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Black in the U.S.S.R.

Africans, African Americans, and the Soviet society

Maxim Matusevich

MEMORIES INFORM AT least some of our life pursuits. I have long been tempted to attribute my interest in the history of African-Russian encounters to one particularly embarrassing episode from my adolescence. On a dreary March afternoon in the mid-1980s, a schoolmate of mine and I were waiting in a long line (lines were ubiquitous in the Soviet Union) at the photographer's studio to have our passport pictures taken. In a few weeks' time, upon turning sixteen, we would be presented with our first Soviet passports—two inconspicuously looking red-jacketed documents with the letters *СССР* [U.S.S.R.] emblazoned on the cover. In some significant ways Soviet passports differed from similar identity papers issued by most other modern states: they contained such information as your place of residence, marital status, military rank for reserve soldiers and officers, and, most notoriously, the so-called *line no. 5* identifying the bearer's ethnicity. And that's where our otherwise nearly identical passports would become two fundamentally different documents. Line no. 5 in my friend's passport would read *Russian*, while my newly minted document would identify me as *Jewish*—an ethnic (not religious) designation infused with cultural and political ambiguity. To be sure, all Soviet citizens, regardless of their creed and color, were supposed to enjoy equal rights and protection by the state. The reality, however, often departed from the ideal. Jews in the Soviet Union routinely found themselves negotiating a murky space—framed by Soviet laws and political slogans, but somewhat dissociated from them in content. Officially, there was no racism in the multiethnic U.S.S.R., racial bigotry being antithetical to Marxist values. The Soviet Constitution, and even the Criminal Code of the land, targeted racial and ethnic discrimination for special approbation and criminal prosecution. Yet many Soviet Jews lived under an invisible cloak of alienation, struggling to reconcile the antiracist rhetoric of the state with its vitriolic denunciations of Israel and the subtle discrimination they faced in their everyday lives—the very real (but never officially mentioned or acknowledged) quotas on university admissions for Jews, the near impossibility for Jews to pursue politically “sensitive” administrative or military careers, and an occasional racial slur hurled at you on an overcrowded city bus or in a communal kitchen. Sitting in that photographer's studio, not yet sixteen, I was nevertheless well aware of the import that the word *Jewish* written on

line no. 5 of the brand new red passport would have on my future. And so, I suspect, was my secure-in-his-Russian-credentials friend . . .

The line had barely moved in a half hour, but the people, accustomed to waiting in queues, showed no impatience. After all, waiting, and quite often waiting in vain, constituted such an essential part of Soviet experience. The studio door opened, letting in a whiff of damp, chilly air, and a young African man, clearly one of the thousands of foreign students present in the country at the time, stepped in. Visibly cold and out of place, he scrutinized the length

of the line, then started to walk toward the chair in the farthest corner of the room. As he was passing by our bench, my friend elbowed me with a sly look on his pimply face and snickered loudly, "*Smotri, kakaya obez'yana!* [Look, what a monkey!]" The African froze on the spot, slowly turned around and approached us. More than

twenty years later, I still remember the furious and disgusted expression on his dark face. He fixed us with his gaze for a few very long seconds. I felt a knot in my stomach; my schoolmate was studying intently the lapels of his shabby school uniform, while the rest of the audience remained demonstratively oblivious to the scandal in the offing. But the scandal never erupted. The black man smiled contemptuously, and then, speaking slowly in a heavily accented Russian, emphasizing every syllable, uttered something very strange: "*A Pushkin tozhe obez'yana?* [Was Pushkin also a monkey?]" Having failed to procure an answer to his rhetorical query, he exited the studio amidst an uncomfortable silence. I turned to my friend: "Why did you insult him?!" "And what are *they* doing here?" countered the boy in a less-than-assured tone. I was at a loss, not quite knowing how to respond to this eternal xenophobic question, and harboring a vague suspicion that the content of line no. 5 in my Soviet passport made me also an outsider in the country of my birth, providing an invisible link between my own path and that of a lonely African student trudging through the early spring slush of Leningrad streets.

Officially, there was no racism in the multiethnic U.S.S.R., racial bigotry being antithetical to Marxist values.

