

The GDR's UNTAG involvement 1989/90: A short and unique chapter in German-Namibian history

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Abstract

For the first and only time in history the German Democratic Republic (GDR) took part in an international peace mission under supervision of the United Nations (UN) during the independence process in Namibia 1989/90. A unit of 30 East German police observers was sent to support the civil police component (CIVPOL) of the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG). Developments in both the GDR and Namibia at the time threw up a series of parallels, contrasts and historical curiosities which have since been largely overlooked by historians. The Federal Republic of Germany also sent a contingent of police observers to support the UNTAG mission and for a few months between September 1989 and March 1990 the historically unique situation, in which officers from both German states served side by side, came about at the station in Ombalantu. This paper explores the long term goals behind the GDR's participation in UNTAG and examines its position towards Namibia in the months before the East German state collapsed in 1989/90.

Introduction

2009/10 and 2011 saw commemorations and extensive media discussions of two major events in modern German history: the 50th anniversary of the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the 20th anniversary of the revolution in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1989 with the ensuing reunification of Germany.¹ At the time little attention was paid to East German foreign affairs in general or the GDR's relations with African states in particular and a rather curious chapter of German-Namibian history was largely ignored in 1989 and in 2009–2011. On 11 October 1989, amidst all the turbulence of the East German 'friendly revolution' and a mere six days before the head of state, Erich Honecker, was forced to give up his political office, the GDR sent a unit of 30 police observers to Namibia, as part of the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in the Namibian independence process. In the preceding decade, the GDR's involvement in south-western Africa had centred on the civil war in Angola, one of the major regional conflicts worldwide during the Cold War. Participation in the UNTAG mission was for GDR both the last major attempt to develop and implement foreign

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policy for and in Africa and the first and only time that the state was actively involved in a United Nations (UN) international peace mission.

GDR's policies towards SWA and Resolution 435

That the GDR developed its own strategy for Africa from 1960 onward is well documented.² In the 1960's the East German government, under the rule of the United Socialist Party (SED), began to establish relations with South West Africa (SWA), culminating in December 1977 with the establishment of diplomatic ties between the SED and the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO). In 1978 SWAPO established a diplomatic mission in Berlin, and in 1979 the General Secretary of the SED's Central Committee (ZK) Erich Honecker and SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma met in Luanda, Angola during Honecker's first official visit to Africa. Considering this political background and the GDR's support for SWAPO in the struggle for Namibian independence (e.g. military and medical aid, diplomatic and financial help, support for the electoral campaign of 1989, the teaching of Namibians in kindergartens, schools, job training and sciences), the GDR was clearly also serving its own interests by participating in the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435 (SR435) during the peace process in SWA.³

During the late 1970s, when GDR's involvement in Africa was most intensive, Resolution 435 was not considered far-reaching enough by the East German government. SR435, based on article 42 in chapter seven of the UN Charter and ratified by the UN Security Council on 29 September 1978, sought the reduction of the South African armed forces in Namibia to 1500 troops in two military camps, free and fair elections to a constitutional national assembly and independence for Namibia within twelve months.⁴ An international peace mission, UNTAG was created in order to oversee the process in SWA. The GDR's view was that Resolution 435 was biased towards the interests of western nations and that SWAPO should assume power in Namibia immediately. East Berlin found it unacceptable that the Namibian independence process should be under the administration of South Africa, with only supervisory role for the UN, while South Africa was still treating SWA as domestic territory. In the Cold War confrontation between East and West the socialist GDR always saw itself as a nation of peace resolutely opposed to all forms of colonialism and imperialism, especially in Africa. In December 1979, Peter Florin, the GDR's deputy at the UN in New York, expressed "legitimate

² Cf. SAPMO, DY 30/J IV 2/2/682, Beschluss des Politbüros der SED, Tagesordnungspunkt 5, Entwicklung der Beziehungen der DDR zu den afrikanischen Staaten, 4. Januar 1960.

³ Sectors of cooperation are well described by former GDR Africa diplomat Dr. Hans-Georg Schleicher, e.g. in: Ilona Schleicher, Hans-Georg Schleicher, *Special Flights to Southern Africa*, Harare, SAPES, 1998.

⁴ United Nations, "UNTAG", in: United Nations, (ed.), *The Blue Helmets: A Review of United Nations Peace-Keeping*, 3. edition, New York, United Nations, 1996: 203-229. On the basis of article 42 the UN had the option to install a mission using armed forces in order to restore peace.

doubts” about Resolution 435, and a few months later sharply criticised the western powers which still supported the South African position.⁵

UNTAG was the first UN mission for which the deployment of police (CIVPOL) in the civilian section of a UN peace effort had been sanctioned. The GDR was involved from October 1989 onward. After a long period of international diplomatic activity the UNTAG mission began in SWA on 1 April 1989.⁶ During the elections in November 1989 there were over 8000 international staff working for UNTAG in Namibia. But the GDR’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ (MfAA) desire to be involved in the independence process dated back to 1978. In those days East German diplomats in the MfAA envisaged the implementation of Resolution 435 as early as 1979 – one year before the planned elections in Zimbabwe. From a strategic point of view the Namibian situation was a special case and at the end of the 1970s it had almost become a southern African pilot project in the GDR’s efforts to take on a more active role in the United Nations.⁷ It seems almost surreal that the SED was supporting a country at the other end of the world in a peace process which was to culminate in free and fair elections while the GDR itself did not experience democratic elections until 18 March 1990, more than four months after Namibia elected its first free parliament (7 to 11 November 1989).

From the beginning of the 1980s the GDR line on Resolution 435 changed in recognition of the need for a compromise. South Africa’s role as administrator during the transitory UNTAG-supervised period was accepted and, in keeping with the Soviet position, the USA was portrayed as the main obstacle to Namibian freedom. The USA, under President Ronald Reagan, had been trying to resolve the SWA question in cooperation with South Africa since 1982.⁸ The reasons for this adjustment in GDR’s

⁵ Speech of P. Florin at the UN Assembly on 8 December 1978, “Forderung der SWAPO wird nachdrücklich unterstützt”, *Außenpolitische Korrespondenz* (AK), 3, 1979, 16 January 1979: 21f.; Ulf Engel, Hans-Georg Schleicher, *Die beiden deutschen Staaten in Afrika: zwischen Konkurrenz und Koexistenz 1949-1990*, Hamburg, Institut für Afrika-Kunde, 1998: 308, advice to the note held by P. Florin at the UN Assembly on 25 May 1979.

⁶ Different authors have described these international proceedings from 1978 to 1990 in detail, e.g.: Hans-Joachim Vergau, *Verhandeln um die Freiheit Namibias. Das diplomatische Werk der westlichen Kontaktgruppe*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2006 [engl. edition: *Negotiating the Freedom of Namibia, The Diplomatic Achievement of the Western Contact Group*, Basel, BAB, 2010]; Roger Hearn, *UN Peacekeeping in Action: The Namibian Experience*, New York, Nova Science, 1999; Randall Harbour, *Initiating the „second generation“ of United Nations Operations: UNTAG in Namibia*, Genf, Forschungsinstitut für Internationale Studien/IUHEI, 1998; Heribert Weiland, Matthew Braham, (eds.), *The Namibian peace process : implications and lessons for the future ; a review of an international conference jointly organized by the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute and the International Peace Academy, 1 – 4 July 1992*, Freiburg, Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, 1994; Cedric Thornberry, *A Nation is Born. The Inside Story of Namibia’s Independence*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2004.

⁷ Interview Hans-Georg Schleicher, 25 August 2009. In his own words Schleicher was meant to be part of this observer group.

