

# **Probing the Limits of Internationalism: African Students Confront Soviet Ritual<sup>1</sup>**

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As this article is being revised for final submission to the editor a small cohort of human rights organizations in Russia are preparing to stage a “March Against Hatred” in St. Petersburg.<sup>2</sup> The event organizers hope to attract public attention to the scourge of racial bigotry and xenophobia afflicting post-Soviet Russia, an epidemic of hatred that has left in its wake dozens of innocent victims – from African students, subjected to physical assaults and harassment in the streets of Russian cities, to Russia’s own ethnic minorities, openly abused and publicly humiliated, to murdered human rights activists and scholars. A recent study conducted among Africans residing in Moscow has revealed the staggering dimensions of the problem: almost sixty percent of those polled had experienced racially-motivated violence.<sup>3</sup> Neither the Russian government nor the general public seem to be prepared to so much as acknowledge this unfolding crisis of race relations in a country that in a not-so-distant past used to stake its international reputation on a vociferous campaign against racism. It is reasonable to expect that the march in St. Petersburg, planned by such groups as the African Union of Russia and a veteran human rights organization Memorial, will attract scant media attention inside Russia. If previous protests of this kind are any indication the turnout for the march will be pitifully low and its participants and their message are likely to be met with indifference, if not mockery, from the passers-by. After decades of antiracist and anti-imperialist propaganda during the Soviet rule, post-socialist Russia and its citizens exhibit little taste for internationalist and egalitarian causes. The purpose of this article is to contextualize the rise of racial intolerance in post-Soviet Russia by examining some of its historical and cultural roots. I argue that the ideas of race and racial difference entertained by many modern-day Russians were formed to a large extent through their encounters with and official and popular representations of Africans residing in the Soviet Union, most of them young men who, from 1957 onwards, traveled to the USSR to pursue affordable higher education. Their presence amidst the Soviet society and their interaction with both the Soviet system and Soviet citizens would make a profound impact on the common perceptions of racial difference still resonating across the former Soviet spaces.

## **The Khrushchevian “thaw” and the 1957 Youth Festival**

Following Nikita Khrushchev’s ascent to power in the post-Stalin Soviet Union, at first just a few and eventually hundreds and even thousands of young Africans began to take advantage of generous educational scholarships extended to them by the Soviet government. The arrangement, much trumpeted by Soviet media and its foreign mouthpieces, was essentially a

pragmatic one. The Soviet Union sought to attract African students as a way of enhancing its standing and popularity in the Third World at a time when many third world nations were undergoing the rapid process of decolonization. Africans hungered for access to free education and, as one former African student in the USSR put it, were prepared to receive it “even under the ocean.”<sup>4</sup>

African students traveling and residing in the Soviet Union of the 1960s-1980s found themselves in a country that bore little resemblance to the Soviet Russia of its heady post-revolutionary days. Much of the early revolutionary fervor had been spent and, under Stalin’s reign of terror, the Soviet Union acquired some unmistakable characteristics of conservative statism; i.e., the pragmatic interests of the Soviet state, and not necessarily communist ideology, informed its international behavior. There was no let up in Soviet antiracist and anticolonial propaganda, but it had grown ossified and streamlined to represent the official Soviet line in an ongoing cold war bickering with the West; and thus not necessarily reflecting the popular mood in the country. In a similar vein, the Soviets continued to pay lip service to the ideals of multiethnic coexistence and ethnic and racial equality that had so impressed the pre-war black “pilgrims;” yet the war experience had deepened Russian nationalism and made Soviet officialdom ever more apprehensive of ethnic particularisms (Estonian, Ukrainian, Chechen, Jewish, etc.), a trend that would extend into the post-Stalin period.<sup>5</sup> It is no coincidence that during the last ten years of his life Stalin launched a series of ethnic purges (some of them genocidal in nature) against such Soviet minority groups as the Chechens, the Ingush, the Crimean Tartars, and eventually the Jews. The internationalist ideals of the 1920s increasingly lost their luster as Stalin turned his ire against “rootless cosmopolites,” many of them bearing distinctly Jewish surnames.<sup>6</sup> Stalin’s last years were marked by intense official chauvinism and xenophobia and, as a result, the country’s deepening isolation from the outside world. The tyrant’s death in 1953, followed by the rise of Nikita Khrushchev and his subsequent denunciation of Stalinism at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1956 softened the rigidity of Soviet society. In the aftermath of Khrushchev’s revelations the country entered a relatively short period of the so-called “thaw,” which, in contrast with the years of Stalinism, was a time of cultural and political awakening and relative openness.<sup>7</sup> It was under these transformed circumstances that Soviet citizens were treated to a remarkable spectacle – the appearance amidst Moscow’s drabness of a colorful cast of exotic characters, the international delegates of the 1957 Youth Festival.

The young Muscovites were euphoric. Almost fifty years later, Apollon Davidson, the doyen of Soviet African Studies, still remembered the cultural and emotional shock of the festival. Davidson, like other Soviet students of Africa, had never been to the continent and had limited contact with foreigners. And now, over 30,000 foreign youngsters had poured into Moscow and for the first time in decades Soviet citizens found themselves face-to-face with the representatives of the world ordinarily closed to them.<sup>8</sup> For Davidson and his friends the experience of this new openness was nothing short of “surreal, fantastic.”<sup>9</sup> By many accounts, African delegates enjoyed wide (and wild) popularity during the festival. The hotel reserved for

