

Reading Between the Lines: African Students in the USSR

For much of the twentieth century the Soviet Bloc offered scholarship programmes to students from the Global South. The motivations behind this policy ranged from an ethical commitment to narratives of racial equality and anti-colonial liberation, to a strategic need to cement a global network of alliances, to an ideological imperative to secure the Soviet brand of socialism as the exclusive paradigm for modernity. The US operated similar programmes, but were quick to label the Soviet project either 'red propaganda'ⁱ aimed at indoctrinating the world's youth or a futile investment which paid little political dividend. Higher education for the decolonising world, especially Africa, became in this way a potent signifier for state legitimacy during the Cold War and a powerful device through which competing visions of a brighter future could be reproduced.

For Africans and African Americans, education in the USSR promised both a radical alternative to the structural violence of European colonialism and US segregation, and a pragmatic opportunity for affordable training. The opening of the Soviet archives in the early 1990s has lent new perspectives on the dynamics behind 'educational diplomacy', revealing that, rather than passively accepting these gestures of solidarity or soft power, the recipient states often actively negotiated and determined the terms of Soviet assistance and educational aid.ⁱⁱ

The students taking part in these scholarship programmes therefore stood at the centre of a dense network of political desires inflected by Cold War rhetoric, emergent nationalisms, and socialist internationalism. Today, such networks hint at an alternative history of globalisation, a powerful model of anti-imperial solidarity in action. However a close reading also reveals fissures, often at the level of daily student life, where the visions of donor and recipient failed to align. Through these fissures, this essay follows the shifting and often conflicting desires which animated the rise and fall of the Soviet programmes for African students.

KUTV

For the Soviet Union, the international scholarship programmes represented the praxis of Lenin's theories that the colonised peoples of the world (or 'the Toilers of the East') were the Bolsheviks' natural allies, and that decolonisation was an inevitable and essential stage in the march towards world Communism. To this end, Lenin had argued that "all Communist parties should render direct aid to the revolutionary movements among the dependent and underprivileged nations for example, Ireland, the American Negroes, etc) and in the colonies",ⁱⁱⁱ and a series of institutions was duly established across the USSR to provide training for future Party cadres from around the world. The first of these was the Communist University of Toilers of the East (*Kommunistichesky Universitet Trudiashchikhsia Vostoka* or KUTV), founded in Moscow in 1921, with branches in Baku, Irkutsk and Tashkent. This was followed in 1925 by Sun Yat-sen Communist University of the Toilers of China in Moscow, which provided training for Chinese cadres until its closure in 1930, and the Lenin International School, which functioned in

Moscow between 1926 and 1938, and which aimed to 'Bolshevise' members of the European and North American communist parties.

KUTV was aimed primarily at training members of the Soviet colonies to become party cadres, and initially the school enrolled students from across Asia. In July 1923, control over the school shifted from Stalin's Narkomnats to the Comintern, and the following year the doors were opened to all non-Europeans, including Africans and African Americans.^{iv} This move took place against a backdrop of widening debates about racism, following the efforts of the American Lovett Fort-Whiteman to raise the topic in official discourse. In 1925, Fort-Whiteman was assigned to recruit a contingent of black Americans for KUTV, returning to Moscow with seven prospective students. However, as Woodford McClellan has revealed in his extensive study of KUTV,^v "black communists" proved difficult to find and recruit; despite the intentions of the Comintern, it had been simply impossible, in George Padmore's words, to "gather up ready-made Bolsheviks on the banks of the Congo or the Nile".^{vi} Flouting Moscow's orders, the US Communist Party had discouraged black membership, and in the 1920s the Comintern's only representation in Africa was the all-white South African Communist Party. Between 1925 and 1935, a total of 1,664 foreign students enrolled at KUTV, from which official records indicate only ten were African and twenty were African-American.^{vii}

