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Race Class 2008; 49; 57

DOI: 10.1177/0306396808089288

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An exotic subversive: Africa, Africans and the Soviet everyday

MAXIM MATUSEVICH

Abstract: The Leninist argument, that the class struggle of the European proletariat was intertwined with the liberation of the 'toiling masses of the East', led to an official ideology of Soviet internationalism in which Africans occupied a special place. Depictions of the evils of racism in the US became a staple of Soviet popular culture and a number of black radicals, among them Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and Claude McKay, flocked to the Soviet Union in the 1920s–30s, inspired by the belief that a society free of racism had been created. While there was some truth to this view, people of African descent in the Soviet Union nevertheless experienced a condescending paternalism, reflected also in their cinematic portrayal and in popular literature and folklore. With the onset of the cold war, young Africans were encouraged to study in Russia, where they received a mixed

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Race & Class

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10.1177/0306396808089288 <http://rac.sagepub.com>

reaction and, on account of occasional conflict with the authorities and Soviet cultural norms, became symbols of dissent against official Soviet culture. Later, in the perestroika period, Africa became a scapegoat for popular discontent amidst a worsening climate of racism.

Keywords: African students, cold war, Comintern, Paul Robeson, perestroika, Russian film, Soviet popular culture

On 4 October 1957, the Soviet media had much to celebrate. On that day, the first *Sputnik* was successfully launched into orbit – a seminal breakthrough in the quest for space exploration and a major mark-up for Moscow in the cold war contest of scientific and technological prowess between the USSR and its western opponents. The Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, freshly victorious in the bruising intra-party power struggle of the preceding summer, could hardly contain his euphoria. His dream of ‘outstripping the leading capitalist country – the United States – in the field of scientific and technical progress’ had come to pass. ‘It is the United States which is now intent on catching up with the Soviet Union’, Khrushchev declared self-assuredly, following the successful launch.¹

Over the next few months, the Soviet Union’s most popular humour magazine *Krokodil* (Crocodile) published numerous materials playing up the country’s spectacular space achievement. One particular cartoon depicted scantily dressed colonial labourers toiling away under the knout of a vicious-looking colonial master. But then the Soviet satellite (clearly marked with a star and a hammer-and-sickle sign) crosses the horizon – a grandiose vision that makes the exploited Africans drop their hoes, push aside their exploiter and proudly reassert themselves in the process.² The message of the cartoon leaves no place for second-guessing. The artist presented the Soviet scientific achievement as an act of redemption for the downtrodden Africans. When, some three years later, Yuri Gagarin rode his *Vostok* (East) rocket all the way through the stratosphere and into outer space, *Krokodil* put out a special commemorative issue. Prominently featured in the issue – among a representative sample of congratulatory telegrams from world leaders, collective farmers, young pioneers and patriotic housewives – was another cartoon, this time picturing a group of joyful Saharan nomads cheering a sturdy-looking Soviet rocket on its way to some faraway galaxy. The caption read, ‘The light from the East’ – a humorous word play on the name of the Soviet spacecraft and a not-so-subtle mock religious reference.³

'Natural allies'

The question, then, is why would the flagship of Soviet propaganda turn Africa and Africans into a stage set to celebrate the Soviet achievement? Why would a rocket launch from a super-secret site deep in the dusty Kazakh steppe create such a commotion amidst the desert dwellers of the Sahara? To answer these questions, one needs to look at the special place that the 'peoples of the East' in general and, more specifically, Africans had played in the formulation of an early Soviet identity. That identity, of course, stemmed from the Marxist-Leninist vision of the world predicated on class struggle and class solidarity. Having assumed power in 1917 and established the first socialist state in history, the Bolsheviks quickly positioned themselves as the natural allies of those oppressed by international capitalism. One didn't have to be a Bolshevik to recognise that, across the capitalist world, non-white people (whether in the colonies or in the diaspora) consistently represented the most exploited and the most discriminated-against segments of the population. For the Bolsheviks to embrace the peoples of colour wherever they might be was not a leap of faith but the logical extension of their most intrinsic beliefs.

This embrace (or should we call it a bear hug?) was rather indiscriminate as the term 'toiling masses of the East', commonly used by the Bolsheviks in reference to the non-western world, lumped Africa, Asia and the Middle East together with scant attention to regional, racial and religious distinctions.⁴ The new regime clearly saw its triumph in Russia as a necessary precondition for the eventual emancipation of the exploited non-European masses. The success of the Bolshevik takeover presumably created a kind of historical bridge linking together the destinies of the proletariat in the colonies with those of the new proletariat state in Russia. This sentiment found its way into a popular early Soviet ballad '*Moia Afrika*' ('My Africa'). The poet Boris Kornilov described an odd story in which an African cavalry officer (probably a *tirailleur Sénégalais*) who fought the enemies of the revolution during the Russian civil war and reportedly died in 1918, led the Reds' attack against the Whites near Voronezh 'in order to deal a blow to the African capitalists and the bourgeoisie'.⁵

