¹¹ A key point of reference for the concept of “non-capitalist development” was the Mongolian People's Republic and the Central Asian Soviet Republics, which had gone through initial periods of revolutionary-democratic transformation in the 1920s and 30s before progressing

⁸ The concept of “national democracy” is similar to the concept of “peoples’ democracy” and what Mao described as “a new-democratic state under the joint dictatorship of several anti-imperialist classes” in his 1940 text *On New Democracy*.

⁹ In 1973, DDR-scholars E. Dummer and E. Langer identified the basic prerequisite of such state power: “A decisive criterion for these countries, where the power relations are not yet clearly defined in class terms, where not only social but also political relations are in transition, is that the domestic bourgeoisie has lost the monopoly of political power.” (in *Internationale Arbeiterbewegung und revolutionärer Kampf* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1973), 357.)

¹⁰ “Moscow Declaration” (1960).

¹¹ It was said that the path of non-capitalist development initiated by national democracies would create the conditions upon which a working class – the political subject capable of socialist construction – could emerge. National democratic regimes could thus complete the historical task of the capitalist mode of production without having to endure the agonies of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. As shown further below, this concept had its roots in the 2nd World Congress of the Comintern in 1920 and was expanded after the Second World War to become a cornerstone of communist strategy. See also “sozialistische Orientierung” in *Wörterbuch des Wissenschaftlichen Kommunismus* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1982).

to socialist construction.¹² In the former colonies of Africa, Asia and Latin America, this non-capitalist path would mean a continuous struggle against imperialism and, at the same time, a limitation and gradual roll-back of domestic capitalist relations. The aim was to drive the anti-imperialist national revolution towards a socialist revolution, as had happened in Cuba, where the revolutionary democrat Fidel Castro embraced Marxism-Leninism as the revolution advanced. This was theoretical foundation upon which the USSR and its allies set out to support states like Mali in the 1960s.

Mali's path of non-capitalist development and the DDR's solidarity

Immediately following independence, Mali established close relations with numerous socialist states and sought their assistance in realizing the *option socialiste*. An initial exchange with East Germany began through the Free German Trade Union Federation (FDGB), which sent a delegation to West Africa in 1960. Malian officials emphasized the need to develop the country's health care system, since France had left it in a deplorable state. After Mali's minister of health expressed interest in cooperating in this field, US-RDA representatives travelled to the DDR to develop plans. 60,000 polio vaccines were soon dispatched to Mali and the FDGB helped to merge Mali's health care unions into a more efficient, centralized organisation. A programme was also developed to train Malian students in East Germany. The first class arrived at the medical school in the city of Quedlinburg in 1960. They were followed by hundreds of other Malians that would study a variety of fields. Cooperation was then gradually expanded to include skilled worker training, cultural exchanges, popular education partnerships, and political cadre schooling.

¹² See, for example, Kurt Huber, „Die Mongolische Voksrepublik – Beispiel eines erfolgreichen nichtkapitalistischen Entwicklungsweges zum Sozialismus“ in *Nichtkapitalistischer Entwicklungsweg Aktuelle Probleme in Theorie und Praxis (Protokoll einer Konferenz)* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973).



