

Interview with
Dr. Alessandro Iandolo



On October 3, 2022 CENFAD welcomed [Dr. Alessandro Iandolo](#), Lecturer in Soviet and Post-Soviet History at University College London, to Philadelphia for a [presentation](#) on his book [Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955-1968 \(Cornell University Press, 2022\)](#). CENFAD's Davis Fellow Ryan Langton met with Dr. Iandolo over Zoom to discuss his book. The complete interview can be viewed [here](#).

RL: Dr. Iandolo, thank you so much for joining me.

AI: Thank you for having me.

RL: What prompted you to investigate the Soviet Union's attempts at international development in West Africa? How did you get introduced to the topic?

AI: That's a good question. I was always interested in the history of political radicalism

and that is what brought me to the Soviet Union as a graduate student in history. I started doing graduate education around 2006-2007 and at that time there was really sort of an explosion in studies that looked at the Cold War, but from the point of view of the states, individuals, groups, and events in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and that got me thinking about Soviet connections with the outside world, specifically with Africa. The way in which the history of the Soviet Union, especially from an economic point of view, is told is usually as a history of failure. It's kind of a basket case of things that go wrong with anything related to the economy. If you think about the way in which, in contemporary treatments – newspapers, TV, radio, the media – people talked about West Africa and Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, it is not different. Usually the stress is very much on this history of economic failure. I wanted to write something that challenged this view. Instead of a history of failure, I wanted to highlight moments of collaboration and cooperation and break down the success/failure binary.

RL: So when you focus, not on these moments of failure, but these moments of cooperation, what did you discover about the Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali? What are the big arguments you are making in your work?

AI: There are two elements there. One is about continuity, and the other one is about change. I am interested in exploring the Soviet vision of economic development and how and why Soviet people and institutions worked together with individuals and institutions in West Africa to build economic development. The first is about continuity between socialist, specifically

Soviet, approaches to economic management, the economy, and economic ideas, and non-socialist approaches. What I argue in the book is that the projects that the Soviet government, the Ghanaian, Guinean, and Malian governments worked on together did not aim at building something that resembled communism in a classic sense. They had a lot to do with a mixed economy in which market and state would survive together, would operate together, very much dominated by public investment and state control, but with very strong elements of market structures and incentives operating in these economies.

There was also change regarding how distinctive this approach was. However, comparable and to a certain extent similar to things that other states, other people, and other institutions attempted at the same time, before, and after, the approach was also distinctively Soviet and socialist in every aspect of economic management and their attempts to build economic development. The stress was always on public ownership, collective organization, and socialist principles in organization and the final outcome. What I am trying to do is put the Soviet Union in the center of the history of economic development, and more in general economic globalization, in the second half of the twentieth century. [The Soviet Union] was a very important actor that pioneered certain approaches that collaborated with a number of governments, people, and individuals all over the world and shaped to a very large extent the history of this specific state-driven way of doing development.

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RL: This concept of development is a central focus of your book. Could you talk more about how the visions or expectations of development differed between officials in the USSR and the three West African nations?

Al: That's another excellent question. Development is an incredibly problematic word to use and critically problematic category to think historically with. What I do in the book,

and in my research more in general, is that I try to stick to the way in which actors from my time period and from the places I study defined it and understood what development was. Something people in the Soviet Union and in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali certainly had in common was a very material understanding of development. They were primarily but not uniquely concerned with what we would call economic growth - building new infrastructure, modernizing and mechanizing agriculture to boost production, and building some sort of industry to

start industrialization in each country. Those were the three pillars that they were interested in, all things that you can touch or were tangible. They were also worried about a number of intangibles or conceptual aspects but the first priority was a very material, concrete understanding of development.

They also had a lot of things they did not have in common. What to do in practice could be very complicated and contested on the side of the Soviet leadership among the officials, the technicians, the engineers, and the economists who worked on an everyday basis with

colleagues in West Africa. The visions from Ghana, Guinea, and Mali tended to be more ambitious. They wanted to realize important, significant projects in all fields and they believed it could be done. People on the Soviet side, despite official rhetoric, remained fundamentally skeptical or conservative about what could be done in practice in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, in West Africa in general, and in what today we would call the Global South. They were not fully convinced by the projects and programs they were working on. Obviously that proved to be a problem.

RL: In your book, you make the point that these development projects need to be understood as holistic phenomena. It is not enough to focus on the construction of a particular road or a particular dam, you need to understand how these projects were fueled by ambitious national and international designs with particular organizing principles, which were then implemented in very particular circumstances. What kinds of historical actors are you focusing on when you take this holistic approach?