On a more practical level, the ideal of internationalist class solidarity found its expression in the creation, in 1919, of the Communist International (Comintern). At the Second Congress of the Comintern, held in Petrograd and Moscow in July 1920, the theoretical foundations for communist policy in the colonial areas were laid down. After a long and rather heated debate, Lenin's major argument, that 'all Communist parties must give active support to the revolutionary movements of liberation' of the nationalist bourgeoisies of the colonies, was finally accepted. Departing from conventional Marxism and Leon

Trotsky's contention that colonial revolution would be a by-product of the revolution in Europe, Lenin surprised many delegates by declaring that a communist victory in Europe hinged on the prior success of the revolution in the colonies. In effect, this assumption provided the rationale for Soviet involvement in the colonial world. It seemed only natural that, once self-determination was achieved, the former colonies would continue their forward movement towards socialism.

Lenin's interest in this matter was echoed in the chambers of the Congress of the Peoples of the East, convened in Baku in September 1920. Grigorij Zinoviev, Lenin's close associate who presided over the Comintern throughout the 1920s (later becoming one of the first victims of Stalin's purges), issued an impassioned appeal to 'all of toiling humanity living in Asia and Africa' to follow the communists. 'The European proletariat', he said, 'cannot help seeing now that the course of historical development has bound together the toilers of the East to the workers of the West. We must conquer or perish together.'⁶ Mikhail Pavlovich, the most influential Soviet writer on Africa during the 1920s, assisted Zinoviev in organising the Baku Congress.⁷ Even though the bulk of his energy was spent exhorting the Muslim delegates to declare a jihad against capitalism, Pavlovich expected the decisions of the Congress to resonate throughout black Africa – as he put it, 'even on African shores the mole of revolution would do his work and neatly burrow the soil from beneath the feet of capitalism'.⁸ This digging exercise, in Pavlovich's opinion, was of great significance, for while the black continent remained oppressed 'the European worker cannot throw off his chains'.⁹

The Soviet regime's vociferous assault on racism and the capitalist exploitation of non-Europeans resonated throughout the colonial and African diasporic worlds and generated goodwill among those who had to bear the brunt of western racial prejudices. In the post-revolutionary years, a significant number of black radicals and black Soviet sympathisers flocked to the 'Red Mecca'.¹⁰ Most of them arrived from the Caribbean and North America in search of the racial harmony that was conspicuously absent in their countries of origin. Among those who bought into the Soviet rhetoric of colour-blind internationalism and travelled to the land of socialism for education and/or intellectual experience was the Jamaican writer Claude McKay, who in 1922 came on what he called his 'magic pilgrimage to Russia'. He arrived in the USSR just in time for the fifth anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution:

Petrograd was magnificent in red flags and streamers. Red flags fluttered against the snow from all the great granite buildings. Railroad trains, street cars, factories, stores, hotels, schools – all wore

decorations. It was a festive month of celebration in which I, as a member of the Negro race, was a very attractive participant.¹¹

Or here is how Langston Hughes, another celebrated poet and traveller, described the emotional encounter with the USSR of a group of young black 'pilgrims' crossing the Soviet border in 1932:

In Helsinki, we stayed overnight and the next day we took a train headed for the land . . . where race prejudice was reported taboo, the land of the Soviets . . . When the train stopped [at the border] for passports to be checked, a few of the young black men and women left the train to touch their hands to Soviet soil, lift the new earth in their palms and kiss it.¹²

At about the same time (1931), a twenty-two-year-old African American from Minneapolis, Homer Smith, travelled to Moscow to find the dignity that was denied him in his native land.¹³ His motivations bore a remarkable similarity to those expressed by his two more famous contemporaries:

I yearned to stand taller than I had ever stood, to breathe total freedom in exhilarating gulps, to avoid all the hurts that were increasingly becoming the lot of men (and women) of colour in the United States. The solution seemed simple to me: Russia was the only place where I could go and escape colour discrimination entirely. Moscow seemed the answer.¹⁴

And Moscow most certainly 'seemed the answer' to the great actor and singer Paul Robeson who, over the years, would develop close personal ties with the USSR. His son, Paul Robeson Jr, attended a high school in Moscow in the late 1930s and, in 1952, Robeson became the recipient of the Stalin Peace Prize. Robeson's genuine popularity among the Soviet people remains unsurpassed. His seventy-fifth birthday occasioned thousands of congratulatory letters from Soviet citizens. Here is an example of one such letter sent to Radio Moscow and read on air. In fact, it's a poem and a thinly-veiled love confession:

You appeared on stage,
Head bowed, eyes lowered

The pianist struck a chord
And gently your wonderful voice overflowed

Then the hall and the pit fell silent
And only your voice was heard.
And in the spellbound stillness
It charmed and conjured . . .

