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KHRUSCHEV'S "SPUTNIK DIPLOMACY" IN WEST AFRICA (1957-1964)

Abstract

On October 4th, 1957, the Soviet Union launched the world's first artificial satellite, "Sputnik-1", prompting Chairman Mao Zedong of China to declare that "the East Wind is prevailing over the West Wind" in the context of the cold war, whereby he saw the Soviet priority in space as proving the superiority of the Socialist model "in the most important field of science and technology". Sputnik-1 had shocked not only the West, but also the nascent independent countries in Africa and Asia, many of whom started to consider the Soviet Union as the superior power in the cold war battle for allegiances in the non-aligned world. Soon, the Soviet Union's Premier Nikita Khrushchev realized that Sputnik-1 and the subsequent performances of the Soviet Union in the conquest of space were ideal instruments of soft power for attracting the third world countries in the Soviet geopolitical orbit. Therefore, he embarked on a campaign of "Sputnik Diplomacy", a propaganda drive whereby he displayed Soviet space technology to visiting Third World dignitaries, gifted them models of Soviet spacecraft, and later sent Soviet cosmonauts touring the Earth on "orbits of friendship" as goodwill ambassadors of the Soviet political model. This paper will summarize Khrushchev's "Sputnik Diplomacy" endeavours in regard to West Africa, an area of interest to the superpowers during the Cold War, from the beginning of the Space Race in 1957 to Khrushchev's ousting in 1964. It will recount the encounters with Soviet space technology in Moscow of both Ghana's leader Kwame Nkrumah and Mali's Modibo Keita, the subsequent visits of Soviet cosmonauts Yuri Gagarin and Valentina Tereshkova in the area of West Africa, and the impact the efforts of using space technology as a soft power tool had in cementing the approach between the Soviet Union and the designed countries.