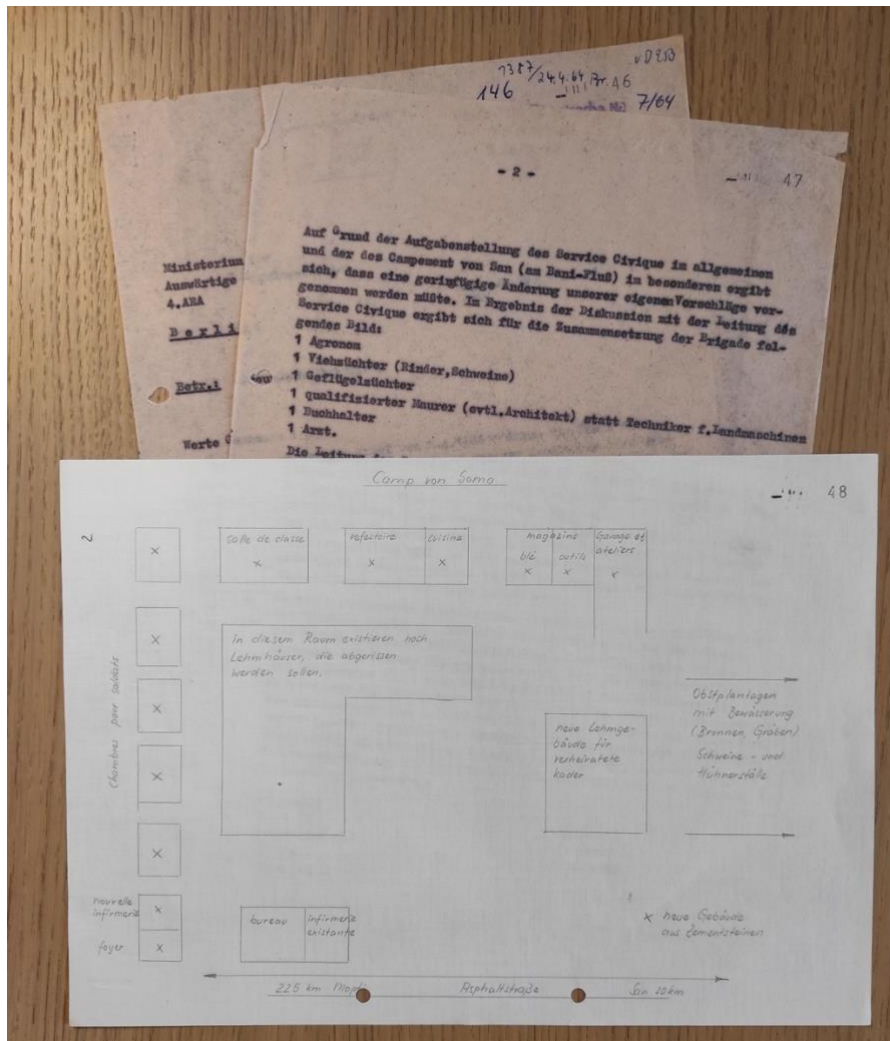
Malian students at the Karl Marx University in Leipzig pose for a photo after writing a statement denouncing France's detonation of a nuclear bomb in the Sahara Desert during the Algerian War of Independence (February 1960)

Agricultural production was the central economic activity in Mali, with 90% of the working population engaged in this sector. It was also the country's primary source of accumulation, with 92% of exports coming from agriculture. Yet in many regions, the level of productive forces remained extremely low: the land was worked by families who used hand-operated implements and consumed more than three quarters of their yield for subsistence. Since the particularities of colonial rule in French Soudan had not given rise to large private estates (see full article), there was no need for a land reform similar to those in Cuba, Egypt, and Iraq. Instead, the *action rurale* sought to transform the semi-communist villages into cooperatives (*Groupement Rural de Production et de Secours Mutuel*, GRPSM) and connect them to state-run facilities (*encadrement rural*) that would assist farmers in the use of modern production methods. The *action* was to be the centrepiece of socialist transformation in Mali; the aim was to boost agricultural production beyond subsistence farming and, through state-run trading companies, generate the funds necessary for industrialization. The GRPSM were also to become engines for social progress in the countryside: they were to elect their own management structures and establish literacy centres, sanitary stations, shops, and seasonal schools for young villagers.

By the mid 1960s, significant gains had been made in Mali, especially in comparison to the decades of colonial rule. While the French had only spent 4% of colonial taxes on education in West Africa, the US-RDA had managed to double the number of primary and secondary students in just 3 years.¹³ Hundreds of new medical facilities and sanitary stations had been constructed throughout the country. In agriculture, over 45,000 hectares of land

¹³ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* and *Argumente und Tatsachen, Zur Entwicklung der afrikanischen Parteien*

were irrigated, and 30,000 ploughs had been delivered to the GRPSM, while the construction of the *encadrement* system and seasonal schools had been mostly completed by the end of 1965.¹⁴ Yet these gains fell short of the US-RDA's ambitious five-year plan. While cotton, corn and peanut production expanded, the production of subsistence crops stagnated (rice) or even declined (millet).¹⁵ The *action* was inconsistently implemented at the local due to political divergences in the US-RDA (see the full article for a more detailed overview of these issues).