Nevertheless, by the 1930s, Lenin's rhetoric of colour-blind internationalism and solidarity with the 'Toilers of the East' had resonated across the colonial world, and rumours of racial harmony led to a convergence of African, African-American and Caribbean intellectuals on the 'Red Mecca' of the Soviet Union.^{viii} Among them were the young Kenyan Jomo Kenyatta (who enrolled at KUTV in 1932), Jamaican writer Claude McKay, and African-Americans including actor, musician and activist Paul Robeson, actor Wayland Rudd and writers Homer Smith and Langston Hughes. Hughes described how on their arrival in 1932, many of his group "left the train to touch their hands to Soviet soil, lift the new earth in their palms, and kiss it".^{ix} Robeson, during the first of many visits to Moscow, told the press in 1934: "here, I am not a Negro but a human being for the first time in my life.... I walk in full human dignity."^x

The anti-racist stance of the Soviet Union was proudly promoted in official discourse and influenced policy such that foreign students at the Universities enjoyed preferential treatment (including superior rooms, private tuition, extra clothing and travel allowances) and any students who expressed racial prejudice faced expulsion from the school and the Party. However, black students often complained that Russians treated them with excessive paternalism, a reception that Homer Smith described in 1931 as "racial inequality in reverse".^{xi} Maxim Matusevich's work lends much insight into Soviet attitudes to the African students, describing an overbearing xenophilia that stemmed from a combination of fear of reprisal for racism, enthusiasm for party rhetoric and a lack of knowledge about Africa or African America.^{xii} For example, when Rudd, Smith and Hughes were commissioned to produce *Black and White*, a major Soviet propaganda film about the evils of racism, the project eventually collapsed due to a series of misconceptions, including a clichéd script, and the expectation

that the cast would be able to sing and dance. As Hughes later recalled, “few of us had ever heard a spiritual... [the cast] were too intellectual for such old-time song, which to them smacked of bandannas and stereotypes.”^{xiii}

Misunderstandings about race also dogged the syllabus at KUTV, and in September 1928, four African-American students presented a petition to the Comintern, complaining that, despite their advantages over the Russian students, living conditions in the University were “unendurable”, and that:

the PROGRAMME OF STUDY is not entirely suited to the ideological needs of students from Western countries. There is no course treating of American Imperialism as such or of the American labour movement, nor touching in any way upon the conditions of Negroes internationally.^{xiv}

The ninety-eight strong founding faculty of KUTV offered courses in Marxism-Leninism, Historical Materialism, Bolshevik History, Mathematics, Economic Geography, Russian language and the “National and Colonial Question”, but knew little about the non-Soviet world. In response to the students’ petition, the International Lenin School, at which African and African American KUTV students were required to attend courses, created a special section (“Section 9”) for black students and initiated short courses on Imperialism and the “Negro question”.^{xv}

In a speech made at KUTV on 18 May 1925, Josif Stalin had addressed the apparent conflict between a Soviet rhetoric of internationalism and the interests and needs of the diverse nationalities of the students. The University, he argued, would create cadres who could serve both “the needs of the Soviet republics of the East”, and “the revolutionary requirements of the toiling masses in the colonial and dependent countries of the East”. These cadres were then tasked “to implant national-Soviet statehood, close to and comprehensible to the toiling masses” and “to develop national culture”.^{xvi} The ambiguous terms of the ‘National Question’ would remain a contentious issue throughout the scholarship programmes.

Despite his initial defence of KUTV, the following decade saw Stalin reverse Lenin’s policies of internationalism. Turning his back on the colonies, he declared that “the proletariat will not support so-called ‘national liberation’ movements... [who] have been acting in the interests of the bourgeoisie”.^{xvii} During the ‘Great Terror’ of the 1930s, Stalin’s purges sent a wave of xenophobia across Russia and led to the closure of KUTV in 1938. A board outside the University announced:

the practice of training students from the ranks of the barely literate and sometimes illiterate who have no practical experience of organizational work with the masses has not produced the desired results.^{xviii}

Patrice Lumumba Peoples’ Friendship University

After Stalin’s death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev began partially reversing his predecessor’s repressive and isolationist policies. Censorship in press and the arts and restrictions on travel were eased, and efforts were made to re-establish Soviet internationalism. Marking this shift in policy, Moscow hosted the sixth

World Festival of Youth and Students in 1957, receiving over 34,000 young people from 131 countries.^{xix} Khrushchev instructed the officials of the Communist Union of Youth to “smother foreign guests in our embrace”,^{xx} and over three million euphoric Muscovites flocked to the streets to welcome their “exotic” visitors. Reeling from the Stalin years, young urbanites eagerly embraced the revival of Lenin’s ‘socialism with a human face’, and by the end of the 1960s, 40 million Soviet citizens were members of international friendship societies.^{xxi}