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THE YOUNG AFRICAN'S question had caught us off guard even though the Soviet educational system never made a secret of the African origins of Russia's greatest poet, Alexander Pushkin. Neither did Pushkin himself, passionately researching his own genealogy, commenting occasionally on his "Negro features," and longing for "the skies of my Africa," in the celebrated verse. Then, as now, anyone doubting Pushkin's place on Russia's literary Olympus, or questioning Pushkin's "Russianness" would be committing cultural blasphemy on a national scale. If anything, the poet's African roots supported the claim to the universality of Russian culture,

most famously formulated by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his celebrated *Pushkin Speech* (1880) and, later, for the purposes of political expediency, upheld by Soviet ideologues. Generations of Soviet schoolchildren learned from an early age the minute details of Pushkin's biography, including the rags-to-riches story of his great-grandfather Abram Hannibal. An African slave boy, brought to the court of Peter the Great and adopted by the eccentric tsar, Abram Hannibal would rise to fame and fortune in the early imperial Russia. His personal journey was starkly different from the fate of Africans in other parts of Europe and the Americas. During the height of the Atlantic slave trade, Hannibal, a talented military engineer and mathematician, attained noble status and became a general in the Russian army. There was a sad irony in his "nobility," as, like most other prominent Russian aristocrats at the time, he owned hundreds of slaves: the impoverished peasant serfs. Hannibal's presence in Russian history has always been surrounded by a kind of romantic aura—in part due to his own unconventional life story, but also because of the keen interest that Pushkin displayed toward his exotic progenitor, going even so far as to attempt to write a comprehensive (though unfinished) Hannibal biography, *The Arap of Peter the Great*.

Pushkin's ancestry resonated beyond Russia's borders. While, for generations of Russian and Soviet schoolchildren, Pushkin represented the triumph of Russian national culture, he also attracted admiration from the millions of people of African descent who saw in the exalted status bestowed on this "octoroon" by the Russian society a powerful argument in debunking racist claims of black inferiority. Such sentiments assumed special poignancy among African Americans due to their collective historical

experience of racism and slavery. As observed by W. E. B. Du Bois, in Jim Crow America—where the biological school of racial theory reigned supreme— "the fact that this great literary figure [Pushkin] was the result of miscegenation is of vital interest." Also of "vital

interest" were other examples of Russians practicing racial openness notably out of tune with Western racial sensibilities dominant during the age of social Darwinism. Russian liberal intelligentsia—the likes of Alexander Herzen, Vissarion Belinsky, Nicholas Dobrolyubov, and Nicholas Chernyshevsky—viewed with an unequivocal disgust the institution of American slavery. Herzen and Belinsky drew some all-too-obvious comparisons between America's "peculiar institution" and the system of peasant serfdom in tsarist Russia; while Chernyshevsky did more than any other Russian to popularize Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In 1858, he mailed free copies of the book to the subscribers of the literary journal *Sovremennik* [The Contemporary] under his editorship. At about the same

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time that Stowe's heart-wrenching portrayal of black life in America created a literary sensation among Russia's educated classes, a black American actor, Ira Aldridge, conquered the "hearts and minds" of the theater-going public in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Until his last days (he died in 1867 while on a tour of Russian-controlled Poland), Aldridge would cherish the acceptance and recognition he found among all classes of Russian society, as he did his close personal friendship with the great Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko.

Russia was conspicuously absent from the European scramble for Africa, arguably too busy expanding its own Eurasian empire, and Russians often viewed with suspicion European imperialist adventures on the continent. In case of Orthodox Ethiopia, the suspicion gave way to outward hostility toward Italian invaders and an emotional support for Ethiopian Christians and their (successful) struggle against European aggressors. Russia supplied weapons to Ethiopian troops, and Russian volunteers were present in the camp of Menelik II during the famed battle of Adwa, in which Ethiopians defeated the Italian colonial

army and thus preserved their country's independence. Soon after the war, in 1896, the Russian Red Cross founded a hospital in Addis Ababa and dispatched a team of medics to treat the Ethiopian war wounded. Anticolonial sentiments also ran high in Russia during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902. Throughout the war Russian society remained overwhelmingly pro-Boer, and Russian volunteers and adventure-seekers trekked to South Africa to join in the fight against British colonial domination.

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IT WOULD BE naïve to romanticize the state of race relations in pre-revolutionary Russia. In the conquered areas of Central Asia, for example, tsarist colonial administrations mistreated local populations and instituted segregationist regimes akin to those found across colonial Africa. And the treatment meted out by tsarist officials to Russia's Jews ranged from humiliating to murderous. Yet there exists some evidence—much of it presented in Allison Blakely's groundbreaking study of African-Russian encounters, *Russia and the Negro*, published in 1986—pointing to a society which, as a whole, was less prejudiced in its perceptions of black people than most other contemporary "white" industrial nations. Not only the celebrated Aldridge, but also other black Americans occupying far more modest stations in life, indirectly acknowledged Russia's relative racial tolerance, especially when compared with the conditions that obtained at the time in North America

Russian liberal intelligentsia—the likes of Alexander Herzen, Vissarion Belinsky, Nicholas Dobrolybov, and Nicholas Chernyshevsky—viewed with an unequivocal disgust the institution of American slavery.