African delegations quickly turned into a vibrant social spot, “the liveliest place” in town, with Soviet youngsters (especially girls) crowding its entrance in hope of getting acquainted with the exotic newcomers.<sup>10</sup> Urban folklore circulated the wild tales of Russian girls throwing themselves at the exotic looking delegates. The rumors, undoubtedly greatly exaggerated, cast the festival as a veritable extravaganza of interracial love. Yet the gathering did excite Soviet citizens, unaccustomed to such close, not to mention intimate, contacts with foreigners, pushing the most adventurous towards behaviors both risky and risqué. One of festival’s unintended consequences was the appearance of a generation of bi-racial “festival kids,” whose presence amidst the Soviet populace would serve as a continuous reminder of that 1957 summer of love in Moscow.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, love was very much in the air. “Africa is shaped like a heart,” serenaded poet Evgenii Dolmatovsky, another contemporary and observer of the festival.<sup>12</sup>

Soviet authorities had planned the festival to showcase Soviet values but the event overwhelmed them and produced some long-lasting and quite surprising ramifications. In August of 1957 millions of Soviet citizens received their first exposure to the lifestyles, mannerisms, aesthetics, cultural expressions, and political debates that contrasted most sharply with the Soviet everyday.<sup>13</sup> The effects of the festival would linger on for decades; it provided an opening through which Western ideas and art forms began to seep into the Soviet society.<sup>14</sup> Africans, so visible during the festival, would soon begin to arrive in the country in large numbers. They came to study but, in an ironic role reversal, they ended up educating the Soviets; they introduced the population steeped in parochialism to modern aesthetics, new art forms, and the liberation political discourse.

### **Institutional initiatives and the arrival of African students**

The 1957 Youth Festival also rejuvenated the study of Africa in the USSR. After the grim decades of Stalinist isolationism the Soviet Union now looked for friends in the developing world where the nations emerging from colonial dependency seemed perfect candidates for just such a friendship. This was the point emphasized by W.E.B. Du Bois during his 1958 conversation with Nikita Khrushchev, when Du Bois argued for the creation within the Soviet Academy of Sciences of “an institute for the study of Pan-African history, sociology, ethnography, anthropology and all cognate studies.”<sup>15</sup> Du Bois’ argument must have convinced the ebullient Khrushchev; in July 1959, the Communist Party’s Central Committee adopted a special resolution provisioning for the creation of a research institute of African studies (later to be known as the Africa Institute).<sup>16</sup> And less than a year later another party resolution of 5 February 1960 stipulated the founding of a new university to train “the national cadres for the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.” Friendship University, also known as Lumumba University, would emerge as the flagship institution of higher learning, catering to the needs of third world students and thus to the needs of Soviet foreign policy.<sup>17</sup>

As these institutional initiatives were being finalized African students began to trickle into the USSR. As of January 1, 1959, there were only seven students from sub-Saharan Africa

officially enrolled in Soviet institutions of higher learning.<sup>18</sup> However, between 1960 and 1961 the number of African students in the USSR increased almost ten-fold, from 72 to over 500, eventually reaching some 5,000 by the end of the decade.<sup>19</sup> By 1990, on the eve of Soviet collapse, the number of Africans in the country would rise to 30,000 or about 24% of the total body of foreign students.<sup>20</sup> Their entrance into the Soviet society proceeded under circumstances vastly different from those that had accompanied the arrival of the black pilgrims of the 1920s-1930s.<sup>21</sup> They saw in the Soviet Union less of a “promised land” of racial equality and more of an educational opportunity of choice. Few of these students were committed Marxists. In fact, there is some evidence that even those of them who arrived with the backing of foreign Communist parties or their front organizations often lacked the appropriate ideological credentials or at least failed to put them to good use once in the USSR.<sup>22</sup> As a result and in stark contrast to the black travelers of the pre-war decades, African students of the 1960s and 1970s were less inclined to give the Soviets “the benefit of the doubt.” Where the African-Americans of the 1920s-1930s, on a tour away from Jim Crow America, put much faith in Soviet rhetoric and rationalized the many Soviet deficiencies as a necessary corollary to the “newness” of the socialist experiment, the new arrivals proved to be far less sanguine about the Soviets. Many of them also arrived from places steeped in political activism, charged with the energy released by the process of decolonization. They brought into the midst of Soviet society the very revolutionary fervor and liberation ethos that had marked Soviet Russia’s entry into the world some forty years earlier.

### **African students challenge and subvert Soviet ritual**

Accounts by African students in the late-Soviet Union are replete with complaints about drab lifestyles, everyday regimentation, substandard dorm accommodation, spying (real or imagined) by Soviet fellow students, etc.<sup>23</sup> Upon his arrival in Moscow in 1959, an East African student Everest Mulekezi was quick to discover that he had to share his 14' by 16' dorm room with three other students, two of whom were “hand-picked” Russians. His hopes for a hot bath after a long and arduous journey were also dashed – hot water was only available once a week, on Wednesdays from five to eleven o’clock in the evening.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the prevailing climate of complacency and the general timidity of their Soviet peers, Africans protested vociferously against poor living conditions, racist incidents, restrictions on travel within the USSR, restrictions on dating Russian girls, and restrictions on forming national and ethnic student associations. As early as March 1960, African students in Moscow petitioned the Soviet government to curb the expressions of crude racism by Soviet citizens.<sup>25</sup> On another occasion, two African students refused to be part of a long established Soviet practice – an annual dispatch of thousands of Soviet students to work in the countryside during the harvest. The objectors from Chad and Morocco argued (unconvincingly and probably mockingly) that in their cultures men under 25 years old were not allowed to work in the fields but rather had a special obligation “to engage in leisure activities.”<sup>26</sup> At about the same time four African

students (Theophilus Okonkwo of Nigeria, Andrew Richard Amar and Stanley Omar Okullo of Uganda, and Michel Ayieh of Togo) were expelled from Moscow State University for defying an administrative ban on the Black African Students' Union. Their expulsion and subsequent departure from the country received wide coverage in the Western press. The students publicly accused university officials of suppressing the union as well as of imposing severe restrictions on the circulation of "books and jazz records." Okonkwo, Amar, and Ayieh challenged the Soviet authorities in a biting "open letter:"