In the decade following the Festival, aid and investment were widely distributed to national liberation movements and decolonised nations in the global south, and by 1966, diplomatic relations had been forged with 25 sub-Saharan African states.^{xxii} From the early 1960s, thousands of Soviet (as well as Cuban, Eastern bloc, North Korean and Chinese) technicians, teachers, artists and military trainers were sent to newly independent nations such as Ghana, Mali and Algeria, and training centres were established across the continent with Soviet support, such as the Worker’s University which opened in Conakry in 1961, for training trade union officials.

The cornerstone of Khrushchev’s diplomatic drive was a generous programme of scholarships. In October 1960, the Peoples’ Friendship University was established in Moscow specifically to cater for Third World students, alongside similar institutions in Leipzig, Prague and other cities. Renamed Patrice Lumumba Peoples’ Friendship University in 1961, following the US-led assassination of Congo’s independence leader, the University received over 43,000 applications for just 597 places in its first academic year.^{xxiii} By 1966, over 24,000 students from almost 130 countries were enrolled in 300 Soviet educational institutions,^{xxiv} compared to only 46 students a decade earlier.^{xxv}

For students and policy makers engaged in forging modernity in the newly independent African nations, education in the USSR and other socialist states provided a pragmatic alternative to the institutions of the former colonial powers. While the ‘sojourners’ of the 1920s and 1930s had turned to the USSR as an escape from the structural violence of an oppressive state, the students of the 1960s and 1970s were often motivated by a strong commitment to their own emergent nationalisms. As a result, they were often seen to be less swayed by ideological discourse and quicker to point out any disjuncture between rhetoric and reality in Soviet life. Blamed for an influx of ‘degenerate’ aesthetics including jazz music, the African students soon became both objects of fascination and symbols of dissent against official Soviet culture, an ambiguity Matusevich terms the “exotic subversive”.^{xxvi} Much of this dissent was provoked by racially motivated attacks against African students, including the violent death of Ghanaian medical student Edmond Asare-Addao, which in 1963 prompted the largest unofficial protest since 1927, when up to 500 students marched on the Kremlin demanding a bill of rights for African students and holding placards reading “friend today, devil tomorrow” and “Moscow, a second Alabama”.^{xxvii}

Students also expressed discontent with the ideological emphasis of the teaching. Kenyan student Nicholas Nyangira, who studied in Baku between September

1964 and March 1965, complained in *The New York Times* that “if a student disagreed with Comrade Lenin’s writings, his teacher tried very hard to trace the student’s family background.... We failed to understand why this was necessary”.^{xxviii} He went on to recount cases of racist harassment experienced by African students in Baku, and their general dismay that “we hardly learned any other subject apart from the Russian language and Marxism and Leninism”.^{xxix} He and a group of eighty-four other students, incensed by poor living conditions and this “Communist indoctrination... and pressure exerted on us to join political movements”, occupied Baku railway station for nine days, demanding to be taken to Moscow to have their case for curriculum change heard. They were eventually herded onto a plane back to Kenya. He later recalled “we were uncertain whether we had been chosen to learn or to be trained as Communists”.^{xxx}

Countering complaints received from African students that their courses amounted to indoctrination in Marxism-Leninism, Khrushchev addressed the inaugural ceremonies of the Lumumba University on 17 November 1960:

Of course, we will not force any student to accept our views, our ideology. A philosophy of life is an extremely voluntary matter. If you wish to know my political convictions, I will not hide the fact from you that I am a Communist and am deeply convinced that the most progressive ideology is Marxism-Leninism. If any one of you becomes convinced that you favour this ideology, we will not be offended. However, we will not be grieved if you do not become Communists . . . I repeat that, if anyone of you becomes, so to say, sick with this 'illness' of the times—Communism—I beg you not to blame it on us.^{xxxi}