AI: One of the challenges I encountered doing research was that a sensible approach would have been to focus on a few case studies, to use a term from social sciences, to analyze bigger trends and ideas, but I found that very difficult because everything fed into each other. The construction of the road was related to the working of the factory, which needed the training of a specialist at a school or a technical institute, which fed back into different levels of

government. I realized that this was a challenge not just for me as the researcher in the archive and libraries but also for the people at the time who were involved in these projects. This was a source of difficulty at all levels from the presidents and prime ministers to the people physically involved in building sites. They all had to deal with the intricacy and interconnectedness of this incredibly ambitious project of boosting economic growth. We

sometimes talk about [development] in easy terms, but – when you deconstruct it – it is incredibly complicated. That is why I decided to try and follow them all as much as possible in order to try to show how these connections and misconnections often happened, and how they shaped the evolution of this relationship. How to research with this methodology also has its many challenges. There were many agencies, institutions, actors, and individuals involved, and I have tried to look into, ideally, all of them. On the Soviet side, you have a number of state agencies

involved in these projects. Some had a more political direction, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or higher levels of the government in the USSR. [Others] had a more technical approach – how to build something in practice, how to assign a blueprint, what kind of materials are going to be needed, and so on and so forth. By and large, this was done by an agency called GKES – the State Committee for Foreign Economic Contacts or Foreign Economic Relations. Each of these bodies has documentation and archival records with a lot of documents that one at least used to be able to look into.

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The same is true on the West African side. I tried to look into the top level of government – presidents, prime ministers, their cabinets, their governments – and also the more technical organizations which usually tended to mean ministries – the ministry of economic development, ministry of the economy, ministry of infrastructure, ministry of economic planning, so on and so forth. They all produced many records. Not all the records in what was the Soviet Union, in West Africa, or in other parts of the world have survived or not all of them are, unfortunately, accessible, but I had a little bit of an advantage. By not focusing too much on specific projects that would have been a little bit difficult to follow the details I was able to access more than enough material.

RL: How might this history of Soviet economic development in West Africa be relevant to current discussion about development today or current events today?

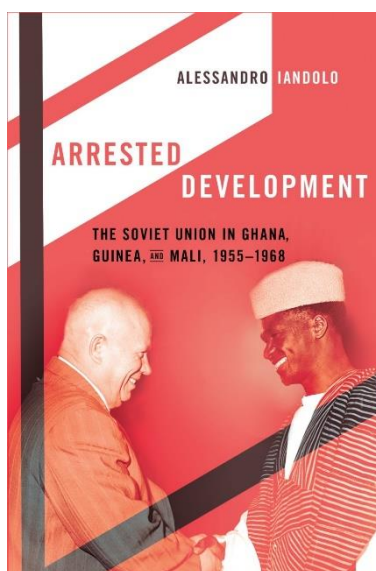
AI: That is a tricky question for me to answer. My research agenda as a historian is to put the Soviet Union on the map of the history of development, and I think it should occupy a prominent place on that map. I talk about the USSR abroad, Soviet interactions with the economies of other countries, not so much about the Soviet Union at home and the management of its own economy. In that field, it was both the forerunner in some cases and also part of a much longer tradition of state-driven state development that stretches all the way back to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It is really a very long history of state driven economic development...and the Soviet Union is very important for anything that has to do with state-driven approaches to economic management and economic growth. That is relatively easy to conceptually argue.

As for the question of today and relevance for the world which we live in, I should say that is not necessarily a primary aim in my research. I am a historian and I am very comfortable with the past. I am interested in the present but I don't necessarily make claims that I have insight or ideas to make the present better. What I would say is that conversations between people and in some cases institutions who support market-driven approaches to economic growth and people and institutions that instead support or believe in a more state-driven approach continues to this day in post-Soviet spaces, West Africa, and other parts of Africa, Europe, and the United States – it is almost universal. The book says that the state matters and should be taken seriously when thinking about the economy, economic growth, and development.

RL: Do you have any plans or ideas for your next project?

AI: Yes, I have moved onto a second project. It has been difficult for reasons that I think

everyone will be familiar with. I'm very interested in the intellectual legacy of Soviet engagement with societies, people, and economies outside of its orbit in the global South. After thinking about that and reading Soviet publications, documents, and debates, I started thinking many of the ideas they discussed reminded me of what dependency theorists were talking, arguing, and debating about in the 1960s and 1970s all the way up to the 1980s and 1990s and so on. I am especially thinking about the early generation of people interested in dependency theory, mostly from Latin America. They were economists by training that came from different parts of Latin America and tended to work for the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, a UN agency, and later on for UNCTAD, another UN agency – the United



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Nations Conference for Trade and Development. They were set up with the task of studying and ideally improving trade and development on a global scale.

What I have been doing is looking at the interaction between economists in the USSR, their ideas, their approach to the global economy, and approaches that came instead from Latin America. I am trying to think about connections, misconnections, mutual understanding, misunderstandings, and mutual influences, if you will. The project focuses on a couple of these agencies, how they operated, and the contribution that came from each side, [the Soviet Union and Latin America]. It is also more of a history of ideas. I would call it an intellectual history, focusing on a few key individuals in Brazil, in Argentina, and in the Soviet Union. The basic question is why wasn't there more sharing among these countries? Why did they not manage in a way to create a shared intellectual space in which to discuss global economic issues using a mutually understandable language?

RL: Thank you again Dr. Iandolo for joining me and thanks for your time.

AI: Thank you very much!