After a request for assistance from JUS-RDA, the mass youth movement of the DDR, the Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ), kitted up a "Friendship Brigade" in 1960 to assist in the construction of "Camp Somo", a GRPSM near the town of Ségou. These were the plans drawn up by the FDJ.

The most significant problems crippling the Malian economy, however, were of external origin. The US-RDA had been able to drive out foreign corporations from the domestic agricultural market and thus stop the direct outflow of Mali's national product, but Malian commodities were still at the mercy of prices on the capitalist world market. The cost of transporting goods across national borders to ports in Senegal and Guinea, as well as

¹⁴ Ernst, *Tradition und Fortschritt im afrikanischen Dorf*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

the subsidy schemes for cotton in Europe and the United States, made it almost impossible to make a return. Unequal exchange embodied “the hidden hand of neocolonialism” (Nkrumah) in Mali. Yet France was brazen enough to also employ a more visible hand, interfering with petrol deliveries and pressuring the Senegalese government to create obstacles on the transit routes to Dakar.¹⁶ As the terms of trade deteriorated year after year, Mali’s deficit began to balloon, and local merchants started enriching themselves by bypassing the state trading company and smuggling goods across the Senegalese border. After failing to effectively combat this growing black market, Keïta’s government resorted to wage cuts and price increases in 1965.

As economic problems mounted in the mid-1960s, Keïta repeatedly approached the socialist states to ask for more assistance. Yet despite numerous efforts, the DDR failed to establish commercial ties with Mali, citing “the narrowness of Mali’s export structure and Malian price demands above the world market price”.¹⁷ Mali was in urgent need of strong trading partners that could purchase goods at prices above those on the imperialist market. Without a steady stream of revenue from agricultural exports, the *option socialiste* would be doomed to failure. The situation became acutely tense in February 1966 after a counterrevolutionary putsch toppled Nkrumah’s socialist-oriented government in Ghana. Aware of the dangers posed by domestic instability, Mali’s national assembly agreed to grant extraordinary powers to a *Comité National de Défense de la Révolution* one month later.

Questions of political organization – a popular front or a vanguard party?

Internal divisions within the US-RDA intensified as the economic situation deteriorated. The right wing of the party, resting largely on the ascendant merchant class and the administrative bureaucracy, went on the offensive and began negotiating a financial agreement with France to bring about the re-entry of Mali into the CFA franc zone. The proponents claimed the agreement would help stimulate trade with neighbouring countries, but opponents argued it represented the end of the *option socialiste*, for it would erode the state’s control over trade and give France a dominant role in the economy. Driven by the youth in the JUS-RDA and the workers in the UNTM, the left wing of the party blamed corrupt officials and their half-hearted implementation of revolutionary policies for the economic crisis. They began calling for the development of a vanguard party, which – with stricter discipline and greater unity of action – would be better suited for the hostile environment.¹⁸

In the mid-1960s, against the background of similar challenges across the continent, the question of vanguardism became a point of dissension amongst communist and progressive forces in Africa. The US-RDA was split over the issue. The right wing argued that the specific historical development of Africa meant that class contradictions in African society had not and need not become antagonistic, making a class-based vanguard party unnecessary: “socialism can be realised without a communist party. We think that the political organisation of the people, considered as the motor of the nation, can lead the

¹⁶ This information was passed along to a DDR delegation by President Keïta and Mahamane Alassane Haïdara (the president of the National Assembly) in May 1966 (DY 30/98103).

¹⁷ DY 30/98102.

¹⁸ Internal strife within the party leadership was detailed to East German officials by several US-RDA politburo members who travelled to Berlin for the SED’s 7th Party Congress in April 1967 (DY 30/98100).

country to socialism."¹⁹ The left, on the other hand, recognized the inevitability of class struggle and advocated for the strengthening of “vanguard forces inside the party” in order to “further develop the [US-RDA] from within.”²⁰ (See the full article for a more extensive overview of this debate.)



A map by the journal *Problems of Peace and Socialism* illustrating the state of Africa’s social revolution at the end of 1966.