⁸ The issue of Cuban linkage and constructive engagement in the long international diplomatic process on the SWA question can be mentioned only briefly here. Among other issues, it had been the wish of the USA since 1982 that South Africa should reform their Apartheid strategy and abandon their hard-line role

position were the failed socialist revolutions in Angola and Mozambique, which had ended in civil wars and not, as had been hoped, in political socialism, and the outcome of elections in Zimbabwe in 1980 with the unexpected victory of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union over the GDR-backed Zimbabwe African People's Union. The hopes for socialist expansion in southern Africa had suddenly vanished. Thus for the GDR in June 1981 Resolution 435 was the "only acceptable basis" for Namibia's independence.⁹ When the SWAPO leader Nujoma visited the GDR in July 1982, GDR's deputy foreign secretary Klaus Willerding promised to support the implementation of Resolution 435 and to help SWAPO on "political and diplomatic" levels.¹⁰ The 1980s also heralded a new era in foreign policy for the GDR. Prior to the basic treaty between the GDR and the FRG of 1972, the East Germans had struggled for international and diplomatic recognition on the global stage. After 1972 the GDR saw foreign policy as a Cold War confrontation with West Germany. But in the 1980s the East German government sought to portray the GDR as the 'better' Germany, focussing on the GDR's support for more intensive dialogue, peace and initiatives against Apartheid.¹¹ At the end of the 1980s the GDR was still seeking close relations with young national states or national liberation movements.¹² SWAPO was one of the major recipients of financial support under the GDR's Africa strategy.¹³ Having said that it should, however, be stressed that in 1989 the Namibian question was significant but not a top priority for East German foreign policy. The focus for the GDR was still on the Soviet Union, West Germany and countries such as Poland.¹⁴

towards neighbouring states in southern Africa. In addition the USA linked the question of Namibian independence to the withdrawal of Cuban military troops from Angola.

⁹ Ulf Engel, Hans-Georg Schleicher, *Die beiden deutschen Staaten in Afrika: zwischen Konkurrenz und Koexistenz 1949-1990*, Hamburg, Institut für Afrika-Kunde, 1998: 309.

¹⁰ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PAAA), MfAA/ZR 2765/84, department for East and Central Africa (OZA), Namibia/SWAPO, minutes of political discussions 1977–1984, notes of the dialogue between S. Nujoma and K. Willerding in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, East Berlin, 29 July 1981.

¹¹ For a detailed characterisation of the East German foreign affairs see: Benno-Eide-Siebs, *Die Außenpolitik der DDR 1976 – 1989: Strategien und Grenzen*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 1999; Hermann Wentker, *Außenpolitik in engen Grenzen: die DDR im internationalen System 1949 – 1989*, München, Oldenbourg, 2007.

¹² Engel and Schleicher, *Staaten*: 309. In 1988 the GDR had embassies or representations in 41 African states, was connected to 48 member states of the African Union through diplomatic relations, and 18 states or movements from Africa had a representation in East Berlin.

¹³ Ilona Schleicher, "Zur materiellen Unterstützung der SWAPO durch die DDR", *Asien Afrika Lateinamerika*, 27 (1), 1999: 1-18 (8). SWAPO received, 5 million East German Marks (Mio. M.) in 1987; 10,5 Mio. M. (1988) and 16. Mio. M. (1989), which were organised by the GDR's *Solidaritätskomitee*. Mentioned here are costs for relief shipments, education, medical aid and miscellaneous items.

¹⁴ Interview Bernhard Neugebauer, 1989 GDR's deputy foreign secretary, 4 September 2009.

GDR and UNTAG: levels of interests and hopes

The GDR was, nevertheless, willing to assist in the implementation of Resolution 435. On 26 August 1988,¹⁵ a date which had been officially designated annual “day of solidarity with Namibia” in the GDR since 1972, GDR’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Oskar Fischer, in an official note to UN General Secretary Javier Pérez de Cuéllar offered for the first time the GDR’s aid in implementing UNTAG (not CIVPOL!) in Namibia.¹⁶ The GDR’s specific African or Namibian political agenda became obvious in this offer. Only a few days later the office of SED’s ZK decided to inform the UN of the GDR’s desire to participate in UNTAG. At the same time the MfAA was ordered to find “exclusive cadres” to “arrange and organise the elections” in Namibia. Their goal was to demonstrate “the GDR’s support for a peaceful end to the regional conflicts in southern Africa” and to “counteract imperialist powers” in Namibia. A supporting initiative was designed to facilitate better relations between the GDR and an independent Namibia.¹⁷ This declaration was the official beginning of the UNTAG project for the GDR (but included no reference to a police unit). Conversations between the MfAA and SWAPO from 1978 to 1984 are well documented.¹⁸ However, it is obvious that the East Germans sought not only to enhance their political standing in Namibia in the future. The wish to raise the state’s profile within the UN was another reason for GDR participation in UNTAG. It was envisaged that the GDR-cadres who worked for the UN in Namibia in 1989/90 would become qualified officials for future peace missions and thus mitigate the East German state’s perceived under-representation in the structures of the UN.¹⁹ It seems also that the GDR considered the UNTAG as much a Namibian project as a UN one. The ZK declaration of the 8 September 1988 was drafted in the MfAA in the summer of 1988 by Kurt Kutschan, who worked in the section for United Nations.²⁰ It is therefore not unrealistic to assume K. Kutschan to be (one of) the architect(s) of GDR’s UNTAG involvement.

¹⁵ To commemorate the 26 August 1966, when armed South African forces attacked a military camp of SWAPO’s guerilla arm PLAN (People’s Liberation Army of Namibia) near Omgulambashe in Ovamboland, this date is ‘Heroes Day’ in Namibia today.

¹⁶ Oskar Fischer, “DDR solidarisch mit Kampf des Volkes von Namibia”, *Außenpolitische Korrespondenz*, 35, 1988, 2 September 1988.

¹⁷ Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv Berlin (SAPMO), DY 30/J IV/2/3A/4735/41-44, working paper (AP) to the resolution by the office of SED’s central committee (ZK), 8 September 1988.

¹⁸ PAAA/MfAA/ZR 2765/84, department for East and Central Africa (OZA), Namibia/SWAPO, notes of political talks 1977-1984. It is noted on the cover of this file that on the 28 February 1989 an employee of the department for OZA had been using these materials about Namibia (from 1977–1984) for the last time. Normally all files of the GDR’s MfAA are subject to a confidentiality period of 30 years according to the German Bundesarchivgesetz, §5. Currently only files up to the year 1982 are open for public use.

¹⁹ SAPMO, DY 30/J IV/2/3A/4735/41-44, AP to the resolution by the office of SED’s ZK, 8 September 1988.

²⁰ SAPMO, DY 30/J IV/2/3/4303, decision of SED’s ZK-secretariat, protocol 101/88, agenda item no. 7, participation of the GDR in the civil component of the UNTAG, 8 September 1988.