And everyone wanted to hear again
 Your wonderful voice without ending . . .
 And instead of a fine bouquet,
 To place at your feet our hearts.¹⁵

Paul Robeson returned the sentiment and sustained throughout his life an unwavering support for the land of socialism. This position, one might add, led him to turn a blind eye to the Stalinist horrors (of which he was at least partially aware and which claimed the lives of some of his close Jewish friends) perpetrated there.¹⁶ Robeson's love for the Soviet Union was real and its sources were more personal and moral than ideological. For Robeson, as for a number of other black activists of his generation, the USSR remained the place built on peaceful ethnic coexistence and racial equality, the place where (in stark contrast to the US and other western countries) 'coloured folk' could enter modernity and live and toil in dignity – on a par with their white fellow countrymen. The awe at this achievement was fundamental to Robeson's attitude to the Soviets and informed his famous heartfelt eulogy for Stalin composed upon the tyrant's death in 1953:

Here [in the USSR] was a people quite comparable to some of the tribal folk of Asia – quite comparable to the proud Yoruba or Basuto of West and East Africa, but now their lives flowering anew within the socialist way of life twenty years matured under the guidance of Lenin and Stalin. And in this whole area of development of national minorities – of their relation to the Great Russians – Stalin had played and was playing a most decisive role . . . I was later to travel – to see with my own eyes what could happen to so-called backward peoples. In the West (in England, in Belgium, France, Portugal, Holland) – the Africans, the Indians (East and West), many of the Asian peoples were considered so backward that centuries, perhaps, would have to pass before these so-called 'colonials' could become a part of modern society . . . But in the Soviet Union, Yakuts, Nenetses, Kirgiz, Tadzhiks – had respect and were helped to advance with unbelievable rapidity in this socialist land. No empty promises, such as colored folk continuously hear in the United States, but deeds.¹⁷

In his enthusiasm for the Soviet multiethnic project (and undoubtedly as a reflection of the personal fame and prestige he enjoyed in the USSR), Paul Robeson probably contributed more than any other single foreign sympathiser to the efficacy of the Soviet propaganda effort projected onto the developing and non-white world.¹⁸ In his public speeches and writings, he put forth an image of the Soviet Union, assiduously cultivated by the Soviets themselves, which pointed

unambiguously towards a commonality of fate between the first socialist state and the non-white colonial and diasporic populations:

All the anger of the reactionaries directed against the Soviet Union is also directed in other forms against the colonial peoples. The latter have learned, thanks to these reactionaries, that there is a natural alliance between the country of socialism and the oppressed people the world over.¹⁹

Musings like the one above had to be music to Soviet ears. The Soviets enjoyed and cultivated their anti-racist image. It was, in part, correct and genuinely reflective of the official ideology but, considering the multiethnic composition of the Soviet Union, it also had a distinctive internal political utility for the regime. Soviet Marxism purported to lift ethnic minorities above their subservient status both in the USSR and abroad. Subsequently, attacks on racism and racist practices in print and in speech became a staple of Soviet propaganda as well as an essential part of Soviet cultural production. The iconic revolutionary bard Vladimir Mayakovsky, for example, lambasted American racism and celebrated struggles against racial prejudice in his popular verse 'Black and White' – inspired by his 1925 trip to Mexico, Cuba and the US. Mayakovsky fully shared the vision of his socialist motherland as a torch of liberation for the oppressed: 'if I were a Negro . . . I would learn Russian just because Lenin spoke it', he solemnly proclaimed in his 1927 poem '*Nashemu Yunoshstvu*' (To our youth). American racism is derided with much sarcasm in a famous 1933 children's poem 'Mister Twister' by Samuil Marshak. The poem's character 'Mr Twister the Millionaire' arrives in Leningrad from New York as a tourist and experiences a virtual 'culture shock' when he realises that, in the Soviet state, blacks and whites stay in the same hotels. Needless to say, the capitalist bigot is shaken by this discovery. Having failed to procure 'all-white' hotel accommodation, Mr Twister learns the hard way (that is, by sleeping on a chair in the hotel lobby) a lesson in racial tolerance. The message of the poem couldn't be any more straightforward: in the Soviet Union, we do not distinguish between black and white and those who do will never feel comfortable or even welcome here.

Firsthand accounts by black travellers in the Soviet Union at the time suggest that the kind of misfortune that befell Mr Twister in the poem could have easily happened in reality. Homer Smith actually experienced a situation so similar to the one described by Marshak that one wonders if the travails of Mr Twister had not inadvertently added a wrinkle or two to his memory. While on a train from Moscow to Leningrad, Smith found himself in the same compartment as a British lady, whose terror over her unexpected proximity

to a black man was so great that she requested a transfer from the train conductor. Not only was her fickle request denied but the conductor made a point of expressing his disdain for her racist paranoia. Having received no satisfaction or understanding, the hapless Briton fled the compartment and spent what had to be an extremely uncomfortable night sitting on her suitcase in the corridor.²⁰ Likewise, Harry Haywood recalls in his memoirs that, during the several years he spent in Moscow as a student at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV), he encountered only one racist incident. On that occasion, he and a group of his friends were riding a streetcar when a drunk muttered 'black devils' in their direction. Upon hearing the abuse, Russian passengers seized the drunk ('How dare you, you scum, insult people who are the guests of our country!') and hauled him off to a police station but not before they had apologised profusely to their exotic-looking 'guests'.²¹ Reading such and similar accounts (and there are many available), one gets a distinct impression that the anti-racist rhetoric of the government and the lofty internationalism of the Comintern did, in fact, penetrate the fabric of Soviet society.²²