For the Soviet leaders to pose before the world as champions of oppressed Africa while they oppress millions in their own country and their satellites is hypocrisy at its worst.<sup>27</sup>

The death of a Ghanaian student in Moscow, in December 1963, which his friends suspected to have been a homicide, occasioned an exceptionally angry reaction among African students in the USSR.<sup>28</sup> They staged a protest march on the Kremlin demanding a "Bill of Rights" for African students in the country (the first unauthorized demonstration in the Soviet Union since the fall of Trotsky in 1927 (!)).<sup>29</sup> The press was also raging back home: "...Why did our students... protest in Moscow recently?" exclaimed a particularly incensed African observer. "Was it not because... our boys had been insulted and attacked on trams, on the streets, in restaurants, in most public places? Could it be that our students have grown tired of the hypocrisy of Communism and the Soviet system?"<sup>30</sup> More trouble brewed in 1964 and 1965, with African students in the USSR frequently reporting racist attacks, fights with Soviet youngsters, and even feeling compelled to "carry knives for protection."<sup>31</sup> Komsomol officials at Moscow State University (MGU) grudgingly acknowledged several instances of scandalous behavior exhibited by Soviet students but also argued that Africans and other foreigners at MGU had a limited understanding of the selfless and romantic nature of Soviet young men, many of whom preferred the hardship of toil in remote Siberia to the pleasures of Moscow high life. One wonders if it was the "romantic nature of Soviet young men" that fueled the passions of one youthful geography major who threatened to "lynch" an African student married to his Russian fellow student. Or was it a disagreement over their respective work ethics that led another MGU freshman to call upon his African roommate to "pack up his stuff and go back to Mali"?<sup>32</sup>

In May 1965, the Soviet authorities tacitly linked the African student community in the country with the idea of political subversion when they expelled a black American diplomat, Norris D. Garnett, for "conducting anti-Soviet work among students from African countries."<sup>33</sup> Garnett's departure from the scene hardly had the desired long-term effect. Just a few years later, 800 African students went on a week-long strike, this time - in Kiev, in protest against the expulsion of a 23-year-old Czechoslovakian woman for marrying a Nigerian fellow-student. That same year a Nigerian student sleeping in his dorm room in the city of Lvov (L'viv) was attacked by "a drunken Russian with a chisel." The attacker was reportedly incensed by the Nigerian's successes with Russian and Ukrainian girls. The incident quickly turned into a major fight

involving other Nigerian students who had come to the rescue of their compatriot, and as a result three of them were expelled “for attacking and beating up a Soviet citizen.”<sup>34</sup>

Discrimination or alleged discrimination aside, the students’ resentment, it was noted, stemmed from “the sole fact of their living in a communist country.”<sup>35</sup> Once in the Soviet Union, Africans, “even self-proclaimed leftists,” had to reconcile “the obvious discrepancies between what is said and what actually exists.” And what “actually existed” in the Moscow of 1960s and 1970s were “the crowded living conditions, lack of privacy, monotonous diet, inadequate sanitary facilities, and the overall drabness of life.”<sup>36</sup> A former African student at Moscow State University, writing about his experiences there, maintained that of all foreign students in the Soviet Union, Africans were most upset by Russia’s depressed style of living:

No cars, no cafés, no good clothes or good food, nothing to buy or inspect in the stores, no splash of color to relieve Moscow’s damp gray. Nothing but shortages and restrictions. No opportunity to let go normally, breathe easily, and enjoy some harmless student fun. Not a trace of the *civilized pleasures of Paris – or even Dakar.*<sup>37</sup>

By expressing their displeasure with the Soviet status quo (something that few of their Soviet peers dared to do) and by challenging it through their “foreign” lifestyles and cosmopolitan aesthetics some African students became the *de facto* conduits of dissent. They had more freedom of expression and travel (and quite often more money) than their hosts and many of them arrived from postcolonial settings reverberating with spirited political debates.<sup>38</sup> Everest Mulekezi remembered intense political discussions he used to hold in his dorm room with some of his Russian friends who were absolutely flabbergasted by the openness and nonchalance with which Everest and his fellow Africans discussed politically sensitive matters. From a Soviet perspective, Everest, by encouraging his Russian friends to question authority and read the Western press, clearly acted as an agent of political subversion. By introducing them to jazz he effectively subverted Soviet cultural values. It was in the course of one such “sedition session” that a Russian friend of Mulekezi’s “buried his face in his hands” and conceded the truth of the African’s argument: “It is true we’re not free... I am not free to read what Westerners read. I am not free to visit the West or even travel in my own country without a permit.”<sup>39</sup> African students in Moscow articulate ideas manifestly out-of-sync with Soviet sensibilities in the pages of *Russian Journal*, Andrea Lee’s perceptive memoir of her time in Russia. Lee records, for example, an intense conversation she had in a smoke-filled Moscow kitchen with a stern-looking Eritrean student: “In my five years in Russia, I’ve come to hate everything about the Soviet system. Life here is a misery of repression – you yourselves know it... The Soviet Union has educated me, though not in a way it intended.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Performing foreignness, performing blackness, performing freedom**

It is not that every African student in the USSR embarked on a collision course with the Soviet system. Yet being an African in the Soviet Union also meant that one performed “foreignness” on a day-to-day basis. Being black additionally implied an almost automatic association with a number of political and cultural modern phenomena that taxed Soviet sensibilities. I am specifically referring here to: **a)** anti-racist and anti-colonial movements with their strong liberation (and often implicitly religious) message; and **b)** cultural production associated with black roots and containing an unmistakable anti-authoritarian message. The liberal wing of Soviet intelligentsia sometimes embraced the officially sanctioned liberation “causes” for reasons that had little to do with Soviet foreign policy. Africa’s struggle for emancipation and freedom evoked some all-too-understandable sympathies among those whose own freedoms were significantly restricted. Having visited West Africa in the late 1950s the bard of the Soviet “thaw” Yevgenii Yevtushenko penned a series of emotionally-charged and ideologically ambiguous poems. The poet exoticized Africa but also mused on a supposed commonality of fate between the savannah (Africa) and the taiga (Russia):

Savannah, I’m the taiga  
I’m endless like you  
I’m a mystery for you  
And you’re a mystery for me...