Parallel to these considerations was a third important field of cooperation, which the SED wished to intensify in a very direct way – trade and economics. In view of the long and intensive partnership with SWAPO it is safe to assume, that the GDR did not need a special project like UNTAG to secure a position for itself as an important trade partner of Namibia's after independence.²¹ But the UNTAG period provided a good opportunity to cultivate common economic interests. On 20 December 1988 the SED Politburo approved a new Namibia programme which featured, among other things, the setting up of an embassy in Windhoek, the establishment of diplomatic relations after independence and the stationing of two officials from the MfAA during the UNTAG phase in Namibia. After the elections cooperation with Namibia was to be redefined “depending on the status of SWAPO”. This was perhaps a precaution for the eventuality that SWAPO should not win an absolute majority in the elections. The Politburo envisaged cooperation between the GDR and Namibia in the fields of sciences, culture, engineering, shipping, aviation and fisheries.²² Several ministries were involved in this plan, such as the Ministry of Transport (MfV), the MfAA, the Ministry of Local Industry and Food Industry (MfBL) and the Ministry of Foreign Trade (MAH). This Namibian agenda was proposed by Foreign Affairs Minister Oskar Fischer, Günter Sieber (Head of the SED Department for International Relations) and Hermann Axen (Head of SED's Commission of Foreign Affairs) on 7 December 1988. Heinz-Dieter Winter (Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs) was responsible for coming up with the appropriate measures.²³

In addition, some ministries developed their own economic ideas for Namibia. As early as 16 November 1988, Food Industry Minister Udo-Dieter Wange agreed to a suggested trade treaty with Namibia on fisheries.²⁴ On 20 February 1989, long before Namibian independence, the Ministry of Foreign Trade (MfA) issued a press release which stated that it was possible “with immediate effect for East German companies to trade with Namibian institutions”, “if there is no identifiable influence on the Republic of South Africa”.²⁵ Reports on Namibia's natural resources appeared in the media.²⁶ This manoeuvring suggests that in the GDR there were hopes that Namibian independence would be helpful in the search for solutions to domestic economic problems. A GDR trade delegation, which visited Namibia from 16 to 28 October 1989, was the first such mission to the country from a socialist state. This delegation attended several meetings in Windhoek, Tsumeb, Grootfontein, Arandis or Swakopmund with representatives from agriculture, commerce and industry. Following this the first plans were made for the East

²¹ Engel and Schleicher, *Staaten*: 312. SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma had already visited the GDR from 8 to 13 January 1962 for the first time.

²² SAPMO, DY 30/J IV 2/2/2308, final protocol (Reinschrift /RS), meeting of the Politburo of the ZK, 20 December 1988, attachment No.4, measures for political and economical cooperation with Namibia.

²³ SAPMO, DY 30/J IV 2/2A/3183/73-78, AP, meeting of the Politburo, 20 December 1988.

²⁴ BArch DC 20 I/4 6444/117, internal letter of the MfBL, 16 February 1989.

²⁵ BArch DC 20/19930/36, information no. 36/1989, department information and press of the MfA, acceptance of trade connections with companies in Namibia, 20 February 1989.

²⁶ “Der Wüstensand birgt Schätze”, *Wochepost*, March 1989: 13.

German companies for foreign trade (AHB) Fischimpex (from Rostock) in fisheries, Interpelz (from Leipzig) in the textile industry and the nationally owned enterprise (VEB) Agro-Consult (from Dresden) in agriculture to forge new trade relations with Namibia.²⁷ The sea food sector was of particular interest to the GDR, which had been active in the south east Atlantic since 1976. Since 1984 the East German boats had harvested approximately 40,000 tons of mackerel and hake per year in the area.²⁸ An official agreement on fisheries, with a designated East German sea representation in Namibia (possibly in Swakopmund), had already been prepared, but was never signed.²⁹ The speed of political changes in the GDR meant that nothing came of these preparations but had events taken a different course in 1989 trade relations between Namibia and the GDR would undoubtedly have flourished after Namibian independence.

These efforts show the GDR's economic interest in Namibia. In 1978/79 there had been many such discussions about resources and trade in the GDR. South African business influences in SWA and the structure of the economy were explored extensively in the media.³⁰ On 3 January 1979, SED's ZK office had sanctioned political and economic cooperation with Namibia on the assumption that Resolution 435 would be implemented early the same year. Prospects for cooperation in mining and fisheries were among the main topics on the agenda.³¹ Once again, Namibia's role as pilot project for GDR policy in southern African is in evidence here. There was no similar cooperation plan for Zimbabwe for example. But there is a difference between the East German strategies of 1979 and 1989. At the end of the 1970s the Cold War between the two German systems reached its peak. In 1979 it was noted in the ZK that the Namibia concept "could produce a special confrontation with the FRG", because the GDR considered the German minority in Namibia to be pro-West Germany.³² In general the GDR saw the German minority in SWA as racists.³³ Such populist propaganda tendencies were no longer evident in 1989.

²⁷ SAPMO, DY 30/17855, report about a business trip to Namibia, written on 29 October 1989.

²⁸ SAPMO, DY 30/J IV 2/3A/4869/21-22, statement to the draft resolution for the ZK-office, cooperation with Namibia in the fisheries sector, 23 August 1989.

²⁹ SAPMO, DY 30/J IV 2/3A/4869/22-24 (attachement), concept agreement between the government of the GDR and the government of Namibia about cooperation in the fisheries sector. This paper had already been addressed in the meeting of SED's ZK-office on 30 August 1989 (see: SAPMO, DY 30/J IV 2/3/4436/12-17, attachement no. 4).

³⁰ Cf. Uwe Zeise, "Namibia im Kampf für nationale Unabhängigkeit", *Einheit. Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis des wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus*, 34 (7), 1979: 773-777.

³¹ SAPMO, DY 30/J IV 2/3/2849, meeting of SED's ZK-office, item five on the agenda, suggestions for a political and economical cooperation with Namibia, attachment three, 3 January 1979.

³² BStU, Ministry for State Security (MfS), office of the minister, Nr. 1641/26, declaration of the ZK office for a political and economical cooperation with Namibia, 3 January 1979.

³³ See e.g. Note of Peter Florin, GDR's UN ambassador at the UN Security Council, 13 October 1976: "The people of the GDR have nothing in common with those unprogressive powers operating in Namibia, who are still marching on the Kaiserstreet in Windhoek and in places named after other notorious fascists like Göring or Goebbels, who are still inspired from Goebbels' laws of racial discrimination and other Nazi ideas..."

Developments in the SED's UNTAG strategy 1988/89

At the turn of the year 1988/1989 nobody in the GDR administration would have thought the deployment of a police unit in Namibia possible. But in the following months the situation changed dramatically and the GDR's efforts to become involved in Namibia became a reflection of their poor, almost "non-existent", diplomatic relations with South Africa.³⁴ Against the advice of Soviet diplomats, the GDR sent a small group of diplomats as observers to Namibia under the direction of the former GDR ambassador to Zambia and Zimbabwe, Dr. Hans-Georg Schleicher, on 23 April 1989 – as did many countries in the context of the Namibian independence process. South Africa blocked the entry of the East German diplomats for several weeks and in the months thereafter Schleicher and his group found the work with the South African administration in Namibia under the command of Louis Pienaar extremely difficult.³⁵ Cooperation with the South African diplomatic observers, led by Carl von Hirschberg, who, like all the international observers, were committed to neutrality, was less problematic.³⁶

When UNTAG officially took up its duties on 1 April 1989, there were clashes between South African forces and SWAPO's PLAN guerrillas in the north near the Angolan border, resulting in several hundred casualties. This created a political disaster at the very beginning of the implementation of Resolution 435. As a consequence of these skirmishes, the UN general secretary's special representative for the UNTAG, the Finnish diplomat Martti Ahtisaari, decided in the second week of May 1989 to increase the CIVPOL contingent in the UNTAG from 500 to 1000 men.³⁷ For Ahtisaari political balance

(quoted in: Henning von L wis of Menar, *Namibia im Ost-West-Konflikt*, K ln, Wissenschaft und Politik, 1983: 30; "Das Volk der DDR hat nichts mit jenen in Namibia wirkenden reaktion ren deutschst mmigen Kr ften gemein, die immer noch auf der Kaiserstra e in Windhoek und anderen nach notorischen Faschisten wie G ring und Goebbels benannten Pl tzen marschieren, die sich weiterhin von Goebbels Gesetzen der Rassendiskriminierung und anderem nazistischem Gedankengut inspirieren lassen..."). See also Julius Mader, "Neokolonialistische Praktiken der BRD gegen ber Namibia", in: Solidarit tskomitee der DDR, (ed.), *Die NATO und das s dliche Afrika*, Bd.1, (Ost-)Berlin, 1978 15: "In FRG and South African rhetoric the term 'German' is generally used per se. It is, however, quite clear that this does not refer to citizens of the GDR in this question, but rather to colonialists and neo-colonialists, whose home is the imperialist FRG or who just 'want to return home to the Reich'". ("Allgemein wird also in der BRD- und S dafrikaterminologie schlechthin von 'Deutschen' gesprochen. Dagegen muss kl rend und eindeutig festgestellt werden, dass es sich bei dieser Problematik keinesfalls um Staatsb rger der sozialistischen DDR, sondern um Kolonialisten und Neokolonialisten handelt, die in der imperialistischen BRD ihre Heimat haben oder just in dieses 'Reich heim wollen'.")