Soviet writers, poets and filmmakers turned their scorn for western racism into an art form. In 1935–36, Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov, two popular satirical writers and collaborating authors, drove across depression-era America. The authors of the hugely successful satirical novel *The Twelve Chairs* and its sequel *The Little Golden Calf* reflected on their experiences in the US in a witty travelogue *The One-storey America* (better known in the West as *Little Golden America*). The famous pair were unusually (for Soviet writers) candid in their appreciation of America's many technological achievements and for the vigour and resilience of the country's population. Yet when it came to the racial inequality and discrimination that they observed during their travels, especially throughout the American South, Ilf and Petrov did not pull any punches. They mocked racial prejudices willingly articulated by many of their white interlocutors who, they noted, allowed 'Negroes' no opportunity 'to develop and to grow'.²³ They further suggested that southern racism, with its disgusting, always ridiculous, and sometimes horrific manifestations, impoverished the souls of those 'Southern gentlemen' (clearly most of them) who harboured racial bigotry. In fact, the true soul of the South, as experienced by Ilf and Petrov, was 'its people; not its white people, but its black'.²⁴ American whites, according to the authors, had much to learn from their black compatriots, not the least of which was the ability to experience life to its fullest (just like a true Russian soul would):

Oh, if only the Southern gentleman, the kindhearted spectator or the participant of a lynching-bee suddenly understood that in order to attain full one hundred per cent humanity he needs what he lacks – namely, these very Negro characteristics which he derides! . . . If Negroes were to be taken away from America, the country would, of course, become somewhat whiter, but most certainly it would become at least twenty times more dull.²⁵

North American racism was subjected to a devastating cultural critique in the most popular Soviet film of the 1930s – *Circus* (1936).²⁶ *Circus* tells the story of a white American actress with a black child (played by five-year-old James Patterson), who tours the Soviet Union, where she finds much sympathy and understanding. In 1936–37, this feelgood movie took the Soviet Union by storm. Indeed, in the midst of Stalin’s terror, the Soviets could have used some good old cheer and *Circus*, starring the blond and chastely attractive Lyubov Orlova, offered plenty to cheer about. Orlova played an American circus performer Marion (Mary) Dixon on a tour of the USSR. The woman, who is conspicuously white, harbours a ‘dark’ secret – her little black son, the fruit of forbidden love back in the US. Predictably, she falls in love with the country of socialism and then, in due order, with a nice specimen of Soviet manhood whom she fondly addresses by his patronymic Petrovich. Orlova’s character seems to have a strange proclivity to go against the grain of bourgeois culture and embrace (often literally) what is most frowned upon in capitalist America – blacks and communists. Mary’s German manager von Kneischitz is a highly unflattering depiction of the world of capitalism. Obsessing about money, Von Knieschitz endlessly haggles over the conditions of the contract. He is materialistic. He displays little respect for, or understanding of, the host country and he makes awkward sexual advances towards Mary. He is also an unapologetic racist, sufficiently ignorant of Marxism to fully expect Soviet citizens (who are mostly white, after all) to share his prejudices. When rejected by Mary, he takes his revenge on her by exposing what he sees as her shameful past to the audience of Soviet circus-goers and . . . the whole house erupts into laughter. Thoroughly humiliated, the racist capitalist flees in shame – most likely to the trash-heap of history. In one of the celebrated final scenes of the film, the audience virtually adopts the dark-skinned boy and passes him around the circus. And, very soon, the proud mother, with her Petrovich next to her, marches in a communist parade, surrounded by a joyful crowd and free of any fear of racial prejudice, singing, in delightfully accented Russian, ‘I don’t know any other country where a person can breathe so freely!’

Russian national character becomes a metaphor for racial open-mindedness and inclusiveness in another popular Soviet film of Stalin’s

period – *Maksimka* (1951).²⁷ In this movie, based on a story by the pre-revolutionary Russian writer K. Stanyukovich, a ship crew of grizzly Russian sailors save an African child-slave at sea. The sailors adopt the cheerful black orphan and christen him Maksimka. The saved ‘*negritenok*’ (little Negro boy), eager to please his saviours, entertains them with song and dance. Thus, the special relationship between Russia (and the Soviet Union, we can infer, is a legitimate, if much improved, successor to tsarist Russia) and the oppressed race is upheld once again. In this context, it helps to remember that the Soviet schoolchildren who came to adore the little Maksimka belonged to a generation who, from an early age, had been crying over Harriet Beecher Stowe’s wrenching descriptions of slave life in the American South or following Nigger Jim’s heart-stopping flight to freedom on the Mississippi in *Huckleberry Finn*. It was the same generation who wrote letters of support to the ‘Scottsboro Boys’ on trial in Alabama or marched in protest against Mussolini’s aggression in Ethiopia. It was the same generation that had grown up exposed, almost daily, to anti-American and anti-western propaganda, much of it targeting racism and racial exploitation as some of the most essential features of life in the capitalist West. Indeed, Paul Robeson, it seems, was quite justified in singing praises to the Soviet people’s sense of racial solidarity and egalitarianism.

