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Alessandro Iandolo. *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955–1968*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022. 310 pp. ISBN 9781501764431.

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Alessandro Iandolo's debut book, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955–1968*, is a landmark study that provides a fresh and in-depth exploration of Soviet development aid in three key West African countries during their postcolonial transition. This work sheds light on a crucial but understudied aspect of Cold War history.

The focus on Ghana, Guinea, and Mali is intentional. These newly independent states, emerging from decades of colonial rule, were “ideal candidates” for Soviet assistance. As Iandolo notes, “they emerged from decades of colonial domination” eager to assert themselves as modern economies and international actors (p. 9). Their relatively small populations and early decolonization—Ghana in 1957, followed by Guinea in 1958 and Mali in 1960—made them visible testing grounds for Soviet-style development. The Soviets hoped that successful aid projects in these countries could inspire other “Third World” states to follow suit, creating a more favorable global environment for socialism and expanding opportunities for Soviet influence (p. 9).

At the heart of Iandolo's analysis is the Soviet vision of development, which encompassed far more than financial aid. The USSR's approach prioritized the establishment of a strong state sector as the engine of modernization, in contrast to Western capitalism's market-driven model. The Soviets were not attempting to impose Soviet communism on these countries; instead, they sought to promote a socialist form of development, believing that state-led industrialization and economic growth would bring long-term prosperity and stability. As Iandolo argues, both the Soviet Union and the leaders of Ghana, Guinea, and Mali “equated development with economic growth” and saw the state as the key driver of this process (p. 3). This shared vision shaped the political, economic, and diplomatic relationships that Iandolo meticulously documents throughout the book.

The timing of Soviet involvement in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali was also significant. It coincided with rapid economic growth and technological advancements in the USSR, as well as Nikita Khrushchev's growing interest in the postcolonial world. Iandolo skillfully demonstrates how, despite an initial period of optimism, the Soviet Union's development efforts in these three countries quickly faltered. By the late 1960s, many of the ambitious projects had failed, and Soviet influence in the region had waned.

Iandolo's work has earned him well-deserved recognition, including the W. Bruce Lincoln Prize for the best first monograph in Russian history and the Marshall D. Shulman Prize for the best work on Soviet international relations, both awarded by

the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. These accolades reflect the book's scholarly rigor, broad scope, and deep contribution to both Cold War studies and postcolonial African history.

Iandolo moves beyond the typical East/West dichotomy of Cold War historiography, situating his analysis within a broader understanding of international relations during the postcolonial era. His research is impressive, drawing on a wide range of linguistic and archival sources from Russia, Ghana, Mali, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, as well as private collections. This wealth of primary materials allows him to construct a richly detailed and multifaceted account of the Soviet Union's interactions with these newly independent West African states.

In the introduction to the book, Iandolo clearly sets out his central theme: the Soviet Union's vision of development and its efforts to realize this vision in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali. He emphasizes that these countries were not passive recipients of aid but active participants in shaping their own paths to development, pursuing ambitious foreign policies that aligned with their domestic goals (p. 10). Iandolo's focus on the Soviet Union's role is justified, he argues, by the extensive existing literature on the internal politics and economics of West Africa, particularly in Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah (e.g., by Nana Osei-Opare) and Mali (e.g., by Ophélie Rillon). Guinea, by contrast, has been less studied, largely due to limited access to archival materials, as noted by scholars like Elizabeth Schmidt. Iandolo's book fills an important gap by focusing on the Soviet role in these countries, contributing to a growing but still incomplete body of research on Soviet-African relations during the Cold War concerning the history of political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural interconnections between the African states and the Soviet Union.

The first two chapters provide an accessible overview of the Soviet Union's economic history and its growing interest in Africa during the Cold War. Chapter 1 outlines the historical context of the Soviet economy, with a particular focus on Nikita Khrushchev's biography and his aspirations for the postcolonial world (p. 26). Chapter 2 explores how, at the start of Khrushchev's leadership, the USSR had little presence on the African continent, but how this changed through a series of development initiatives in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali (pp. 50, 52).