³⁴ Quote from interview Schleicher, 25 August 2009. For aims, interests and character of the relations between GDR and South Africa see: Ulrich van der Heyden, *Zwischen Solidarit t und Wirtschaftsinteressen: die „geheimen“ Beziehungen der DDR zum s dafrikanischen Apartheidregime*, M nster, Lit, 2005.

³⁵ Hans-Georg Schleicher, *Zeitenwende am Sambesi. Als Diplomat, Historiker und Zeitzzeuge im s dlichen Afrika*, Teil II, Berlin, Verb. f r Internat. Politik und V lkerrecht, 2010: 56. The permission for the GDR diplomatic group was overseen by South African administrators after UN general secretary Javier P rez de Cu llar became involved personally.

³⁶ Interview Schleicher, 25 August 2009.

³⁷ Harbour, *Initiating*: 32.

was very important, as he told GDR's UN office in New York.³⁸ There were signs of political tension between a number of countries around the globe – such as India and Pakistan and the two German states. Ahtisaari, being a diplomat, wished to involve both German states and derive maximum benefit from the influence of the German minority through language, culture and economy which stretched back to SWA's time as German Protectorate (1884 – 1915).³⁹ The official language of UNTAG was English, but German was also important for winning the trust of German Namibians, who were often sceptical about the independence process.⁴⁰ The SED's Namibia strategy suddenly gained a fully unexpected significance. For the first time the GDR was to be part of an international UN peacekeeping mission. Although participation was at least partly the result of the difficulties encountered at the start of the UNTAG mission it was still the first and only time the GDR took part in such a high profile international project.

GDR's Africa affairs at the end of the 1980s

In May 1989 there were the first signs of a public protest movement in the GDR following the rigged municipal elections of 7 May. The work of foreign policy institutions was unaffected by these developments. In the same month two African presidents visited the GDR, Joaquim Alberto Chissano of Mozambique and Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia. Alongside diplomatic efforts to take part in UNTAG, a special think-tank was also set up and tasked with developing a new concept for the GDR's Africa strategy for the 1990s. In a 25-page paper, produced in association with the MfAA, the Institute for International Relations in Potsdam assessed the situation in Africa realistically, with less focus on political system polemics and more on the significance of various health issues (HIV/AIDS), environmental problems and hunger. Alongside Zimbabwe and South Africa - both of which were expected to play important roles in southern Africa - in the coming decade, Namibia was mentioned as an important player in the region for a number of reasons. These included political and economic considerations. Namibia's abundance of mineral and energy resources was common knowledge by then. The independence of Namibia was thus deemed to be of the highest importance in this strategic paper. A new strategy for Africa was put to SED's Politburo by foreign minister Oskar Fischer on 14

³⁸ Interview Bernhard Neugebauer, 4 September 2009.

³⁹ BStU, MfS, Sekr. Neiber, Nr. 297/42–44, letter from GDR's UN deputy, Kurt Kutschan, in New York to the MfAA, 11 May 1989.

⁴⁰ In anticipation of the possibility that neither of the German states would participate in UNTAG, the UN had canvassed for police observers with German language skills in other states such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia, where some German was still spoken. Knowledge of German was a requirement in the application process for incumbent members of UNTAG Sources: BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/219–220, message from GDR's embassy in Budapest, Hungary, 11 May 1989; BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/216, fax from GDR's UN deputy, Kurt Kutschan, in New York to the MfAA, 5 June 1989.

March 1989, but the party failed to adopt it before the GDR itself ceased to exist as a state.⁴¹

In the 1980s two main political powers forged East German strategy for Africa, including UNTAG. The more creative group of the two was the diplomatic corps in the MfAA, which formally belonged to GDR government under direction of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers (*Präsidium des Ministerrates*), which in turn was officially bound by the decisions of GDR parliament (*Volkskammer*). The units of the MfAA involved in UNTAG were the department of United Nations (VN) and the chapter for East and Central Africa (OZA) with the sectors southern Africa I and II. Set against these was the enormous administrative apparatus of the SED with the Politburo and the ruling secretariat of the central committee, which from 3 May 1971 until 18 October 1989 was led by Erich Honecker. Two powerful officials, both members of the Politburo, were responsible for the external affairs work of the SED. Hermann Axen was the Head of the Commission on Foreign Affairs, and Günther Mittag led the units for economy and for developing countries. Furthermore, the SED's ZK department for international relations (in the 1980s led by Günter Sieber) was another major force in determining the GDR's foreign policy. But despite tensions communication and cooperation between the party and the government ministry were maintained. H. Axen was also chairman of the foreign affairs committee in parliament while the SED had an office in the council of ministers, and in the 1980s many former African specialists from the MfAA worked in the SED's department for international relations. As a result of the various connections East German foreign policy was a tiered process. Foreign policy decisions were often drawn up by specific regional units of the MfAA and officially proposed to and signed off by executive officials in the SED Politburo or ZK's secretariat. After that resolutions, which were often not even discussed but merely rubber-stamped by the various committees, were sent back to the MfAA through the Council of Ministers.⁴² In the case of Namibia in 1989/90, the MfAA also had an active role in arranging the UNTAG participation, but the power to make decisions was always in the SED's hands. The exclusive authority of the SED, laid down in GDR's constitution of 1968, was clearly visible in the field of foreign affairs.⁴³ Similarly, a wide range of mass organisations in the GDR, such as the youth organisation *Freie Deutsche Jugend*, or the workers' union *Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*, also had sections for international relations. Influenced by the SED, they worked on a third 'tier' of East German foreign activities.

It is also important to remember that Namibia was under South African administration in 1989. It was not an independent nation and had no diplomatic corps of its own. Thus

⁴¹ SAPMO, DY 30/IV 2/2.115/50-75, Die Bedeutung Afrikas in den internationalen Beziehungen am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts, 14.3.89; Engel and Schleicher, *Staaten*: 137.

⁴² Engel and Schleicher, *Staaten*: 142ff.

⁴³ See: 2nd constitution of GDR from 6 April 1968, version from 7 October 1974, chapter I, sector 1, article 1: "The GDR is a socialist state of workers and peasants. The GDR is the political organisation of workers in cities and the countryside under direction of the working class and their Marxist-Leninist party" (in: *Gesetzblatt der DDR*, 1974, I, 47, 27 September 1974: 432).

the SED's strategy for Namibia focussed on the cultivation of close relations with SWAPO, rather than the pursuit of official diplomatic relations. As far as the GDR was concerned, SWAPO was the only legitimate diplomatic representative of Namibia, which contrasted sharply with the position of the FRG.⁴⁴ It thus seems fitting that SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma was the last high ranking political leader from Africa to visit the GDR (for several weeks starting in August 1989).⁴⁵ For the ceremonies to mark the 40th anniversary of the GDR on the 7 October 1989, 10 African countries and three liberation movements sent diplomatic delegations to East Berlin, among them SWAPO.