Africa’s challenge to the Soviet status quo

The story of the Soviet Union bridging the age-old racial divide and providing the oppressed Africans and people of African descent with a new paradigm of colour-blind coexistence is a compelling one. There are plenty of firsthand accounts and a good deal of circumstantial evidence to support it. But was it the whole story? I suggest not. A closer examination of the encounters between ‘black’ and ‘red’ points towards a far more ambivalent picture.

True, Africans, as the most visible victims (and symbols) of capitalist degeneracy, were welcome in Soviet Russia and enjoyed there a degree of respect and acceptance almost unimaginable in the West at the time. Having arrived in Moscow in 1931, Homer Smith noted with amusement the special treatment accorded to black visitors by Muscovites. They would happily relinquish their spot in a food line or in a barber-shop queue for the benefit of a rare African. Russian girls would ditch their Russian suitors to dance with a *negritianskii tovarisch* (Negro comrade) and the suitors (at least, that was Smith’s impression) wouldn’t be in the least offended. Thus: ‘Negroes who were looking only for racial equality found themselves given the full treatment of *racial inequality in reverse*.’²⁸ And not all black visitors enjoyed the special attention heaped upon them. One of them, a Ugandan student

resident in Moscow in the early 1960s, grew positively weary of it, suspecting its real sources to be less than egalitarian: 'I was beginning to feel uncomfortable from all this flattery, which had a touch of condescension in it, too. I began to feel that this was racial discrimination, but, as it were, in reverse.'²⁹

The latter observation is curious enough and not only because it is almost identical to the one registered by Homer Smith almost three decades earlier. It appears that, in their quest for racial equality, the well-intentioned Soviets inadvertently displayed the kind of self-abnegation that (if we dismiss the usual Russian predilection for self-sacrifice as a motivating factor) smacked of paternalism. In both of the films discussed above (*Circus* and *Maksimka*), the Soviet Union/Russia assumes the mantle of the saviour of non-white races ('There is no other country where . . .'), a vocation cherished by the country's Communist elites and apparently internalised by large segments of the general population. In both films, Africa is typically presented in the image of a black child, cute and vulnerable and in dire need of protection. In this respect, the rendition (in a much later film) of the life story of Abraham Hannibal, Peter the Great's adopted son and the great-grandfather of Alexander Pushkin, is also typical. An African child, specially purchased for the Russian tsar at a slave market in Istanbul, is brought to St Petersburg, where he is educated under the benign authority of Peter the Great and later ascends to fame and fortune. In *The Tale of How Tsar Peter Married Off his Negro*, Abraham owes his dizzying career to the magnanimity of the Russian emperor, who (as the title of the movie indicates) micromanaged his life to the extent of selecting a wife for his '*Arap*' (Blackamoor).³⁰ To be sure, it is difficult to act any more paternalistic.

The treatment accorded to Africa by official Soviet culture was undoubtedly well-intentioned. Good intentions, however, did not make the Soviets any more knowledgeable about Africa or Africans. In fact, Soviet African studies were decimated during Stalin's Great Terror, with a number of prominent scholars of Africa swept up in the purges on account of their alleged 'bourgeois nationalism'.³¹ Soviet leaders, including those active in the Comintern and thus exposed to culturally and racially diverse audiences, remained convinced that the application of a basic Marxist analysis was sufficient for understanding other cultures. Marxist internationalism held unquestionable appeal for those who had experienced racial injustice. Yet, in the long term, Marxists' refusal to treat the issue of race as anything but an extension of class struggle could as easily antagonise non-white populations. After all, George Padmore, the prominent West Indian communist and one-time honorary member of the Moscow City Council, broke ranks with his Russian comrades over this very issue.³²

The story of a failed film project, *Black and White*, is a case in point. In 1932, twenty-two African Americans journeyed to Soviet Russia to take part in making a propaganda film about racial (and class) oppression in the American South. Soviet officialdom seemed to have a better idea than black Americans themselves of what life was like for black people in the former confederate states. When, upon their arrival in Moscow, the American visitors were presented with a script of the film, they did not know whether 'to cry or to laugh'. Langston Hughes, who was among the would-be actors, remembered years later:

I was crying because the writer meant well, but knew so little about his subject and the result was a pathetic hodgepodge of good intentions and faulty facts . . . the writer's concern for racial freedom and decency had tripped so completely on the stumps of ignorance that his work had fallen as flat as did Don Quixote's valour when good intentions led that slightly demented knight to do battle with he-knew-what-not.³³

Despite their professed anti-racism, the Soviet sponsors of the project obviously shared some of the entrenched western stereotypes of blacks, as they expected every member of the hapless troupe to be able to sing and dance in the picture. According to Hughes, Soviet officials were flabbergasted to find out that very few of their guests (most of whom were young intellectuals and knew very little about acting) could actually carry a tune.³⁴ Eventually, the project was shelved and the visitors were given a choice of either going back home or staying in the land of socialism.