One of the book's most interesting aspects is Iandolo's attention to figures beyond Nikita Khrushchev. While the Soviet first secretary's role in shaping policy toward the African continent is central, the author also highlights the contributions of lesser-known Soviet researchers and specialists who played key roles in implementing development projects. These "second-tier" figures, often working on the ground in West Africa, faced numerous challenges, from language barriers to cultural misunderstandings (p. 58). Their experiences, which Iandolo skillfully brings to life, offer valuable insights into the practical difficulties of Soviet aid efforts. For instance, Soviet women had a limited role in these efforts, a notable gap in both the historical record and Iandolo's own study, which he acknowledges (p. 17).

Chapter 3 provides a detailed examination of Soviet relations with each of the three West African countries. Iandolo traces the progression of Soviet involvement in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali in parallel with their decolonization, noting that despite

their different colonial legacies—Ghana was a former British colony, while Guinea and Mali had been under French rule—all three initially showed little interest in Soviet aid. However, the slow response of Western countries and the appeal of Soviet assistance as a means of rapid modernization eventually drew these nations into closer partnerships with the USSR. The leaders of Ghana, Guinea, and Mali—Kwame Nkrumah, Ahmed Sékou Touré, and Modibo Keita—were ideologically aligned with the Soviet emphasis on state-led development and economic growth (p. 91).

In chapter 4 the author offers a comparative analysis of Soviet support for Ghana, Guinea, and Mali from 1960, the year Mali, the last of the three countries, was decolonized, onward (p. 93). This analysis focuses on the establishment of formal Soviet relations, including treaties and trade agreements. The USSR provided household appliances and technological equipment in exchange for coffee and fruits from Ghana and Guinea, respectively, and peanuts from Mali (p. 112). However, trade was often hampered by inadequate infrastructure, and large-scale projects, such as the construction of dams and ports, frequently exceeded the financial and logistical capacity of these countries (p. 129). As Iandolo succinctly puts it, “the shared vision between the Soviet government and its partners in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali appeared unshakeable. This honeymoon, alas, was not to last forever” (p. 145).

Iandolo skillfully situates Soviet–West African relations within the broader Cold War context, noting the influence and reactions of former colonial powers like Britain and France, as well as the capitalist United States. This wider perspective enriches the analysis, highlighting the complex international dynamics that shaped Soviet–West African relations during this period.

In the final chapters Iandolo illustrates how the initial optimism and shared visions of the Soviet Union and its West African partners gradually unraveled. The Soviet development projects faced numerous obstacles, from flawed estimates to logistical challenges and political disagreements. By the late 1960s, Soviet support for these projects had diminished, and relations with Ghana, Guinea, and Mali had begun to deteriorate. As Iandolo summarizes, “the complexity of development in West Africa was too much for the Soviet Union. At multiple stages along the way, things went wrong. Estimates proved inaccurate, costs too high, exchanges too complicated, the soil too treacherous, and the people too quarrelsome” (p. 222). Even though the Soviets had attempted to pursue development based on socialist ideas rather than a strict replication of Soviet communism, the results were often disappointing (p. 3).

Despite the many setbacks, Iandolo argues, Soviet engagement in the West African countries of Ghana, Guinea, and Mali remains a significant episode in Cold War history, offering important lessons about the challenges of development aid and the limits of ideological influence. His book is a valuable contribution to the study of Soviet foreign policy and development, showing that it is not only the success stories but also the failures that need to be examined to fully understand this period.

One of the strengths of Iandolo’s work is his ability to present complex issues in a clear and engaging manner. However, one notable omission is the limited discussion of how World War II shaped the Soviet Union’s role in the early Cold War (p. 27). This could have provided additional context. Nevertheless, Iandolo’s focus on the

specifics of Soviet–West African relations allows him to provide a detailed and insightful account that will appeal to scholars of Eastern European, African, and global history, as well as a broader audience interested in Cold War dynamics.

Overall, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955–1968* is a skillful work that balances scholarly depth with accessibility. The author offers a richly detailed account of the Soviet Union’s development efforts in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, shedding new light on a complex and often overlooked aspect of Cold War history. This book is a significant contribution to the fields of Soviet studies, Cold War history, and postcolonial African studies, and it provides a foundation for future research in the broader context of international relations and development policy.