Following the dismissal of the Politburo together with Egon Krenz, E. Honecker's successor as SED's ZK general secretary, on the 3 December 1989, East German foreign policy in Africa fell into abeyance. Many officials in positions relating to Africa lost their posts in autumn 1989 and all diplomatic activity ceased in the following months.⁴⁶ The involvement of GDR police in Namibia was thus the last act of East German policy in Africa.

The influence of South Africa

On 11 May 1989, UN general secretary J. Pérez de Cuéllar officially announced that the CIVPOL force was to be increased to 1000 officers. On the same day, Kurt Kutschan, who had become the GDR's ambassador to the UN in New York, relayed this back to East Berlin⁴⁷. It was also reported in the MfAA's in-house paper *Außenpolitische Übersicht*.⁴⁸ In the following days the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MfAA), State Security (MfS), Interior (Mdl) and National Defence (MfNV) began assembling a police observer unit for the CIVPOL in UNTAG. The qualifications required by the individual police observers had first to be defined. Among the criteria were knowledge of the English language, ability to adapt to living and working in tropical conditions and political reliability i.e. loyalty to the SED party line. In their preparations the East German authorities followed the example set by Hungary, a CIVPOL contributor since 21 April 1989. The eventual administration and structure of the GDR police unit were very similar to those of the Hungarians and ministries in East Berlin referred to the "expertise of the Hungarian comrades".⁴⁹ Hans-Georg Schleicher, the GDR's deputy for UNTAG in Namibia

⁴⁴ This was a fact since GDR had agreed to UN resolution UN 3295 on the 13 December 1974 and to decision UN A/31/146 on 20 December 1976 by the UN plenum, in which SWAPO was described as "authentic" and as "exclusive and authentic" deputy of Namibia, respectively. The FRG abstained in 1974 and voted against the declaration in 1976.

⁴⁵ "Präsident der SWAPO traf zu Arbeitsbesuch in der DDR ein", *Neues Deutschland*, 19 August 1989: 1.

⁴⁶ Gareth Winrow, "The GDR in Africa - a gradual disengagement?", *africa spectrum*, 3, 1989: 303-314 (311f.).

⁴⁷ BStU, MfS, Sekr. Neiber, Nr. 297/42-44, letter of Kurt Kutschan to the MfAA, 11 May 1989.

⁴⁸ BStU, MfS, Sekr. Neiber, Nr. 297/41, Außenpolitische Übersicht, 12 May 1989.

⁴⁹ BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/135-139, Information über die Beratung im MfAA zur möglichen Beteiligung der DDR an der zivilen UNTAG-Komponente, 16 May 1989. Cf. also BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/219-220; 228-229, cables from the GDR embassy in Budapest, 11 May 1989.

noted, that “political and ideological trust in the party” was demanded of the candidates.⁵⁰ Only male candidates were considered.⁵¹ A list of potential election observers was presented to the UN by the MfAA despite there never having been an official request for such.⁵²

As a rule the SED leaders would respond to specific demands from the UN for the East German police contingent. Oskar Fischer, Minister of Foreign Affairs, was, however, pushing for a resolution before the UN could officially inquire about the participation of the GDR. He wrote directly to the ZK’s general secretary Erich Honecker. On the 20 May 1989 Honecker personally approved the participation of the GDR in the CIVPOL without the consent of the SED’s ZK secretariat or the Politburo.⁵³ This *modus operandi* was not unusual in the 1980s. Honecker, as head of state, would make decisions at short notice and without consulting the board of the SED.⁵⁴ At the same time the East German ambassadors in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, China, Algeria and Ethiopia were instructed to seek support for the GDR’s participation in UNTAG. These five states were members of the UN Security Council at the time.⁵⁵ By the end of May 1989, the departments for human resources in the GDR Ministries of Foreign Affairs, State Security, Interior and National Defence had begun recruiting for CIVPOL from within their own ranks. However, South Africa was still the major diplomatic force and “strictly against” any participation of the GDR in CIVPOL or in the UNTAG in general. Kurt Kutschan referred to the South Africans’ “resolute blocking resistance” to the GDR in the UN.⁵⁶ They would only tolerate additional CIVPOL members from states which already had officers in Namibia. The African front-line states – Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Angola and Botswana – were reluctant to present South Africa with a new reason to block the Namibian independence process so they too would only consider additional police units from nations which were already part of UNTAG. Following these events the foreign minister, Oskar Fischer, concluded in an internal letter to GDR’s

⁵⁰ Ilona Schleicher, Hans-Georg Schleicher, *Die DDR im südlichen Afrika: Solidarität und Kalter Krieg*, Hamburg, Institut für Afrika-Kunde, 1997: 227.

⁵¹ 45% of the total UNTAG staff were women, see: “UNTAG goes home”, *UN Chronicle*, United Nation’s Department for Public Relations, (ed.), 27 (2), 1990, June 1990: 8.

⁵² BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/140-144, Zur möglichen Beteiligung der DDR an der UN-Polizeibeobachtergruppe in Namibia, written between 11 and 16 May 1989.

⁵³ BStU, MfS, HA I, Nr. 13985, letter by Oskar Fischer to Erich Honecker, September 1989. The exact date is not noted on the paper, but O. Fischer wrote about the CIVPOL unit in this letter to E. Honecker: “In regard to your decision from the 20 May 1989”.

⁵⁴ Engel and Schleicher, *Staaten*: 140.

⁵⁵ BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/140-144, information of the department of United Nations in the MfAA, Zur möglichen Beteiligung der DDR an der UN-Polizeibeobachtergruppe in Namibia, written between 11 and 16 May 1989.

⁵⁶ BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921, messages from Kurt Kutschan in New York to Heinz-Dieter Winter and Bernhard Neugebauer (GDR’s Deputy Ministers for Foreign Affairs), Harald Rose (head of the MfAA section for United Nations) and Bernd Hauke (head of the MfAA department for East- and Central Africa), 30 May 1989 and 5 June 1989.

Minister of State Security, Erich Mielke, that the East German plans for the CIVPOL had been shattered. But he also noted “that the participation of the GDR in missions to end regional conflicts including the one in Namibia has not been completely ruled out.”⁵⁷ In June 1989 the GDR’s goal of contributing a contingent to CIVPOL seemed, for the moment, unattainable.

GDR’s role in future peace missions

Despite this diplomatic setback, the GDR’s Ministry of National Defence (MfNV) made plans for participation in future UN missions. The UNTAG mission in Namibia was a catalyst for this and the various ministries resumed their preparations even though the GDR was not part of CIVPOL in summer 1989. For example candidates selected for a police unit were obliged to receive vaccinations⁵⁸ or take part in June 1989 in a special seminar on UN missions.⁵⁹ In meetings between the ministries involved, Harald Rose, chief of the department for United Nations in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1989, pointed out that the GDR had to be better prepared for official requests from the UN in the future as the country was a member of the UN Special Committee for Peace Missions.⁶⁰ Other Warsaw Pact member states had been participating in UN missions for years, e.g. Poland and Hungary and it was imperative for the GDR to establish its own position for the future. Therefore a special task force for peacekeeping operations, established by the Ministries for Foreign Affairs and National Defence in cooperation with the Institute for International Relations (IIB) in Potsdam, developed a strategy paper on prospects and conditions for the GDR to support the UN in the 1990’s. Not only civilian components, but also options for military participation were discussed. The Polish international experience served as an example for these deliberations.⁶¹ In September 1989 a special section was established within the Ministry of National Defence to coordinate strategy for this field of activity for the East German armed forces. These operations were also documented by the Ministry of State Security (MfS). It foresaw the training of 30 to 40 military observers for UN missions by the end of 1990, and by the end of 1991, a fully trained army unit consisting of two companies with about 340 troops, to be based at the *Luftsturmregiment* 40 in Lehnin near Potsdam. These forces were to be ready for deployment by the end of 1991, with the administrative decisions

⁵⁷ BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/109-110, letter from O. Fischer to E. Mielke, no exact date noted, written in the first days of June 1989 (“dass Beteiligung der DDR an der Regelung regionaler Konflikte auch in Bezug auf Namibia noch nicht völlig ausgeschlossen werden kann.”)