It was misunderstandings like this that tempered the early enthusiasts of the Soviet Union on the African continent and in the diaspora, who would grow disillusioned with the rigidity of Soviet dogma and with Moscow's conspicuous inability to recognise the importance of race as a vehicle of political discourse. For example, Jomo Kenyatta and George Padmore (both one-time residents in the USSR) in due course traded Soviet communism for nationalist and pan-African aspirations respectively.³⁵

The cold war thrust the Soviet Union deeper into Africa, turning the latter into an important stage in the global ideological contest. Thousands of Soviet technicians and political and military advisors streamed to such newly independent nations as Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Algeria, Egypt and later Angola, Mozambique and (after a spectacular reversal of commitments to Somalia) Ethiopia, to assist in their march on the path of socialist orientation. The Soviet Union also provided military and logistic assistance to the liberation movements in southern Africa.³⁶ The logic of the cold war compelled the superpowers to battle for the 'hearts and minds' of Africa. The Soviets did so by providing African youth with scholarships. Following the

celebrated 1957 Youth Festival in Moscow, the USSR began to receive increasing numbers of African students. Such institutions of higher learning as the Patrice Lumumba Friendship University catered specifically to the academic needs of thousands of young and knowledgeable Third Worlders, among them many Africans. The presence of communities of young Africans in the Soviet cities created a new dynamic in the relationship between the Soviet citizenry and their 'exotic guests'. African students brought with them new lifestyles and aesthetics and generally raised the Soviets' awareness of the outside world. For decades isolated from the rest of humanity, Soviet citizens now had an opportunity to see, live on their streets, the characters of internationalist propaganda lore, while African students became natural conduits for conveying knowledge about Russia and the Soviet Union deep into Africa.

The encounter between the two communities reflected all the contradictions inherent in the artificiality of the Soviet entry into the Third World and in Russia's age-old wariness of foreigners. The lofty anti-colonial rhetoric of the Soviet establishment could not conceal the country's homegrown racism and its officially inspired xenophobia. Africans in the Soviet Union were often confused by the mind-boggling mixture of state-sponsored propaganda, the reality of everyday racism and the selfless generosity and warmth they encountered in many Soviet people.³⁷ Africans on occasion found themselves objects of ridicule while walking down the street or riding a subway. But, at the same time, many Soviets were clearly fascinated with their exotic élan and foreignness. In contrast to Africans' experiences in western countries, students from Africa, the vast majority of whom were male, were popular with Russian women. In fact, during the 1960s–80s, hundreds of Soviet women married African students or had children by them outside wedlock. Hundreds more dated Africans, in spite of the immediate institutional suspicion aroused by close contact with any foreigner.³⁸

Most Africans went to the Soviet Union for practical reasons. Unlike the visitors of the 1920s and '30s, few of them were inspired by ideological considerations. The Soviet anti-racist and anti-imperialist propaganda continued unabated but, with the rise of independent Africa, its efficacy and uniqueness were somewhat diminished. Still, the Soviet Union presented an affordable educational opportunity not to be overlooked. It also projected an alternative vision of development that some newly emerged African nations found so appealing that they dispatched hundreds of their young citizens to the land of the Soviets. Upon their arrival in the USSR, African students often had to adjust to lifestyles and public rituals that many found unappealing. Woodford McClellan has written several exhaustively documented pieces describing the conflicts flaring up between African and African

American students, on the one hand, and Soviet authorities, on the other, at KUTV as early as the late 1920s.³⁹ The 1960s and '70s arrivals could be equally troublesome. They generally differed from their Russian/Soviet peers in their readiness to express grievances and to put forward demands to university and party officials. Some of them ended up pondering the dilemma so eloquently formulated by Homer Smith: 'Was the racial equality worth the bare subsistence living in an atmosphere filled with fear and suspicion?' A number of them obviously decided that it was not, that the rhetoric of racial equality was not enough compensation 'for the lack of material amenities and the absence of civil liberties'.⁴⁰