Following Khrushchev’s promises, courses in Marxism-Leninism were officially made optional. Foreign students would spend their first year studying Russian language before continuing to regular courses. From 1960, students at Lumumba University could choose between six fields: Education; Agriculture; Medicine; Physics, Mathematics and Natural Sciences; Economics and Law; and History and Philology. While KUTV had aimed to train party cadres in ideological terms, the latter waves of scholarships became more oriented to cementing bilateral relations with strategically important states in the face of US ambitions. Premier Kosygin articulated this sentiment in his address to the first graduating class of the Patrice Lumumba Friendship University in 1965, saying: “We would like the University graduates forever to remain our friends, to become the bearers of an inviolable friendship between their peoples and the peoples of the first country of socialism”.^{xxxii}

Khrushchev also assumed that by assisting in the training of personnel, African states would be better placed to industrialise and develop into sympathetic and profitable trading partners and military allies, and between 1957 and 1985, the USSR signed agreements with thirty-seven African countries.^{xxxiii} Particular support was offered to those states which appeared to be likely to move in a socialist direction, starting in the late 1950s with Egypt, Mali, Ghana and Guinea.

However, it proved difficult for these states to disentangle themselves from

the West. Moscow had extended support to Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah following the publication of his 1964 book *Consciencism*, in which he developed a locally specific thesis of 'African Socialism', but following a turn towards Marxism-Leninism, he was promptly ousted in a CIA-backed *coup d'état* in 1966. Similarly, in Mali, Modibo Keita's socialist and pro-Soviet policies led to his forced removal from office in 1968. In Guinea, Soviet relations quickly deteriorated after 1959, as the state fell increasingly under a Western sphere of influence. Egyptian leaders proved equally difficult to retain; al-Nasser angered Moscow by suppressing the Egyptian Communist Party, and Soviet relations broke down completely when al-Sadat took power.^{xxxiv} Students returning from Soviet training thus found their education increasingly at odds with the prevailing ideology of their home states.

Scholarships under Brezhnev and Gorbachev

Having assumed power in 1964, Brezhnev initiated a period of retrenchment, assessing the scholarship programmes to be too expensive, and the post-colonial regimes in Africa "too unreliable to warrant major investments in their loyalty",^{xxxv} a view compounded by these failed attempts to gain allies in Ghana, Mali, Egypt and Guinea, and by an increase in Western aid to Africa during the 1960s. In Khrushchev's final years, economic aid to Africa accounted for around 25 per cent of new Soviet commitments; by the early 1970s it had fallen to well under 10 per cent,^{xxxvi} although the scholarship programme did continue operate.

Two events of the mid 1970s effected a shift in this policy on Africa. The first was the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Lisbon and subsequent transfer of power in Lusophone Africa to nationalist movements with varying degrees of affiliation with the USSR, namely Frelimo (The Mozambique Liberation Front), the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde). coup in Addis Ababa which saw the Derg (a committee of police and army officers led by General Mengistu Haile Mariam) depose Emperor Haile Selassie and declare Marxism-Leninism the state ideology, explicitly repudiating Ethiopia's long-standing relations with the West. The second was the 1974 coup in Addis Ababa which saw the Derg (a committee of police and army officers led by General Mengistu Haile Mariam) depose Emperor Haile Selassie and declare Marxism-Leninism the state ideology, explicitly repudiating Ethiopia's long-standing relations with the West. ~~Carnation Revolution in Lisbon and subsequent transfer of power in Lusophone Africa to nationalist movements with varying degrees of affiliation with the USSR, namely Frelimo (The Mozambique Liberation Front), the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde).~~

The Marxist-Leninist alignment of these new governments reignited Soviet hopes for Africa after the disappointments of earlier Socialist experiments. During the mid-1970s Brezhnev therefore re-emphasised the scholarship programmes, which he hoped would reap immediate benefits in the ideological battles of the era. By 1981, the USSR and Eastern Europe were training 72,090 foreign students (including 34,805 from Africa)^{xxxvii} and over the next five years,

Russia would provide scholarships worth the equivalent of over US\$1.7 billion.^{xxxviii} Taking advantage of these programmes, Mengistu sent over 15,000 Ethiopian students to study in the USSR during the second half of the twentieth century, and around 2,000 to other Socialist countries.^{xxxix}