⁵⁸ Personal papers of one candidate of the Ministry of National Defence handed out to the author on the 10 August 2009. Different vaccines were distributed in June, July and September 1989.

⁵⁹ BStU, MfS, HA I, Nr. 13985/10, dossier about a member of the Ministry of National Defence, 12 September 1989.

⁶⁰ BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/105-107, minutes of the meeting on the 20 June 1989, 29.6.1989.

⁶¹ BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/32-52, Friedenserhaltende Operationen der UNO (PKO) – Voraussetzungen und Konsequenzen einer Teilnahme der DDR an der militärischen Komponente der PKO, concept of the task force for peacekeeping operations of MfAA, MfNV and IIB Potsdam, 30 June 1989.

to be made in SED's Politbüro by December 1989.⁶² These plans were overtaken by the radical political events in the GDR in autumn 1989. Yet, they document East German diplomatic aspirations and strategies for a more active role in the UN and were a direct result of the GDR's negative diplomatic experience with CIVPOL in Namibia in the summer of 1989. This is an important consideration when examining the historical context of the GDR's UNTAG involvement.

Other Namibia-related activities in the GDR in 1989

Namibia was an issue for officials in other areas of the GDR administration in 1989. For example the State Secretary for Church Questions contacted Namibian churches via the MfAA, and, in May 1989, in cooperation with the organisation *Brot für die Welt* (Bread for the World), sent tents to Namibia where they were to be used to store corn.⁶³ There was contact between the Conference of Protestant Church Leadership in the GDR and the Namibian Council of Churches, in the course of which the injustices of the German colonial period were acknowledged in a written statement.⁶⁴ The Namibian issue also occupied the Ministry of State Security (MfS). Mail sent from the GDR to Namibia and South Africa was monitored from April 1989 by a unit for monitoring foreigners in the MfS main department II (HA II).⁶⁵ Informants in the SWAPO office in East Berlin also provided the MfS with inside information on SWAPO.⁶⁶ Following the skirmishes between South African forces and SWAPO guerrillas in April 1989 the MfS drafted a secret memorandum about talks between military representatives from Cuba and Angola, during which the possibility of the Namibian peace process failing was also considered.⁶⁷ In the summer of 1989, the wife of SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma spent time recuperating in the GDR's government hospital in Berlin-Buch following an operation. Nujoma himself visited the GDR for several weeks in August 1989.⁶⁸

⁶² BStU, MfS, HA I, Nr. 13985/63-64, Inoffizielle Information der Abteilung MfNV in der Hauptabteilung I des MfS, 12 September 1989.

⁶³ "DDR schickt Zelte", *Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 May 1989, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Gerhard Besier, "Internationale Religionspolitik als sozialistische Außenpolitik. Das Beispiel der DDR-Außenpolitik im südlichen Afrika (1970-1990)", in: Heiner Timmermann, (ed.), *Die DDR: Politik und Ideologie als Instrument*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1999: 719-756 (751ff.).

⁶⁵ BStU, MfS, HA II, Nr. 28725/44, letter by the head of the HA II / working group for foreigners, Reiner Wiegand, 11 April 1989. The working group for foreigners in the HA II observed foreigners living in the GDR, i.e. Namibians or employees of the SWAPO office in East Berlin.

⁶⁶ BStU, MfS, HA II, Nr. 29700/25; 28-29; 57-60, reports from informants to the HA II about internal news of the SWAPO from 11 April 1989 and 22 June 1989.

⁶⁷ BStU, MfS, HVA, Nr. 812/1/9-11, Information 176/89, Information über aktuelle Entwicklungen in Namibia, April 1989. The exact date of the report is not on the file, but the information was written in regard to the talks between Angola, Cuba and South Africa in Mount Etjo on 9 April 1989.

⁶⁸ "Präsident der SWAPO traf zu Arbeitsbesuch in der DDR ein", *Neues Deutschland*, 19 August 1989: 1.

The GDR also trained the bodyguards who protected SWAPO officials returning to Namibia from exile in June 1989⁶⁹ and the following month provided two air planes, belonging to the GDR airline Interflug, to fly over 200 Namibians who had been working or studying in the GDR back to Windhoek.⁷⁰ In the summer of 1989 there were still 526 Namibians resident in the GDR.⁷¹ Apart from this, on 21 March 1989 (since 1990 Namibia's Independence Day), Sam Nujoma was awarded the *Großer Stern der Völkerfreundschaft* (star of peoples' friendship) by the SED Politburo, and on 27 March 1989, the SED Politburo decided to support the production of TV advertisements for SWAPO's election campaign financially, and to send a journalist from GDR state television.⁷²

The end of South Africa's opposition to GDR observers

In the late summer and autumn of 1989 public protests in the GDR became a broad-based revolution with waves of citizens fleeing to West Germany through Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Erich Honecker, general secretary of the SED, became very ill at the beginning of July 1989 and Günther Mittag took over government business provisionally until the end of September. The first days of October brought a series of dramatic events in the GDR. In Dresden trains filled with East German refugees from the embassy in Prague passed through the train station en route to the West while protesters clashed with police in front of the building. There were huge demonstrations in Dresden, Leipzig and Berlin on 7, 8, and 9 October 1989. These prompted the Politburo to remove Erich Honecker from office as General Secretary of the SED and thereby also as the head of state of the GDR on 18 October 1989 and replace him with Egon Krenz.

At the end of August 1989 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs received word from Siegfried Zachmann, the East German deputy at the UN in New York that South Africa no longer opposed GDR participation in CIVPOL.⁷³ A few weeks earlier the participation of 25 East German election observers had been approved by both the UN and the Central Committee.⁷⁴ These observers left for Namibia on 26 October 1989 for three weeks and served at a number of locations including Rundu. The UN's decision to raise the number

⁶⁹ Schleicher and Schleicher, *DDR*: 223.

⁷⁰ "Namibier kehren aus der DDR in ihre Heimat zurück", *Neues Deutschland*, 18 July 1989: 1f.

⁷¹ Schleicher and Schleicher, *DDR*: 226.

⁷² SAPMO, DY 30/1 IV 2/2/2320, protocol 12/89 of the Politburo, agenda item 17, 21 March 1989; SAPMO, DY 30/1 IV 2/3/4374/16-17, protocol 31/89 of the Politburo, attachment 7, 27 March 1989.

⁷³ BStU, MfS, Abt.X, Nr. 921/95, cable from S. Zachmann to the MfAA departments East and Central Africa and United Nations and to the deputy Foreign Ministers Bernhard Neugebauer and Heinz-Dieter Winter, 31 August 1989.