Accounts by African students in the late Soviet Union are replete with complaints about drab lifestyles, everyday regimentation, sub-standard dormitory accommodation, spying (real or imagined) by Soviet fellow students, and so on.⁴¹ In stark contrast to the prevailing climate of complacency, Africans protested vociferously against restrictions on travel within the USSR; restrictions on dating Russian women; restrictions on forming national and ethnic student associations. The suspicious death of a Ghanaian student in Moscow, in December 1963, provoked an exceptionally angry reaction among West African students in the USSR.⁴² They staged a protest march on the Kremlin demanding a 'bill of rights' for African students in the country (the first unauthorised demonstration in the Soviet Union since the fall of Trotsky in 1927).⁴³ The press was also raging back home. 'Why did our students . . . protest in Moscow recently?' exclaimed one 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?'⁴⁴ In 1975, 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 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'.⁴⁵

Discrimination or alleged discrimination aside, the students' resentment, it was noted, stemmed from 'the sole fact of their living in a communist country'.⁴⁶ 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 the 1960s–70s were 'the crowded living

conditions, lack of privacy, monotonous diet, inadequate sanitary facilities, and the overall drabness of life'.⁴⁷ A former African student at the Moscow State University, writing about his experiences there, maintained that, of all foreign students in the Soviet Union, Africans in general, and especially Nigerians, 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 colour 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, they complained disgustedly, of the *civilized pleasures of Paris – or even Dakar*.⁴⁸

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 *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.⁴⁹ Andrea Lee, in her marvellously thoughtful and perceptive *Russian Journal*, records 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.⁵⁰

Certainly not all Africans in the Soviet Union were set on a collision course with the regime. Yet being an African in the Soviet Union meant performing 'foreignness' on a day-to-day basis. Being black also implied an almost automatic association with a number of political and cultural modern phenomena that taxed Soviet sensibilities. I'm 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. I would argue that the liberal wing of the Soviet intelligentsia sometimes embraced the official liberation 'causes' for reasons other than their being official. 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. His signature penchant for all things exotic notwithstanding, Yevtushenko also mused on the

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 you
 Freedom eternal
 And towards them I'm filled with love
 Enormous like my pine trees

And at the hour of this heated struggle
 I'll follow them closely
 I'll cool their foreheads
 With Russian snow . . .⁵¹

On its surface, the poem reads as yet another evocation of empathy with African aspirations. As shown earlier, the Soviet regime worked hard over the years to domesticate and appropriate African anti-colonial movements or to claim a kind of ideological kinship to the civil rights movement in the US – despite its being epitomised by a charismatic Baptist minister, who was by no means a 'natural ally' of the USSR.⁵² Yet the very discussion of civil and human rights in the context of the Soviet everyday, with its typical rigidity, the routine of a 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 a time when hopes were running high for a long-lasting post-Stalin liberalisation of Soviet society, can also be read as a hymn to freedom – African *and* Russian. It should probably come as no surprise 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'.⁵³ 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 types of artistic expression usually associated with African/black cultural tradition. Living in Moscow in the early 1960s, Andrew

Amar noted Russian students' fascination with jazz 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.⁵⁴

With its strong emphasis on improvisation and free spontaneous expression, jazz (as rock music later) provided for a special kind of camaraderie between its listeners that knew no borders or ideological divides. Jazz as an art form, then, was bound to run afoul of the Soviet authorities, a 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.'⁵⁵

Early Soviet commentators saw in jazz the worst manifestations of western decadence. They also fumed over the music's 'jungle' and 'uncivilised' roots. When it came to criticising jazz, the gloves came off and the Soviet critics of the 'music of grossness' reinforced their arguments with the most nauseating 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 an unbridled sexuality in its performers. For Gorky, jazz is a symptom of decay and sexual degeneracy, a logical final step in man's descent into a spiritual abyss (obesity and homosexuality being the intermediary stages). In his vitriolic denunciation of jazz, the great proletarian author faced an obvious dilemma: how does one reconcile the rejection of this 'degenerate' music with 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 recognises the 'savagery' of black people and also provides an ideologically sound, if rather ridiculous, rationalisation for the spread of jazz music.⁵⁶

Africa, both as a historical agent/construct and as a cultural trope, occupied a uniquely 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 the 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 played, at

least partially, a role subversive of the Soviet status quo. It is highly noteworthy, then, that African themes came to feature prominently in Soviet countercultural production, especially towards the late Soviet period.

Perestroika and cultural production

In 1988, millions of Soviet citizens flocked to the movie theatres to see what would become a classic perestroika film: *ASSA*.⁵⁷ By employing a grotesque but poignant pop-cultural symbolism, the film exposed the debility of late Soviet society to national scrutiny. The movie's main character, the arty and non-conformist 'boy Bananan' (played by countercultural icon Sergey Bugaev, also commonly known to his peers by the nickname 'Africa'), turns himself into a protagonist of change.⁵⁸ Bananan's youth and lightness of being, his alternative lifestyle, his penchant for hippie outfits and his eventual tragic end at the hands of mature and businesslike 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 of 'We wait for changes' by underground rock star Viktor Tsoi, *ASSA* offered both an exposé of, and a challenge to, the Soviet everyday. The very name 'boy Bananan' evoked 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 a 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 . . .⁵⁹

