1 The Heritage of Russian Involvement in South Africa: The Anglo-Boer War

It is pleasing for me to know that the ultimate means of deciding the course of the war in South Africa lies entirely in my hands. (Czar Nicholas II, 1899)

The war in South Africa is a proof of the insignificance of the power of money when pitted against moral force. (Leo Tolstoy, 1900)

The Russian people have had an historic interest in South Africa . . . from the time of the Anglo-Boer War. (Pavel S. Atroshenko, Soviet Consul-General in Pretoria, 1948)

Soviet foreign policy has historical roots in southern Africa dating back to the initial Russian involvement in the Anglo-Boer War (1889–1902). In several respects Soviet activities in this part of the continent represent a continuation of those undertaken during the Czarist period. In order better to understand the nature of Soviet involvement in South Africa it is worth examining the heritage of Russian activity in the region. Although Russia before the Revolution did not have much interest or influence in South Africa, nevertheless, Russian statesmen sought to exploit the Transvaal war to their advantage. As Russia had no colonies of her own in Africa, the primary objective of her diplomacy in South Africa was the prevention of British colonial expansion, or what Wilson has termed 'the contest of preventive imperialism'.1 Russian leaders endeavoured to
subvert British supremacy by providing moral and military assistance to the Boers, challenging British positions in India, and by pursuing diplomatically a European coalition to confront British aggression in South Africa.

It is important to note, however, that the Anglo-Boer War was not the occasion of the first Russian foray into Africa. Indeed, Czarist interest in sub-Saharan Africa was not confined to South Africa. Early Russian activity on the continent has been traced from the initial religious mission to Ethiopia in the 1700s, through attempts made by Czar Alexander III to establish colonies on the Red Sea. The Czarist concern for north-eastern Africa at the end of the nineteenth century was motivated by Russia's desire to disseminate Orthodox Christianity, challenge the British, and to secure, through Egypt, access to the Red Sea. Although Russia had no lasting presence on the African continent, it did play a modest role in the imperial struggle for African territory spanning the turn of the century. Having failed to establish colonies of her own, Russia sought to deny others what she herself could not have.

Most of Europe, including Russia, was united against Great Britain on the issue of the South African war. Britain's European rivals, while careful not openly to oppose British imperial policies, attempted to exploit the conflict with varying degrees of commitment. Germany, France, Russia and the Netherlands all provided aid and comfort to the Boers. Germany was the chief benefactor of military equipment and personnel while the Netherlands provided the majority of medical relief and ambulance units to South Africa. France, which had recently reached an agreement with Britain concerning their respective spheres of influence in Africa, was unwilling to interfere overtly in a region claimed by the British. French assistance was thus limited to sending a few military specialists to fight with the Boer commandos. Imperial Russia dispatched military and medical personnel along with supplies to South Africa. In addition, Russian statesmen advocated the formation of a diplomatic coalition of European states to protest against British imperial policies in South Africa. The Germans, French and Dutch, due either to vital interests in Africa or historical ties to the Boers, were all cautious adversaries of Britain in the South African conflict. The reasons for Russian involvement are more difficult to cite. As previously mentioned, Russia had no colonial presence in Africa and could not claim any particular cultural or historical affinity with the Boers. Hence, the primary motivation for Russian activity in the Transvaal war can best