While the socialist camp refrained from taking a public position on these organisational questions in West African mass parties at the time, the right wing’s views clearly contradicted the Marxist-Leninist understanding of national liberation and socialism, for they “overestimated the potential of a national-democratic mass party and its petty-bourgeois leadership” while simultaneously “underestimating social differentiation and class

¹⁹ See S. B. Kouyaté, quoted in Ernst, *Tradition und Fortschritt im afrikanischen Dorf*, 32. And Idrissa Diarra in *Probleme des Friedens und des Sozialismus*, iss. 01, 1967.

²⁰ Detailed to SED officials by left-wing members of the US-RDA politburo in April 1967 (DY 30/98100).

struggle”.²¹ The Guyanese Marxist Walter Rodney had identified the same problem in a number of African mass parties at this time.²² For the communists, class struggle would necessarily intensify during the second stage of national liberation, and it would be up to the working class to achieve hegemony in the national movement. Nkrumah came to a similar conclusion upon critical reflection in his 1970 book *Class Struggle in Africa*.²³

Despite this ideological divergence, the socialist states continued to support parties like the US-RDA. Openly criticizing these tendencies would have undermined progressive governments in Africa and besides, it was held that the dynamics of the national-democratic process would necessarily give rise to Leninist parties capable of socialist construction, as had happened in Cuba. In early 1967, the SED concluded that future cooperation should pay special attention to strengthening “progressive forces within the US-RDA”, thereby helping to consolidate “Mali's non-capitalist path of development”.²⁴ The cadre training programmes already underway in the USSR, the ČSSR, and Bulgaria were to be expanded to include Mongolia and the construction of a party school for the US-RDA in Bamako.

The “*revolution active*” and the November coup

The financial deal with France was provisionally agreed to in February 1967. The first stage of its implementation followed shortly thereafter, and this proved fatal for Mali’s already unstable economy. In the subsequent three months, the value of the Malian currency dropped by 50 percent.²⁵ Unrest began to shake the cities as large demonstrations called for action against the “bureaucratic bourgeoisie” that had emerged in the state apparatus. The JUS-RDA, partially inspired by the Chinese cultural revolution, launched operations to combat corrupt government officials and renew the party. The events culminated on 22 August 1967, when Keïta announced the “*revolution active*”: the politburo of the US-RDA was dissolved and the *Comité National de Défense de la Révolution* (CNDR) assumed its responsibilities. The National Assembly dissolved itself five months later in January 1968 and was replaced by a provisional assembly of left-wing figures.²⁶ The right wing was thereby purged from the leadership, yet many lower-level party and state positions were still held by the bureaucratic bourgeoisie.

²¹ This assessment of Diarra and Kouyaté’s views was written by Ernst, *Tradition und Fortschritt im afrikanischen Dorf*, in 1973, five years after the coup against the US-RDA.

²² Walter Rodney, *Decolonial Marxism*, (London: Verso Books, 2022), 47-49, 68-69, 284-285.

²³ “The rash of military coups in Africa reveals the lack of socialist revolutionary organisation, the need for the creation of an all-African vanguard working-class party, and for the creation of an all-African peoples’ army and militia. Socialist revolutionary struggle, whether in the form of political, economic or military action, can only be ultimately effect if it is organised, and if it has its roots in the class struggle of workers and peasants.” Kwame Nkrumah, *Class Struggle in Africa* (London: Panaf Books, 1970), 54.

²⁴ DY 30/98100.

²⁵ This figure is provided in DY 30/98105 and verified in Pierre Boilley, *Encyclopedia of African History*, Routledge, 2013.

²⁶ These developments were closely observed by the head of the DDR’s trade mission in Bamako, who sent detailed monthly reports to the MfAA in Berlin (DY 30/98101 and DY 30/98105).



Slogans from the “revolution active” that was initiated on 22 August 1967: “Return to the roots – Victory to the people”

Madeira Keita, who was Mali’s minister for justice, came to lead the progressive forces in the CNDP. In July 1968, Keita delivered a pivotal address in which he analyzed the development of Mali since 1960.²⁷ He argued that antagonistic social forces had in fact emerged following Mali’s independence. The “opposing political objectives” of these groups, he said, had led to a political crisis in 1966/67. With the help of “mass actions by the youth and unions”, progressive forces have been able to regain the initiative and avert a right-wing putsch, but this danger still looms over Mali. The left wing of the party has come to the realization that it is necessary "to transform the US-RDA and the state apparatus from within, from organs which include all social strata, to institutions of the vanguard forces." The dissolution of the politburo and national assembly marked the beginning of this process, but it was far from complete.