The irony of a scene that shows a black Russian child consuming a cultural product that treats Africa as an exotic, dangerous and slightly ridiculous unknown could not fail to register with the viewers. The black girl's outward appearance made her absorption in the cartoon highly humorous. Yet the significance of this brief cinematic encounter with Africa went beyond a passing movie moment. Both *ASSA* and *Little Vera* give us a glimpse of popular Soviet imagery of Africa and alert 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 girl in the movie didn't just materialise out of thin air amidst the clutter of Soviet domestic life (even if some of the viewers conclude that to have been the case) – her mother is white, hence her 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 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* utilised an idea of Africa and Africanness in its treatment of the contemporary Soviet condition. Such contrasting imagery flushed out the essentials of Soviet experience – its profound isolationism, the drabness of the mundane, the lack of colour and even the notoriously forbidding Russian climate. For many a Soviet citizen, Africa encapsulated the world outside the Soviet ritual, differing from it in almost every respect. At the same time, the African presence in Russia, if often overlooked or ignored, was nevertheless real. From the genealogy of Russia's greatest poet (A. S. Pushkin) to Russians' late nineteenth-century fascination with their Orthodox brethren in Ethiopia, to the prominence of black activists in the Comintern, to genuine widespread enthusiasm for anti-racist and liberation struggles, to later Soviet cold war exploits on the African continent and to the continuing existence of a small but culturally significant African diaspora in the country, Africa has occupied its unique, if not immediately defined, place in Russia's culture, history and popular imagination.

On the eve of Gorbachev's reforms, something of an equilibrium had set in in the relations between independent Africa and the Soviet Union. The Soviets' credentials in supporting Africa's liberation struggles remained quite solid. 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 ('festival kids' as they were sometimes jocularly called, in a suggestive reference to the 1957 Youth Festival) began to enter Soviet public life. To be sure, Africa remained

distant and strange for the average Soviet citizen but it had found its limited but seemingly permanent space in the Soviet popular imagination and within the official cultural and political discourse. Perestroika would upset this status quo.

Perestroika exposed the structural deficiencies of the Soviet system and invited an increasingly open discussion and re-evaluation of the special place the USSR had come to occupy within the international community.⁶⁰ 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 channelling aid to Third World nations. Such arguments had a fairly straightforward implication: the Third World had been 'sponging' off the USSR and thus degrading the quality of life of its citizens.⁶¹ Some of the popular 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 cartoon animals) care little to nothing about 'tomorrow', that turned Africa into a ready scapegoat for popular 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.⁶²

A very similar theme can be found in another popular cartoon *The Lion Cub and the Turtle*, whose characters – several charming and unmistakably African animals – affirm their unapologetic commitment to 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

It would certainly be a stretch to view such 'orientalist' representations of Africa and life in the tropics in general as intentionally demeaning. More likely, they reflected generally benign views, widely held by Soviet citizens and just slightly touched by a certain condescension and paternalism. Yet adverse economic circumstances can easily expedite the transition from condescension to distaste and even outright hostility.

A surge in anti-Third World sentiments accompanied the new revelations about the alleged 'sources' of Soviet underdevelopment. The Soviet Union, the public believed, couldn't afford to support dependants in faraway exotic locations. And Africans, the most visible representatives of the developing world in Soviet public spaces, often bore 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.⁶³ With the country undergoing a tumultuous period of transition and eventual disintegration, Africa largely slipped off the radar of public consciousness in the teetering Soviet Union. Similarly, there was a widespread disillusionment on the African continent with the direction of Soviet reforms, which entailed the USSR's near-complete withdrawal from the Third World. The withering of the cold war and the rapprochement between former ideological rivals significantly degraded the political manoeuvrability of Third World actors and their ability to gain concessions from the superpowers by playing one against the other.⁶⁴

The encounter between Africa and the Soviet Union came to its logical end with the 1991 disintegration of the latter. Yet, some twenty years after the onset of perestroika in the Soviet Union, African students still arrive in Russia in search of affordable education and African diasporic communities obtain in Russia's larger cities. What these communities face in the new Russia, however, is no longer the paternalistic internationalism of Soviet propaganda but an openly hostile ethnic supremacism, nurtured by the rise of extreme-Right political groups against the backdrop of wars in the Caucasus and the economic turmoil that has accompanied the painful transition from socialism to capitalism. It is the fear of racially motivated violence that pervades the lives of Africans, African-Russians and other minorities in the Russia of today.⁶⁵ In such circumstances, it is important to recall that it was not always so – as demonstrated by the record of the deep historical encounter between Africa and Russia.

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- 63 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) and his 'From paternalism to ethno-centrism: images of Africa in Gorbachev's Russia', *Race & Class* (Vol. 46, no. 4, 2006), pp. 79–89.
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- 65 'Xenoracism reaches Russia', *IRR News* (17 March 2004), < <http://www.irr.org.uk/2004/march/ak000015.html> > .

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