Your sons desire for you  
Freedom eternal  
And towards them I’m filled with love  
Enormous like the pine trees of my land...<sup>41</sup>

On its surface the poem reads as yet another evocation of empathy with African aspirations toward emancipation. Indeed, over the years the Soviet regime labored to domesticate and appropriate African anti-colonial movements or to claim a kind of ideological kinship to the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., the movement epitomized by a charismatic Baptist minister – by no means a “natural ally” of the USSR.<sup>42</sup> Yet the very discussion of civil and human rights in the context of the Soviet everyday, characterized by its notorious rigidity and the routine of heavy-handed state and party intervention in the lives of Soviet citizens, planted the seeds of dissent. That is why Yevtushenko’s ode to African freedom composed at the time when hopes were running high for a long-lasting post-Stalin liberalization of Soviet society can also be read as a hymn to freedom – African *and* Russian. In this respect it is significant that one of the first public expressions of dissent in Brezhnev’s Soviet Union was occasioned by African events. In 1968, Andrei Amal’rik, the dissident author of the visionary *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?*, breached a major taboo when he and his wife picketed the British embassy in Moscow carrying signs reading “Gowon Kills Children” and “Wilson, Don’t Help Gowon.”<sup>43</sup> This unsanctioned protest was an ingenious act of political defiance. It was the Soviet Union, not

Britain, that since 1967 had been providing the crucial military aid to the federalist regime of General Gowon fighting a bloody civil war against secessionist Biafra.

Probably the most visible aspect of Africa's subversive challenge to Soviet values could be observed in the countercultural prominence of the types of artistic expression usually associated with African/black cultural tradition. Living in Moscow in the early 1960s Andrew Amar noted the Russian students' fascination with jazz music as well as their awareness of its historical roots:

One of the things which often brought us together with the Russian students was listening to modern jazz music. Large numbers of them appreciated the better kind of jazz and also realized and acknowledged that it had developed from the folk music of the African people.<sup>44</sup>

With its strong emphasis on improvisation and free spontaneous expression jazz (just as rock music later) provided for a special kind of camaraderie between its listeners that knew no borders and/or ideological divides. Jazz as an art form then was bound to run afoul of Soviet authorities, the fact duly noted by the observant Amar:

It was really the popularity that this type of music gained among Russian students, thus bringing them into close contact and friendship with American and African students, that really decided the Soviet authorities to condemn this kind of music.<sup>45</sup>

Early Soviet commentators saw in jazz the worst manifestations of Western decadence. They also fumed over the "jungle" and "uncivilized" roots of the music. When it came to criticizing jazz, gloves came off and the Soviet critics of the "music of grossness" reinforced their arguments with the most nauseous racist stereotypes. Maxim Gorky wrote a devastating essay "On the Music of the Gross," which in effect evoked the worst racial stereotypes common in the West. Gorky explicitly links jazz to unbridled sexuality of its performers. For Gorky, jazz is a symptom of decay and sexual degeneracy, a logical final step in the man's descent into spiritual abyss (obesity and homosexuality being the intermediary stages). In subjecting jazz to his searing critique, the great proletarian author faced an obvious dilemma: How does one reconcile one's rejection of this "degenerate" music with the feelings of solidarity with and sympathy for its purveyors – the oppressed American blacks? Gorky's answer bears all the trademarks of Lenin's creative dialectic. "American Negroes," he intones, "undoubtedly laugh in their sleeves to see how their white masters are evolving toward a savagery which they themselves are leaving behind." In one sentence Gorky recognizes the "savagery" of black people and also provides an ideologically sound, if rather ridiculous, rationalization for the spread of jazz music.<sup>46</sup>

Africa and Africans thus occupied a highly ambiguous place in the Soviet everyday. While over the years the Soviet state and its ideologues exerted considerable effort in "bringing

Africa into the fold,” the reality of African presence in the USSR was far more multi-layered and complex. As a propaganda weapon Africa often jammed and even backfired, and as the Soviet collapse loomed closer the idea of Africa was playing at least partially a subversive role to the Soviet status quo. It is noteworthy then that African themes came to feature prominently in the Soviet countercultural production, especially towards the late-Soviet period. In 1988, millions of Soviet citizens flocked to the movie theaters to see what would become a classic *perestroika* film ASSA.<sup>47</sup> By employing a grotesque but poignant pop-cultural symbolism the film exposed to national scrutiny the debility of late-Soviet society. The movie’s main character, an artsy and non-conformist “boy Bananan” (played by a countercultural icon Sergey Bugaev, also commonly known to his peers under a nickname *Afrika*) turns himself into a protagonist of change.<sup>48</sup> Bananan’s youth and lightness of being, his alternative lifestyle, his penchant for hippie-esque outfits, and his eventual tragic end in the hands of mature and business-like men (men of establishment no doubt) combined to put forward a quixotic vision of life in stark contrast to the moribund Soviet status quo. Set to the throbbing soundtrack “We Wait for Changes” by an underground rock star Viktor Tsoi, ASSA offered both an exposé of and a challenge to the Soviet everyday. The very name “boy Bananan” evokes the image of an exotic and forbidden (or at least not readily available in the empty-shelved Soviet stores) tropical fruit, while the stage name of the actor himself, “Africa,” makes the alien quality of the main character even more pronounced, as does the appearance of Bananan’s best friend – a black-skinned Russian. For the makers of this popular movie Africa obviously presented a point of reference so out of tune with daily Soviet experience, so remote and strange as to endow the bearer of such moniker with a distinctive dissident aura.