²⁷ The speech is detailed in an internal report from the trade mission to the MfAA (DY 30/98105).



Madeira Keita with Che Guevara in Bamako (December 1964)

This leftward shift in the US-RDA was also discernable in the government's foreign policy. In March 1968, Mali's minister of commerce travelled to Berlin and informed SED officials that "the time is ripe to move towards normalisation of relations and full diplomatic recognition of the DDR".²⁸ While the US-RDA representatives said that Mali was now prepared to take this step, they emphasized that the socialist states would have to step up their assistance if non-capitalist development was to succeed. When President Keita met with the head of the DDR's trade mission in Bamako in July 1968, he lamented the financial agreement with France, describing it as a bitter retreat made necessary by the socialist states' failure to provide sufficient support.²⁹ Yet, despite his continued frustration with the socialist camp, Keita unequivocally positioned himself a month later when, in August 1968, Mali became the only African state to explicitly support the USSR's intervention in the ČSSR.³⁰ In defiance of its allies in Yugoslavia and Egypt, the US-RDA then refused to attend the next conference of the Non-Aligned Movement.

²⁸ DY 30/98102.

²⁹ DY 30/98102.

³⁰ Mali's declaration of support was approved by the CNDR and separately by the trade unionists in the UNTM (DY 30/98105). Madeira Keita had visited the DDR and the ČSSR in July/August of that year and thus understood the situation in Prague well. The significance of this move should not be underestimated, for the US-RDA positioned itself as a close ally of the Warsaw Treaty states and contradicted the position of its allies in China, Yugoslavia, the PCF, and several progressive states in Africa.

The *revolution active* was in essence what the communist movement had been anticipating; contradictions within and around the US-RDA had forced it to adopt a clearer ideological position. The remaining leaders abandoned talk of the “unity of the country” and were now railing against the “reactionary forces who had links with capitalist foreign countries”.³¹ They turned to the workers’ and youth movement for support. A popular militia was granted special powers over all other organs of power to repel the counterrevolution.³² Outside the urban centers, however, the rural masses were focused on the disastrous economic situation, which showed no signs of improving. Most Malians reportedly appeared apathetic to political developments in the cities.³³ Making matters worse, the popular militia proved prone to excesses, which further alienated some once-time supporters of the US-RDA.

The fatal blow against the party came in late 1968. As in Ghana, the military in Mali had long been a bastion of pro-imperialist attitudes. Many officers had been trained in the colonial “mother country”. While they had tolerated Keïta’s presidency, they favoured closer ties with France. The rise of the popular militia during the *revolution active* also angered many officers, for they feared the dissolution of the army. After a violent dispute between militia members and army officers on the evening of 18 November 1968, a surprise putsch was launched by a group of officers. The merchants and petty businessmen saw their hour coming and threw their support behind the military. The rural population remained largely passive.

The leader of the conspiring officers – the self-proclaimed “Military Committee for National Liberation” – was Lieutenant Moussa Traoré, who had recently returned to Mali from a long visit to Paris, purportedly for health reasons. Following the putsch, Traoré promised new elections in the coming months and, tellingly, the right-wing figures that had negotiated the financial deal with France before being purged from the US-RDA were now reinstated as ministers in the new provisional government. All other political activity – including that of the US-RDA and its mass organisations – was banned altogether. The promised elections never arrived and Traoré held onto power until being ousted in 1991. Modibo Keïta died as a prisoner under suspicious circumstances in 1977, whereafter thousands flocked to the former president’s funeral before being violently dispersed by Traoré’s troops.

A legacy to study

The 1968 coup thus brought Mali’s non-capitalist development to an abrupt end, as had happened in Ghana two years prior. The DDR and other socialist states continued relations with the Traoré regime, mostly in the hope of conserving gains and counteracting the influence of the imperialist states.³⁴

It would be too simple to conclude from such coups that the strategies of non-capitalist development and national democracy were unviable. While the objective and

³¹ DY 30/98103.

³² Interestingly, the UNTM even reached out to the SED to ask for help organising armed worker brigades modelled on the DDR’s “Combat Groups of the Working Class” (DY 30/98103).

³³ DY 30/98103.