For Mozambique, the scholarship programmes offered a pragmatic solution to the skills vacuum left by the inequalities of the colonial education system and the sudden mass exodus of Portuguese technicians following independence in 1975. Since its foundation in 1962, Frelimo had maintained a strictly non-aligned position, and the USSR had initially been reticent about an alliance^{xl}. President Samora Machel and his predecessor Eduardo Mondlane nevertheless managed at various stages to negotiate support (whether military or logistic aid, funding, personnel or scholarships) from Cuba, East Germany, Bulgaria, the Scandinavian countries, North Korea, the USSR, China, and even at one point the US-based Ford Foundation, a diplomatic feat given the prevailing context of the Cold War and Sino-Soviet split. A month after Frelimo's official declaration of commitment to Marxism-Leninism at the 1977 third party congress, Mozambique signed a treaty of friendship with the USSR.^{xli} Machel referred to the socialist countries as Mozambique's "natural allies" but also jokingly called Moscow "the Vatican of socialism".^{xlii} In his unofficial biography of the president, Iain Christie recalls Machel's quick rebuttal to any claims that Frelimo had subscribed to an imported ideology, and his assertion that Frelimo's Marxism had originated in the liberation struggle and the experience of the peasantry under colonial rule.^{xliii}

Celestino Matavele was one of three Mozambican students who studied Fine Art and Graphics at the Tashkent State Institute of the Arts from 1981 until 1986. He described his excitement at being selected to study in the USSR: "It was marvellous, I went there prepared with the idea that this country could really teach me something."^{xliv} The students came back to Mozambique full of enthusiasm, only to find the government had signed up to the IMF two years earlier and state patronage for the arts had dwindled. On the eve of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 there were over 50,000 African students in the USSR, but funding for the scholarship programmes was soon axed and this number had shrunk to 12,000 by 1992.^{xlv} By the early 1990s, graduates returning to Africa again found that the ideological terms of their training sat uncomfortably with the increasingly neoliberal orientation of their home states.

Multiple, shifting narratives have been projected onto the experiences of African students in the Soviet Union. For the USSR, the scholarships represented at one turn the praxis of Lenin's ideals of internationalism, revived and writ large across the globe, and at the next turn an expensive and futile endeavour. The African states who actively sought out this aid saw the scholarships first as a tool for forging a national modernity on anti-colonial and anti-imperialist terms, and then as an embarrassing dalliance with foreign ideology or a neo-colonial intervention into their self-determination. For the radical left today, the transnational solidarity networks that once connected state socialism and the struggles of the global south suggest a purer kind of politics, a utopian moment now lost to what Irmgard Emmelhainz has called "representation's ruins", the

state of “post-politics” characterised by the “end of ideology” and “the neoliberal withering away of the state”.^{xlvi}

In practice, it was often the students themselves who exposed the frictions between these various registers of internationalism, as divergent future imaginaries collided on the streets and in the classroom. A close reading of these histories therefore demands a disentangling of multiple narratives of political desire, and an excavation of solidarity at the micro-level, in the lived experiences of the people who undertook these journeys.

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ⁱⁱ See, for example, Engerman, David C, “The Second World’s Third World”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no 1, 2011, pp 183–211 and Katsakioris, Constantin, “Transferts Est-Sud. Echanges éducatifs et formation de cadres africains en Union soviétique pendant les années soixante”, *Revue d’histoire d’Outre-Mers* 95, no 354-355, 2007, pp80-103. On solidarity policies in East German education see Jason Verber ‘True to the Politics of Frelimo? Teaching Socialism at the *Schule der Freundschaft*, 1981-90’ in Slobodian, Quinn, ed, *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World*, New York and Oxford: Berghan Books, 2015, pp.188-210, and Müller, Tanja R, *Legacies of Socialist Solidarity: East Germany in Mozambique* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014 .

ⁱⁱⁱ Lenin, Vladimir, “Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions For The Second Congress Of The Communist International”, 1920, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/05.htm>, accessed 8 April 2016.

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^v McClellan, Woodford, “Africans and Black Americans in the Comintern Schools, 1925–1934”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26, no 2, 1993, p 372.

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^{xi} Smith, Homer, *Black Man in Red Russia: A Memoir*, Chicago: Johnson, 1964, p 56. See also Matusevich, Maxim, “An Exotic Subversive: Africa, Africans and the Soviet Everyday”, *Race & Class* 9, no 4, 2008, p 66.

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