The idea of Africa and Africa’s foreignness finds use in another celebrated and paradigm-changing *perestroika* film – Vassily Pichul’s *Little Vera* (1989). There is a scene in the movie that never failed to elicit puzzled chuckles from the Soviet audience. We see a typical shabby Soviet flat and a little black boy glued to a television screen watching a popular Russian cartoon. At some point the cartoon characters, three vicious looking but highly likable pirates, break into a light-hearted song about Africa:

Little kids,  
No matter what you do,  
Don’t even think of  
Going to Africa for walks.  
Africa is dangerous,  
Africa is horrible....<sup>49</sup>

The irony of the scene that shows a black Russian child consuming a cultural production that treats Africa as an exotic, dangerous, and slightly ridiculous unknown could not fail to register with the viewers. The black boy’s outward appearance made his absorption in the cartoon highly humorous. Yet the significance of this brief cinematic encounter with Africa went beyond a

passing movie moment. *Little Vera* gives us a glimpse of popular Soviet imagery of Africa and alerts the viewer to Africa's presence in late-Soviet public and cultural domains. Yes, Africa is a somewhat unknown quality but not entirely so. The little boy in the movie didn't just materialize out of thin air amidst the clutter of Soviet domestic life (even if some of the viewers conclude that to have been the case) – his mother is white, hence the father had to be of African descent. His precise identity is left to our imagination – a foreign sailor, an African student, a romantic guerilla type on training in the USSR, or maybe even a visiting black American musician (partisans of Soviet counterculture worshipped Louis Armstrong, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley, and others).

It is probably not a coincidence that a cult classic like ASSA utilized an idea of Africa and Africanness in its treatment of the contemporary Soviet condition. Such contrasting imagery fleshed out the essentials of Soviet experience – its profound isolationism, the drabness of the mundane, the lack of color, and even the notoriously forbidding Russian climate. African students in the USSR routinely collided with the state and challenged by word and deed its values. They had demarcated for themselves a separate cultural and ideological space within the Soviet domain, an impressive achievement of free will, beyond the wildest dreams of most Soviet citizens. For many a Soviet citizen then Africa encapsulated the world outside Soviet ritual, differing from it in almost every respect. And for this very reason Africa and Africans became early targets for the xenophobic propaganda campaigns of the late-Soviet period.

### **Popular images of Africanness and racist backlash during *perestroika***

At the time of Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985, the Soviets had long since solidified their bona fide credentials as the supporters of African decolonization and liberation struggles. The Soviet Union participated (with varying degrees of success) in a number of African development and industrial projects. African students became a common sight on most large Soviet campuses where many of them enjoyed a degree of popularity among the student body. Besides, a new generation of Soviet children of partial African ancestry began to enter Soviet public life. For most Soviet citizens Africa remained distant and strange but it had found its permanent if marginal space in the Soviet popular imagination and within the official cultural and political discourse. The post-1985 reforms ushered in a period of thorough reevaluation of Soviet values and commitments, which also affected both the officially-sanctioned and popular attitudes towards Africa and Africans.

By exposing the structural deficiencies of the Soviet system *perestroika* also invited an increasingly open and progressively critical discussion of the special place the USSR had come to occupy within the international community.<sup>50</sup> With the Cold war on the wane, many of the country's economic shortcomings were now blamed on its external commitments. For too long, argued the avatars of *perestroika*, the USSR had undermined its own economic base by channeling aid to third world nations. The implication of such argument was all too obvious: the Third World had been "sponging" on the USSR and thus degrading the quality of life for its

citizens.<sup>51</sup> Even before the onset of reforms folks in the streets had been grumbling about “too much aid to Africans” or lamenting the privileges (foreigners received much higher stipends – 90 rubles per month vs. an average of 30 rubles allotted to Soviet students) bestowed upon African and other visitors at, presumably, their expense.<sup>52</sup> As early as 1963, professors from Moscow and Leningrad reported some of their Soviet students complaining bitterly about the preferential treatment allotted to Africans at their colleges: “they are studying at our expense and eating our bread, of course it’s unfair.”<sup>53</sup>

Popular and popularly accepted images of Africa and African lifestyles long present in the Soviet cultural tradition fed the growing paranoia. It was exactly the frequent representation of Africa as a place of carefree existence, where people (and cute cartoonish animals) care little to none about “tomorrow” that turned Africa into a ready scapegoat for widespread discontent. Several generations of Soviet kids, for example, grew up to the lovely tune “Chunga Changa” from a famous cartoon. In the cartoon, a racially diverse group of adorable and playful youngsters enjoy a problem-free life on a tropical (read: African) island, far away from the drudgery and cold of the north. In a lighthearted song they celebrate the obvious benefits of this easy way of life:

Chunga-Changa, the sky is blue  
Chunga-Changa, the summer’s all year round  
Chunga-Changa, we live so merry  
Chunga-Changa, we sing little songs

Oh, what a miracle island, miracle island  
It’s so easy to live here  
It’s so easy to live here, Chunga-Changa  
We are happy munching on coconuts and bananas  
Munching on coconuts and bananas, Chunga-Changa<sup>54</sup>

A very similar theme can be found in another popular cartoon *The Lion Cub and the Turtle*, where several charming characters of unmistakably African animals celebrate life in the sun without work. Sings the lion cub:

All I do is lie in the sun  
And move my ears  
I just lie and lie  
And move my ears

Such “orientalist” representations of Africa and life in the tropics in general did not have to be intentionally demeaning. More likely they reflected the generally benign views of “southern countries,” widely held by Soviet citizens and just slightly touched by certain condescension and

paternalism. However, adverse economic circumstances expedited a not-so-illogical transition from paternalism to distaste to outright hostility toward “third world leeches.”