³⁴ A detailed post-putsch assessment from the East German trade mission director was delivered to the MfAA in January 1969 (DY 30-98105).

subjective difficulties in Mali proved to be greater than the communist movement and the US-RDA had initially anticipated, there are several states in which these strategies did pave the way for socialism.³⁵ To understand why, it is helpful to recall the origins of these concepts. Non-capitalist development was first alluded to at the Second World Congress of the Comintern in 1920 and it is clear from this initial remark that the strategy presupposed a strong socialist antipole to imperialism:

“The question was posed as follows: are we to consider as correct the assertion that the capitalist stage of economic development is inevitable for backward nations now on the road to emancipation and among whom a certain advance towards progress is to be seen since the war? We replied in the negative. If the victorious revolutionary proletariat conducts systematic propaganda among them, **and the Soviet governments come to their aid with all the means at their disposal** – in that event it will be mistaken to assume that the backward peoples must inevitably go through the capitalist stage of development. Not only should we create independent contingents of fighters and party organisations in the colonies and the backward countries, not only at once launch propaganda for the organisation of peasants’ Soviets and strive to adapt them to the pre-capitalist conditions, but the Communist International should advance the proposition, with the appropriate theoretical grounding, **that with the aid of the proletariat of the advanced countries**, backward countries can go over to the Soviet system and, through certain stages of development, to communism, without having to pass through the capitalist stage.”³⁶ (Emphasis added)

The tragedy of developments in Mali, however, was that despite positive political developments within the US-RDA (represented most clearly by Madeira Keita himself), the socialist camp was ultimately unable to establish economic ties with Bamako to an extent that could free it from neocolonial dependencies. This was greatly hindered by the fact that the pan-African initiatives of the early 1960s had failed; the region remained balkanized, and Mali was left relatively isolated. By 1965, it was clear that, so long as the landlocked Mali was subject to prices on the imperialist world market, the country would not be able to maintain a stable trade balance, let alone accumulate the capital necessary for industrialization. Despite recurring pleas from US-RDA leaders, Berlin was simply not in a position to pay over and above market prices for Malian agricultural goods. The DDR, like the other socialist states, was of course entangled in its own (re)industrialization efforts and fierce competition with the West at the time.

Proponents of non-capitalist development had evidently overestimated the capabilities of the socialist camp after the Second World War, at least in relation to Sub-Saharan Africa. While Soviet assistance had enabled some feudal societies in Central and East Asia to bypass the capitalist stage of development, these states had been directly linked to the Soviet economy. Transposing the idea onto balkanized West Africa was another matter entirely. It would have required both a much stronger Comecon (as a socialist alternative to the imperialist world market) and an extensive international infrastructure

³⁵ For national democracy, the obvious examples are Cuba and China. For non-capitalist development, see Mongolia and the Central Asia Soviet Republics.

³⁶ Lenin (1920), “Report Of The Commission On The National and The Colonial Questions” in *The Second Congress Of The Communist International*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jul/x03.htm>

project capable of linking distant landlocked countries like Mali to the socialist states in Europe and Asia. Communist analysts began to recognize and discuss this point in the 1970s³⁷, yet non-capitalist development remained a core strategy for the movement until the mid-1980s, before Gorbachev's "new thinking" set in. Comparing Mali's experiences with those in other socialist-oriented states such as Guinea, Egypt/UAR, Mozambique, PR Congo, DR Afghanistan, etc., will help to gain a broader understanding of the possibilities and limitations of this strategy in the 20th century.

On the political front, the crux of national liberation was how the immediate fight against neocolonialism could be linked to the long-term struggle for socialism. How can national liberation go beyond the bounds of a bourgeois revolution when the proletariat – the decisive revolutionary subject – is only in an embryonic form? Drawing on Lenin's *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, the communist parties developed the concept of the national democratic state in 1960. After a decade of praxis, analysts came to appreciate the complexity of this process and recognized that national democracy was inherently volatile; it embodied a constant struggle and was liable to both rapid advances and drastic setbacks.³⁸