⁷⁴ SAPMO, DY 30/1 IV 2/3/4436, original script of the ZK secretariat 94/89, 30 August 1989, agenda item 2, Beschluss über die Teilnahme der DDR an der Gruppe der Wahlbeobachter der UNTAG im Zeitraum Oktober-November 1989. See also: BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/224-225, telegram from GDR's UN ambassador Siegfried Zachmann to the MfAA, 28 July 1989.

of CIVPOL observers by a further 500 to 1500 officers in preparation for the elections to the national assembly from 7 to 11 November 1989 (the Berlin Wall fell on the 9 November 1989) brought this change about. Behind the scenes the head of the unit for the United Nations in the MfAA, Harald Rose, drafted a report on the new situation for SED's Politburo. He noted that South Africa had given up its opposition to the GDR after "pressure from UN general secretary" Javier Pérez de Cuéllar.⁷⁵ Once again Rose underlined that the CIVPOL mission was "important for the design of bilateral liaisons with Namibia in the future" as well as in "reducing the dominion of the racist regime" in South Africa.⁷⁶ Oskar Fischer, as the GDR's Foreign Minister, had previously reached an agreement with Erich Honecker. Although Honecker was ill in September 1989, it seems he still made important political decisions personally. Fischer wrote to Honecker in the first days of September 1989 noting

in accordance with your decision of 20 May 1989 and the original agenda of the UN secretariat on the numerical strength (of the force) of 25 men, preparations have been completed. At the moment 30 cadres from the Ministries for Interior, National Defence, State Security and Foreign Affairs are available.⁷⁷

On 5 September 1989 Fischer wrote to Erich Mielke, Minister of State Security, that "Comrade E. Honecker has been informed. He decided that the government of the GDR will agree to the UN request for participation in the group of police observers".⁷⁸ Once again Honecker made a decision before SED's Politburo could deliberate, going over the heads of its members. In the next meeting of the Politburo on 12 September 1989, the delegation of a police unit to Namibia was confirmed.⁷⁹ Eight days later the council of ministers approved the mission.⁸⁰ Bernhard Neugebauer, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Karl-Heinz Wagner, Deputy Minister of Interior, took the salute of the contingent of 30 police observers as they set off for Namibia from Berlin-Schönefeld airport on 11 October 1989.⁸¹ In total approximately 70 GDR citizens including the police contingent, election observers, members of the business delegation, Hans-Georg Schleicher's diplomatic observers and some East German journalists, were deployed around Namibia by the end of October 1989.

⁷⁵ BStU, MfS, Abt.X, Nr 921/244ff, draft for the Politburo meeting on 12 September 1989, Teilnahme der DDR an der Polizeibeobachtereinheit der UNTAG.

⁷⁶ BStU, MfS, Abt.X, Nr 921/248f, reasons for the decision draft for the meeting of the Politburo on 12 September 1989 ("Bedeutung für die zukünftige Gestaltung der bilateralen Beziehungen zu Namibia" and "Einschränkung des Herrschaftsgebietes des Rassistenregimes").

⁷⁷ BStU, MfS, HA I, Nr. 13985/20, letter of O. Fischer to E. Honecker, written between 31 August and 5 September 1989.

⁷⁸ BStU, MfS, Abt.X, Nr. 921/242-243, letter by O. Fischer to E. Mielke, 5 September 1989.

⁷⁹ SAPMO, DY 30/J IV 2/2/2345/5,15-17, original script of the Politburo meeting 36/89, item two, 12 September 1989.

⁸⁰ BStU, MfS, Abt.X, Nr. 921/19-20, decision by the Council of Ministers, 20 September 1989.

⁸¹ "Beobachter der DDR nach Namibia verabschiedet", *Neues Deutschland*, 12 October 1989: 1f.

The GDR could not comply with the original (but unofficial) request for 50 police officers by the UN.⁸² On 7 September 1989 the UN was counting on an East German contingent of 50 men, 41 police officers, eight sergeants and one commander.⁸³ Yet on 12 September the figure of 50 observers was still being discussed within the Ministry of State Security.⁸⁴ It was difficult for the East German administration to find enough officers, who had the necessary international experience and, probably the greatest obstacle, who had an adequate knowledge of the English language. In the summer of 1989 events in Namibia were unfolding too quickly for the GDR to train enough police observers.

The GDR contingent in Namibia

The 30 East German police observers were drawn from various regions. Among others there were natives of Rostock, Leipzig, Dresden, Mühlhausen, Berlin, Aschersleben and Karl-Marx-Stadt (today Chemnitz). Twelve of them had been working for the Ministry of Interior (Mdl), 12 others worked for the Ministry of National Defence (MfNV) and five of the officials selected came from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MfAA).⁸⁵ Officially, the Ministry of State Security (MfS) made only one officer available for the mission, but files from the agency "Bundesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik" (BStU, Agency for the Records of the state security Service on the former German Democratic Republic) show that several members of the observer group were connected to the MfS as unofficial agents. Erich Mielke, Minister of State Security, saw personally to "his" ministry's involvement in the UNTAG project.⁸⁶ All communications from the East German UN deputies in New York to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was read by the MfS. Several units of the MfS ran special security checks on each of the 30 men designated for the Namibia group. The screening of the twelve officers from the Ministry of National Defence is particularly well documented. In these dossiers, sometimes totalling several pages, it was noted (without the candidate's knowledge) whether they were part of political mass organisations or members of the SED, what private interests they had, aspects of their family situation and their political attitude.⁸⁷ These documents demonstrate the comprehensive control

⁸² BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/94, report by Siegfried Zachmann from GDR's UN office in New York to the MfAA units OZA, UNO and the Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs Bernhard Neugebauer and Heinz-Dieter Winter, 1 September 1989.

⁸³ BStU, MfS, Abt.X, Nr. 921/230, telegram by S. Zachmann to the MfAA, 7 September 1989.

⁸⁴ BStU, MfS, HA I, Nr. 13985/64, Information zum Stand der Vorbereitung der DDR auf die Teilnahme an der militärischen Komponente friedenserhaltender Operationen der UNO, 12 September 1989.

⁸⁵ It seems surprising that the MfAA only held five positions in the CIVPOL contingent. Mdl and MfAA co-operated on all required agreements, but the state police in the GDR was part of the Mdl, and the mission in Namibia was a mission of police observers. This is the reason why the Mdl had greater responsibility.

⁸⁶ BStU, MfS, Abt.X, Nr. 921/132, letter from Erich Mielke to Oskar Fischer, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 7 September 1989.

⁸⁷ BStU, MfS, HA I, Nr. 13985/01-62.

which the MfS exercised over East German society in general and these individuals in particular.

In general the East German police observers were not members of GDR's state police, the Deutsche Volkspolizei. They were not, in general, trained as such, and often had an academic background, worked at military universities, in media departments, as interpreters, as navy commanders, in scientific institutions or in the administration of the ministries, in most cases in relation to international issues.⁸⁸ In Namibia the East German unit was split into a northern and a southern division, serving CIVPOL/UNTAG in Oshakati, Ombalantu, Ongandjera, Bethanie, Marienthal and Gibeon. For their time in Namibia every police observer received the rank of police officer. Under the high command of the UN it was their task to monitor the work of the South West African Police (SWAPOL), to document violence and other wrongdoings by the SWAPOL, to support the preparations for and conduct of the elections in November 1989, and to implement Resolution 435 in time for the completion of the Namibian independence process. Like all other international members of CIVPOL, the East Germans went on patrol, destroyed weapons or ammunition belonging to the South African Defence Force and sought to win the trust of the population. They visited many public institutions and individual representatives of civil society such as schools, municipalities, farmers or churches. As a general rule, the police observers were unarmed, yet the work for CIVPOL could be dangerous. Between May and November 1989 over 200 politically motivated, violent incidents were registered in Namibia, some involving fatalities. The worst cases included the assassination of the SWAPO politician Anton Lubowski on 12 September 1989, street fights in Windhoek between SWAPO and DTA (Democratic Turnhalle Alliance) on 26 September 1989 and the hand-grenade attack on the UNTAG station at Outjo on 10 August 1989.

German Reunification in Ombalantu

A unique aspect of the GDR's UNTAG/CIVPOL participation is the fact that members of the East and West German contingents served together at one UNTAG station in Ombalantu in the north of Namibia before the fall of the Berlin Wall. At the end of July 1989, the UN asked the FRG to support the CIVPOL in Namibia.⁸⁹ This request is indicative of the difference in the status of the two German states. While the GDR had to push for a more active role in the UN, the international community was waiting for more prominent involvement from the Federal Republic. But a mission in Namibia was a controversial issue for West Germans although the (West) German Parliament had decided on 16 March 1989 that the Federal Republic had a special responsibility to Namibia and all Namibians as a consequence of German-Namibian colonial history.