A surge in anti-Third World sentiments accompanied the new revelations about the alleged “sources” of Soviet underdevelopment. The Soviet Union, the public was led to believe, could not afford supporting dependents in the faraway exotic locations. And Africans, the most visible representatives of the developing world in Soviet public spaces, now had to bear the brunt of what became a spontaneous campaign of denunciation of Soviet assistance abroad. African residents in the Soviet Union at the time reported a rise in the number of racist incidents as well as mounting difficulties in maintaining government scholarships to continue their education in the country.<sup>55</sup> In a series of letters to *West Africa*, Charles Adade, a Ghanaian residing in Leningrad, depicted a rather gloomy fate of the African in Gorbachev’s Russia. According to Adade, a sense of desperation and insecurity permeated the lives of African students in the country of dying socialism. Prior to *perestroika*, he suggested, African students had been in a privileged class of their own. Their stipends were high, their lodgings were free, and what is more important, they were allowed to travel twice a year to Western Europe, a privilege effectively denied to their Soviet peers. An African bringing three pairs of jeans, a stereo, and a few t-shirts to Moscow from his European vacation could easily fetch himself sufficient rubles for a comfortable living for a semester.<sup>56</sup>

The neat arrangement was ended by a combination of skyrocketing inflation and new regulations that imposed heavy financial burdens on foreign students in the Soviet Union, but not before it had produced a widely spread envy, resentment and racial hatred amongst the general population. *Glasnost* lifted the floodgates to prejudice and crude racism and let loose the virtual anti-black hysteria. And many Africans blamed Gorbachev’s “revolution” for not feeling safe in the streets and public places of the Soviet cities. A Nigerian journalism student at Kazan University wrote to a Moscow newspaper: “One day I decided to have my lunch in nearby café. As soon as I opened the door, I was met with jeers and cat-calls by young girls sitting around a table, laughing and cracking unfriendly jokes about me...”<sup>57</sup> The enterprising Nigerians soon learned to play curious mind games to save their skin during the growing number of unfriendly encounters. One of them, for example, when approached by a group of hoodlums, pretended to be an American black. The trick worked as the toughs abandoned their original belligerent intentions and “immediately simulated keen interest and began to ask questions about Steve Wonder, Michael Jackson, etc.”<sup>58</sup> The ploy, however, was not 100% fail proof and between May and August of 1990 at least four Nigerian students were severely beaten up and one allegedly killed in Moscow on grounds raging from “being a monkey” to dating Russian girls.<sup>59</sup>

Considering the growing public paranoia about HIV-AIDS, for any African to approach a Russian girl was increasingly becoming a risky proposition. By the late 1980s the Soviet public had grown panicky about the alleged AIDS epidemic in the country. Lacking much understanding of the disease Soviet citizens found themselves exposed to a media barrage of materials on AIDS, many of them of scientifically dubious content. Publications dealing with AIDS routinely portrayed Africans as primary transmitters of the virus (the first victim to have

died was reported by *Leningradskaya Pravda* as having had her “first sexual contact with Africans ten years ago”). Another newspaper ran a featured story about an infected Ukrainian baby whose mother had “had an affair with an African.”<sup>60</sup> Adade’s letters are distinct in their bitterness about the “unethical manner in which Soviet media, in collaboration with Soviet doctors and politicians are handling the anti-AIDS campaign.” A fellow African student complained: “As a result of a deliberate racist campaign, we are now being called *SPID* (*SPID* is a Russian abbreviation for AIDS) on the streets by Soviet youngsters.” Soviet street folklore, with its characteristic sexual undertone, tied together the much professed (and mocked) “love” of the Soviet officialdom for the developing world and the appearance of the disease in Russia. A popular joke provided “alternative” transliterations for the original Russian *SPID* (AIDS) wherein the term was variously interpreted either as *Sotsialnoe Posledstvie Internatsionalnoj Druzby* (Social Consequence of International Friendship) or *Spetsialny Podarok Inostrannyh Druzej* (Special Gift from Foreign Friends). Africans residing in the Soviet Union were far from amused though; the joke encapsulated the growing popular dissatisfaction with the regime, which “wasted precious resources” on people who (in the words of one populist politician) “have just descended from the palm tree.” Africans were rapidly becoming visible scapegoats for the Soviet medical, economic and political disasters.<sup>61</sup>

While the Soviet-style paternalism, that permeated the pre-*perestroika* publications on Africa, was being gradually toned down, so was the concern for the continent. Africans residing in Russia on the eve of the Soviet collapse noted on many occasions that coverage of Africa was reduced to simplistic and highly stereotypical catalogues of its bane and woes. In the media, the very word “Africa” was often supplanted by *cherny kontinent* (black continent), the place of danger and wasted opportunities, and a proverbial black hole devouring scant Soviet resources.<sup>62</sup> The stage was being set for the Soviet Union’s withdrawal from Africa as it was for the debilitating wave of racism and xenophobia soon to sweep across the post-Soviet spaces.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Parts of this article have appeared in Maxim Matusevich, “An Exotic Subversive: Africa, Africans, and the Soviet Everyday,” *Race & Class*, vol. 49, no. 2 (April 2008), pp. 59-81 as well as in Maxim Matusevich, “Journeys of Hope: African Diaspora and the Soviet Society,” *African Diaspora*, vol. 1, nos. 1-2 (December 2008), pp. 53-85. I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Rossen Djagalov of Yale University for generously sharing with me some of his findings in Moscow archival collections.

<sup>2</sup> See the organization’s website: <http://www protivnenavisti ru> (accessed on 26 October 2009).

<sup>3</sup> “Africans ‘Under Siege’ in Moscow,” *BBC broadcast*, 31 August 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8230158.stm> (accessed on 5 October 2009).