In the Malian context, the trajectory of Keïta's government confirmed the importance of class struggle both outside and inside the national movement. This was evident not only in the question of vanguardism, but also in the *action rurale*, where idealistic conceptions soon began to objectively hinder progress in the countryside (see full article for details).³⁹ As their political projects advanced, revolutionary democrats like Nkrumah and Keïta came to recognize the pitfalls of neglecting a class analysis. In Ghana, this realization came after the coup d'état, but in his final years, Nkrumah warned against class-neutral "myths such as 'African socialism' and 'pragmatic socialism'" (see quote in the footnote).⁴⁰ In Mali, the US-RDA had learned from the Ghanaian putsch and began moving towards Leninism and correcting their policies in 1967 to fend off the aspiring domestic bourgeoisie. Yet here too, the right-wing of the party, in collaboration with neocolonialism,

³⁷ The limitations of the strategy were hinted at, for example, by Suret-Canale ("Die Bedeutung der Tradition in den westafrikanischen Gesellschaftsordnungen" p.136) who identified three basic contradictions that hampered non-capitalist development in Ghana and Mali: "The continuance of neo-colonialist influence in neighbouring states, the relative isolation of progressive regimes and the geographical distance from socialist countries." Similarly, Nigerian communist Tunji Otegbeye concluded in 1970 that the "proximity of [the newly liberated states] to the world socialist camp" was a major economic and political factor determining their "transition to the socialist orientation," (*Probleme des Friedens und des Sozialismus*, 1970, iss. 08). Nkrumah, like Otegbeye, concluded that non-capitalist development must be considered as nothing more than a very brief transitional phase, not an independent social formation (Nkrumah, *Class Struggle in Africa*, 38-39).

³⁸ Helmut Mardek, "Der Platz der Arbeiterklasse in den staatstheoretischen Vorstellungen der revolutionären Demokratie" in *Nichtkapitalistischer Entwicklungsweg – Aktuelle Probleme in Theorie und Praxis (Protokoll einer Konferenz)* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973), 184.

³⁹ The *action rurale* was analysed in depth by DDR scholar Klaus Ernst in his 1973 book, which was translated into English and offers a valuable reference for those interested in non-capitalist approaches to agriculture.

⁴⁰ "Class divisions in modern African society became blurred to some extent during the pre-independence period, when it seemed there was national unity and all classes joined forces to eject the colonial power. This led some to proclaim that there were no class divisions in Africa, and that the communalism and egalitarianism of traditional African society made any notion of a class struggle out of the question. But the exposure of this fallacy followed quickly after independence, when class cleavages which had been temporarily submerged in the struggle to win political freedom reappeared, often with increased intensity, particularly in those states where the newly independent government embarked on socialist policies." Nkrumah, *Class Struggle in Africa*, p.10.

had already inflicted a great deal of damage through the disastrous financial accords with France and the undermining of the *action rurale*.

In years that followed, a number of parties with sharper class analyses rose to prominence throughout Africa (e.g., MPLA in Angola, FRELIMO in Mozambique, PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau, and PCT in PR Congo). The socialist camp's role in providing a space for these ideological discussions to unfold – whether in journals such as *Problems of Peace and Socialism* or in the countless conferences that brought diverse political movements together – cannot be understated. The documentation of these international exchanges offers a wealth of theoretical insights and practical experience that has too often been lost or ignored since 1990.

Today, over 50 years after the putsch against the US-RDA, the people of Mali are still robbed of social progress and economic independence. Life expectancy remains below 60 years, 70 percent of food has to be imported, and only one third of the adult population are literate.⁴¹ The deplorable state of the country is a clear indictment of France and its allies who have cast a long shadow over Mali since 1968. Through mechanisms such as the CFA Franc and the IMF's notorious "structural adjustment programmes", the dependency and exploitation of West Africa have only been deepened. After ousting the French military in 2022, the Malian people are once again facing the full force of the West's punitive measures: trade has been embargoed, borders to neighbouring states sealed off, and central bank assets frozen. More than one in three Malians now rely on humanitarian aid for survival.⁴² This painful perpetuation of neocolonialism stands in stark contrast to the internationalist solidarity of the socialist states. That alone is reason enough to revisit this tradition and pick up these debates anew.

⁴¹ Aged 15 and over – World Bank data for 2020.

⁴² Press Release January 18, 2022, International Rescue Committee, *New sanctions risk plunging the people of Mali further into humanitarian crisis, warn 13 NGOs*.