⁸⁸ SAPMO, DY 30/14448, Unterlagen der Abt. IV zum UNTAG-Einsatz der DDR, Personenliste der geplanten Polizeibeobachter, September-November 1989.

⁸⁹ BStU, MfS, Abt. X, Nr. 921/224–225, letter from S. Zachmann to the MfAA, 28 July 1989.

It was not clear initially whether the German *Bundesgrenzschutz* (Federal Border Police) or the German *Bundeswehr* (Army) should be sent to Namibia. The constitution prohibited the deployment of the army outside of the NATO alliance. For the FRG it was also the first involvement in any sort of military action, UN peace missions included, since World War II. Previously the *Bundeswehr* had only ever supported international disaster or humanitarian relief missions. There were heated discussions in parliament throughout the summer of 1989. For the West German government SWAPO was just one party among many, which meant that the situation was not so clear-cut. The emotional connection many Germans felt to the German minority in Namibia complicated the issue further. Eventually 50 officers of the German Border Police began their CIVPOL mission on 15 September 1989 in Windhoek. Later they served at the stations of Tsandi, Ondangwa, Ohangwena, Ruacana, Okongo, Rundu, Ombalantu and Omega. Cooperation between the German units in Ombalantu was good and normal.⁹⁰ They even organised a German evening together to which they invited their international CIVPOL colleagues. This German-German activity was no longer a diplomatic sensation (even less so under the supervision of the United Nations). It was merely registered in official reports.⁹¹ In Ombalantu all the police observers, whether German or from Pakistan or Singapore, were facing the same basic problems. The distance and the communications between the stations and other parts of their national contingents often made matters difficult. During the Namibian summer high temperatures, the need for water, the lack of adequate accommodation and power blackouts caused problems daily. Under these circumstances it was difficult to get news about the situation in the GDR. Although the Namibian German language newspapers *Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Namibia Nachrichten* reported the opening of the frontier in Berlin, most of the East German CIVPOL observers only became aware of the fall of the Berlin Wall days after the event. This lack of information was one of the reasons for a meeting organised by GDR's diplomatic deputy in Namibia, Hans-Georg Schleicher, with all 30 East German police observers at the Waterberg plateau on 19 January 1990. With Hans-Joachim Gollnick, head of the department for foreign affairs in the Ministry of Interior, he visited the East German contingent at the CIVPOL stations in January 1990. Unfortunately there are no reliable records of GDR CIVPOL activity available for the time after December 1989. The last document is a report by one member of the unit, who was appointed as the official deputy of the SED in the observer group. His notes arrived in East Berlin on 15 December 1989 and were characterised by the typical SED political rhetoric. The author

⁹⁰ This was not true for everything, though. For example Burkhard Hirsch, member of the German *Bundestag* for the Free Democratic Party (FDP), refused demonstratively to take a seat in a Windhoek restaurant when East German deputies sat at the same table. See: Karl-Heinz Hornhues, *Namibia-Episoden: politisch – anekdotisch*, Göttingen, Hess, 2008: 131f.

⁹¹ BStU, MfS, Sekr. Neiber, Nr. 297/8-9, report from Windhoek by Hans-Georg Schleicher, diplomatic deputy of the GDR, to MfAA and ZK department for international relations, 1 November 1989.

points out that “the question of a German reunification is not at hand”. Instead, it should be the aim for the future “to build up a socialism which is even more attractive”.⁹²

The political changes in the GDR led to the departure from Namibia of the East German police observers. Preparations were underway for democratic elections on 18 March 1990 and the observer group came back to a new homeland. They landed at Berlin-Tegel airport on 5 March 1990. The borders of the four allied sectors were, however, still in place in Berlin and French soldiers escorted the 30 men back to East Berlin. Thus the returning observers experienced a democratic process for a second time. But neither public nor media took much notice of the observer group. The daily newspaper *Neues Deutschland* published a short report.⁹³ Nevertheless, Namibia was still an issue in the GDR in the following weeks. After the elections, Oskar Fischer, Minister of Foreign Affairs, was the only official still in office pending the formation of a new government. For want of a more appropriate representative, state secretary Werner Fleck led an official delegation to the Namibian independence celebrations on 21 March 1990. He submitted a letter from the GDR’s Head of the State Council, Manfred Gerlach, to SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma. The newly independent Namibia and the GDR signed an agreement on diplomatic relations on 22 March 1990, the day after the last GDR embassy worldwide was inaugurated in Windhoek.

Conclusion

The GDR had supported the Namibian liberation struggle for a long time, but nevertheless was taken by surprise by the UN’s sudden request for a police unit for UNTAG in the spring of 1989. An operation of these proportions had not been on the East German state’s roadmap. The CIVPOL project exposed the GDR’s inability to contribute meaningfully to international peace missions and as a result plans were made for a separate unit for UN missions to be set up by the end of 1991. It became quite clear that the GDR did not have enough internationally trained, English-speaking police observers. UNTAG had a catalytic effect for the GDR and its UN involvement. Indeed, the whole CIVPOL mission was in doubt for the GDR because, for a long time, diplomatic matters were in the hands of South Africa. However, from their non-relationship beforehand contacts between the two countries began to grow as a result of this mission. Another important aspect of the GDR’s African policies was that for various departments in the administration, the Namibian issue was very relevant in 1989 and certainly played a major role in future plans for southern Africa. A good relationship with Namibia would have been an important asset for future ties with South Africa.

All things considered it only seems astonishing from today’s perspective that at a time when the state was about to collapse the GDR should send 30 police observers to “the

⁹² SAPMO, DY 30/14488/7-9, report by SED deputy Jürgen Möpert to the department of international relations in the ZK and to the MfAA, 29 November 1989, *Zwischeneinschätzung der Parteilarbeit im DDR-Kontingent der UNTAG-Polizei-Beobachter*, arrived in East Berlin on the 15 December 1989.

⁹³ “Herausforderung bestanden”, *Neues Deutschland*, 6 March 1990: 3.

far side of the world". More than 20 years ago there were rational motives. Political co-operation with SWAPO, playing a bigger role in the United Nations and commercial interests were the most important among these. The CIVPOL involvement was only one factor in the GDR's Namibia strategy, but it was an important one and it drove East German hopes for achieving aims in southern Africa. It took on special significance because of the direct co-operation with West German police observers in a former German colony and all this only a few weeks before the Berlin Wall fell. It also became clear that collaboration between the German states under the supervision of the UN was not only possible, but could happen without major political or ideological obstacles. In the end the GDR's involvement was only a side issue in the Namibian independence process and a small part of German history in Africa – all but forgotten in the face of the historic events in Germany in 1989/1990.

Abbreviations

AHB	Außenhandelsbetrieb
BArch	Bundesarchiv (in Berlin-Lichterfelde)
CIVPOL	Civilian Police der UNTAG
MfAA	Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten
MfA	Ministerium für Außenhandel
MfS	Ministerium für Staatssicherheit
MdI	Ministerium des Innern
MfNV	Ministerium für Nationale Verteidigung
OZA	Abteilung Ost- und Zentralafrika des MfAA
PAAA	Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes
PLAN	People's Liberation Army of Namibia
SAPMO	Stiftung zur Aufarbeitung der Partei- und Massenorganisationen (der DDR)
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands
SWA	South West Africa
SWANU	South West African National Union
SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organization
SWAPOL	South West African Police
UN	United Nations
UNTAG	United Nations Transition Assistance Group
VEB	Volkseigener Betrieb
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union
ZK	Zentralkomitee der SED

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