<sup>4</sup> John Akaan, “Nigerian Students and the Communist Countries”, unpublished paper-memoir, Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) Collection, n. d., p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> On the evolution of Russian nationalism after Stalin, see Yitzhak M. Brudny, *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> On Stalin’s anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish campaigns during the post-war period, see Gennadi Kostyrchenko, *Out of the Red Shadows: Anti-Semitism in Stalin’s Russia*, New York: Prometheus Books, 1995. Also see Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov, *Stalin’s Last Crime: The Plot against the Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953*, New York: Harpers Perennial, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> For an exhaustive study of Khrushchev’s role in this transition, see William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> “Youngsters Fill Moscow For Fete,” *The New York Times* (28 July 1957).

<sup>9</sup> For more on the festival and its impact on Muscovites, see this recent memoir: A.B. Davidson and L.V. Ivanova, *Moskovskaya Afrika* [Africa in Moscow], Moscow: Teatral’niy Institut, 2003, pp. 7-25.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-10. Also see “2-Week Revelry In Moscow Ends,” *The New York Times* (12 August 1957).

<sup>11</sup> Kristin Roth-Ey, “‘Loose Girls’ on the Loose?: Sex, Propaganda and the 1957 Youth Festival,” in Melanie Ilič, Susan E. Reid and Lynne Attwood, eds., *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 75-95.

<sup>12</sup> Russian State Archive of New History (RGANI), Department of Culture at CC CPSU, f. 5, op. 55, ex. 103 (January 1964 – July 1965).

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<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the festival's impact on Soviet society see the recently published Pia Koivunen, "The 1957 Moscow Youth Festival: Propagating a New, Peaceful Image of the Soviet Union," in Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith, eds., *Soviet State and Society Under Nikita Khrushchev*, London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 46-65.

<sup>14</sup> This argument has been recently made in Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*, University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, London: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 18-19.

<sup>16</sup> S.V. Mazov, *Sozdanie Instituta Afriki* [The Creation of Africa Institute], *Vostok*, no. 1 (1998), pp. 80-88.

<sup>17</sup> Tsentr Khranenia Sovremennoj Dokumentatsii (TsKhSD), f. 4, op. 16, d. 783, l. 13 and d. 806, l. 19, 21. For more archival references, see Mazov, *Sozdanie Instituta Afriki*.

<sup>18</sup> RGASPI, "Spravka o kolichestve studentov-inostrantsev iz kap i kol stran, obuchayushihnya v vuzah SSSR na 1 yanvarya 1959 [A note on the numbers of foreign students from capitalist and colonial countries on study in the USSR as of 1 January 1958]" f. 1M, op. 46, d. 248, list 12.

<sup>19</sup> These numbers come from O.M. Gorbatov and L. Ia. Cherkasski, *Sotrudничество СССР со странами Арабского Востока и Африки* [Cooperation between the USSR and the Countries of Arab East and Africa], Moscow: Nauka, 1973 – also quoted in Hessler, "Death of an African Student in Moscow."

<sup>20</sup> Gribanova, V.V. and N.A. Zherlitsyna, "Podgotovka studentov iz Afrikanskikh stran v vuzah Rossii" [Training of African students at Russian universities]. *Publications of Africa Institute*, <http://www.inafiran.ru/ru/content/view/77/51/> (accessed June 17, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the following memoir accounts of such sojourns: McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, New York: Lee Furman, Inc., 1937; Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1994; Homer Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia: A Memoir*, Chicago, Ill.: Johnson Publishing Company, 1964; Robert Robinson, *Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union*, Washington, DC: Acropolis Books, 1988; Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist*, Chicago, Ill.: Liberator Press, 1978; and William L. Patterson, *The Man Who Cried Genocide: An Autobiography*, New York: International Publishers, 1971.

<sup>22</sup> A typical example was that of a young Somali student Abdulhamid Mohammed Hussein, who having arrived in Moscow with references from Italian communists proceeded to wreak havoc with Soviet and university authorities by engaging in a series of domestic disturbances and public scandals. His story was only one of many; see S.V. Mazov, *Afrikanskie Studenty v Moskve v God Afriki* [African Students in Moscow in the Year of Africa], *Vostok*, vol. 3 (May-June 1999), pp. 91-93.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Olabisi Ajala, *An African Abroad* (London: Jarolds, 1963); Andrew Richard Amar, *An African in Moscow* (London, Ampersand, 1963); Jan Carew, *Moscow Is Not My Mecca* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1964); Andrea Lee, *Russian Journal* (New York: Random House, 1981); Nicholas Nyangira, “Africans Don’t Go to Russia to Be Brainwashed, *The New York Times Magazine* (16 May 1965), p. 64; S. Omor Okullo, “A Negro’s Life in Russia—Beatings, Insults, Segregation,” *U.S. News and World Report*, vol. XLIX, no. 5 (1 August 1963), pp. 59-60; William Anti-Taylor, *Moscow Diary*, London: Robert Hale, 1967; etc.

<sup>24</sup> Everest Mulekezi, “I Was a Student at Moscow State,” *The Readers Digest*, vol. 79, no. 471 (1961), pp. 99-104.

<sup>25</sup> TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 35, d. 149, l. 42, 44. For more on this and similar incidents, see Mazov, *Afriknaskie Studenty v Moskve*. Also see “The Plight Of Our Students In The USSR”, *West African Pilot* (3 February 1964).

<sup>26</sup> RGASPI, “Doklad o provedenii letnego otdyha studentov UDN vo vremya letnih kanikul 1961 goda [A Report on the summer vacation by UDN students during the summer break of 1961],” f. 1M, op. 46, d. 295 (1961).

<sup>27</sup> “Africans Did Russians In By Rioting,” *The Chicago Defender* (28 December 1963); also see “Africans Embarrass Reds,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (18 February 1964).

<sup>28</sup> An exhaustive study of this episode is found in Julie Hessler, “Death of an African Student in Moscow,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, vol. 47, nos. 1-2 (2006).

<sup>29</sup> “Students Demand ‘Bill Of Rights’,” *West African Pilot* (30 December 1963).

<sup>30</sup> Sunny Odulana, “Our Students In Moscow,” *West African Pilot* (2 January 1964).

<sup>31</sup> See “Red Race Relations,” *The Washington Post* (5 January 1964); “Africans Carry Knives For Protection In USSR,” *Chicago Daily Defender* (11 May 1964); “Soviet-African Student Fighting Reaches Kremlin,” *The Washington Post* (28 January 1965); “African Students Trying Anew To Leave Russia,” *The Washington Post* (4 April 1965); “Kenya Students Tell Why They Left USSR,” *Chicago Daily Defender* (8 April 1965).

<sup>32</sup> RGASPI, “Spravki ob internatsionalnom vospitanii v MGU [Notes on international education at MGU],” f. 1, op. 39. d. 127, lists 9-10, 87 (1964).

<sup>33</sup> See “U.S. Diplomat Ordered To Leave Soviet Union,” *Chicago Daily Defender* (12 May 1965); “Soviet Ousts U.S. Cultural Aide As Inciter of African Students,” *The New York Times* (12 May 1965); also “Expelled Negro Diplomat Calls Soviet Charges Ridiculous,” *The Washington Post* (17 June 1965).

<sup>34</sup> “Africans Studying in Russia Allege Discrimination,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (11 November 1975); also see “Kiev Strike Settled,” *Africa Diary*, vol. 15, no. 49 (3-9 December 1975), pp. 7703-7704.

<sup>35</sup> “The Plight Of Our Students In The USSR,” *West African Pilot* (3 February 1964).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> George Feifer, “The Red and the Black: Racism in Moscow,” *Reporter* (2 January 1964), p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> Amar, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Everest Mulekezi, “I Was a Student at Moscow State,” *The Reader’s Digest*, vol. 79, no. 471 (1961), pp. 99-104.

<sup>40</sup> Lee, p. 152.

<sup>41</sup> “Savannah and Taiga,” in Yevgenii Yevtushenko, *Vzmah Ruki* [An Outstretched Hand] (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardia, 1962), pp. 58-59. [translation mine]

<sup>42</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., with his Christian gospel and Gandhi-inspired tactics of civil disobedience, had to be inconvenient for the Soviets. They far more preferred such firebrand radicals as Dr. Angela Davis, whose famous 1971-72 trial occasioned a massive propaganda campaign of support by the Soviet Union. [See, for example, numerous commentaries and cartoons about the trial in issues of *Krokodil* for 1971-72. A typical one depicts a plucky Davis holding her head high in front of a racist judge. The sleeve of the judge’s robe is in fact an executioner’s ax ready to drop on the courageous black Communist . [*Krokodil*, no. 5 (February 1972), p. 10] But even Angela Davis inspired more than a sense of solidarity in the hearts of Soviet intelligentsia. In 1978, a leading Soviet nuclear physicist Sergei Polikanov was expelled from the Communist Party after having made a statement to Western reporters protesting restrictions on travel abroad. “It was easier to fight for the freedom of Angela Davis than for our own freedom,” announced Polikanov and... predictably got into trouble. [“Soviet Physicist Who Complained of Travel Curb Is Ousted by Party,” *The New York Times* (28 March 1978)]

<sup>43</sup> Henry Kamm, “Portrait of a Dissenter,” preface to Andrei Amal’rik, *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. XIII.

<sup>44</sup> Amar, p. 63.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>46</sup> All quotes in this paragraph come from S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917-1991* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1994), p. 91.

<sup>47</sup> Film ASSA, dir. Sergey Soloviev (Mosfilm, 1988).

<sup>48</sup> See Louis Grachos, *Afrika* (Los Angeles, Cal.: University of Southern California Fisher Gallery, 1991).

<sup>49</sup> The lyrics of the song come from a popular children's poem. See Kornei Chukovskii, *Doktor Aibolit* [Doctor Dolittle] (Moscow: Detskaiia Literatura, 1961).

<sup>50</sup> See Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>51</sup> L.Z. Zevin and E.L Simonov, "Pomosh' i Ekonomicheskoe Sotrudnichestvo SSSR s Razvivayushimisia Stranami: Uroki, Problemy i Perspektivy," [Assistance and Economic Cooperation Between the USSR and Developing Countries: Lessons, Problems, and Perspectives] *Narody Azii i Afriki*, no. 2 (1990), pp. 5-17.

<sup>52</sup> See Mulekezi, "I Was a Student at Moscow State"; also see William Anti-Taylor, "Red Bias: African Lament," *The Christian Science Monitor* (5 November 1963).

<sup>53</sup> RGASPI, "Stenogramma soveshania prepodavatelej vuzov g. Moskvy, Leningrada i t.d. [Minutes of the meeting of college teachers from Moscow, Leningrad, etc.]" f. 1, op. 46, d. 339 (23 April 1963).

<sup>54</sup> Composer V. Shainskii [translation mine]

<sup>55</sup> See Charles Quist-Adade, *In the Shadows of the Kremlin and the White House: Africa's Media Image from Communism to Post-Communism* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2001).

<sup>56</sup> Charles Adade, "Sense of Insecurity," *West Africa* (March 16-22, 1992), pp. 482-483.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Adade, "Russian Roughshod", *West Africa* (July 9-15, 1990), p. 2056.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Adade, "Black Bashing," *West Africa* (October 8-14, 1990), p. 2606.

<sup>60</sup> Charles Adade, "Targets of AIDS-phobia", *West Africa* (January 14-20, 1991), pp. 8-9.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in ibid. Also see the discussion in *The NIIA-RIAS Dialogue: A Report*, Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, 1997, p. 105.

<sup>62</sup> See examples of such publications in Charles Quist-Adade, "After the Cold War: the Ex-Soviet Media and Africa", *Race and Class*, vol. 32, no. 2 (October/November 1993), pp. 86-95.

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