and Western Europe. Nancy Prince of Massachusetts joined her husband on a boat bound for Russia, where she stayed at the imperial court in St. Petersburg during the early decades of the nineteenth century. According to her memoir (*A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*, published in 1850), the years she spent in Russia were a period of social and financial success. She built a network of friendly relations in St. Petersburg and was compensated handsomely for the services she provided, in her capacity as a maid and seamstress, to several aristocratic households. Others would follow in Prince's steps, and, toward the end of the nineteenth century, tsarist Russia began to receive a trickle of black travelers: entrepreneurs, circus performers, aspiring musicians, and dramatic actors. Rumors circulating among segments of the African American community painted Russians as more accepting of blacks than were other "Europeans." The famous children's book author and literary critic Kornei Chukovsky remembered spending some time in the company of a black American preacher with whom he shared his lodgings while studying in London in the early 1900s. In their conversations, the preacher observed that Russians were far more open to other races than were their fellow Europeans. He also had a peculiar explanation for this phenomenon: Russians themselves, in his opinion, were not exactly *white*.

Even if the pre-revolutionary Russia attracted friendly curiosity among some black Americans, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 turned this curiosity into a veritable fascination. The Bolsheviks arrived to power forcefully advocating the Marxist ideals of colorblind class solidarity among the oppressed. One did not have to be a political radical to recognize that, in 1917, people of color occupied the lowest ranks in the social hierarchies of European, U.S., and colonial societies. An alliance then, between the ideological opponents of racism and its victims, seemed as logical as it was attractive to both. To be sure, the illiterate masses in the colonies, similar to the masses of black Americans muzzled by Jim Crow, knew precious little about the new Soviet state. But the good news of such a state, founded on principles in stark contrast to those that had defined their disadvantaged position within their respective societies, created quite a stir among those colonial Africans and especially African Americans who had access to the printed word or travel. Some of these early fans of the Soviet Union had communist sympathies and, in a few cases, were even members of the Communist Party. However, for the majority of blacks, the main attraction of the land of socialism lay less in its ideology *per se* than in one particular element: the vociferous rejection of racism and colonialism.



WITHIN A FEW years following the 1917 revolution, the first black travelers in search of racial utopia began to arrive in Soviet Russia. This first pre-World War II wave consisted overwhelmingly (but not exclusively) of African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. Their encounter and interaction with the young Soviet society was significant on many levels. Their very presence in the Soviet Union became an identity-building device for the Soviets, who cast much of their polemic with the West in terms of a contest for moral superiority. Surely, to extend acceptance and friendship to people of color the world over and to host some in their midst was to challenge the capitalist adversaries on the issue of race relations, the issue where, for obvious historical reasons, they appeared most vulnerable. Soviet citizens might have lacked in material comforts and basic freedoms, but they could draw satisfaction from their newly gained status as defenders of the oppressed races. Black visitors and residents in the Soviet Union inadvertently acted as a link between the largely isolated Soviet populace and the world outside; their arrival in the U.S.S.R. was highly symbolic of the new progressive terms on which Soviet Russia engaged the international community. As a result, during the two pre-war decades, black sojourners in the Soviet Union usually received exceptionally warm welcomes and found themselves the objects of fussy care by their Soviet hosts.

The experiences of the acclaimed bard of the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay, were typical in that respect. Having arrived in Soviet Russia in late 1922, McKay immediately gained entrance to the higher echelons of the Soviet political and cultural elite. Embraced by his Russian friends as a representative of the “oppressed Negro race,” he received truly royal treatment—participating in the celebrations of the fifth anniversary of the October Revolution, delivering a special address on the “Negro Question” to a Comintern Congress, and even being offered an airplane ride over Petrograd. In several travel dispatches published in the African American press, McKay was effusive in his praise for the Russians’ tolerance and goodwill, and, for years to come, memories of his “magic pilgrimage” to Russia would continue to excite his imagination, even when his admiration for the Soviet dogma had largely evaporated. But McKay’s account was only the first of many such stories. Dozens of African Americans, and half a dozen Africans, from many walks of life—not just political radicals—were attracted by the promise of racial equality in the land of the Soviets. Invariably, they reported finding a society measuring up to its lofty ideals. Victims of housing segregation back in the States, African Americans enjoyed choice hotel accommodations in Moscow and Leningrad. Not allowed to ride in the “whites only” sections of buses and trains in places like Memphis or Philadelphia, these black visitors were stunned to discover Russians

willingly vacating their seats on public transport to accommodate a “Negro comrade.” Russian girls, it seems, harbored few of the racial prejudices so omnipresent in America; most black male visitors ended up dating and/or marrying Russian women. A young African American journalist from Minnesota, Homer Smith, spent almost fifteen years of his life in Stalin’s Soviet Union. Long after he had grown disillusioned with Soviet dogma (and managed to escape from the U.S.S.R.), he still remembered fondly the dancing parties in the Moscow of his youth, where Russian girls would readily ditch their Russian suitors for a chance to dance with a black American.

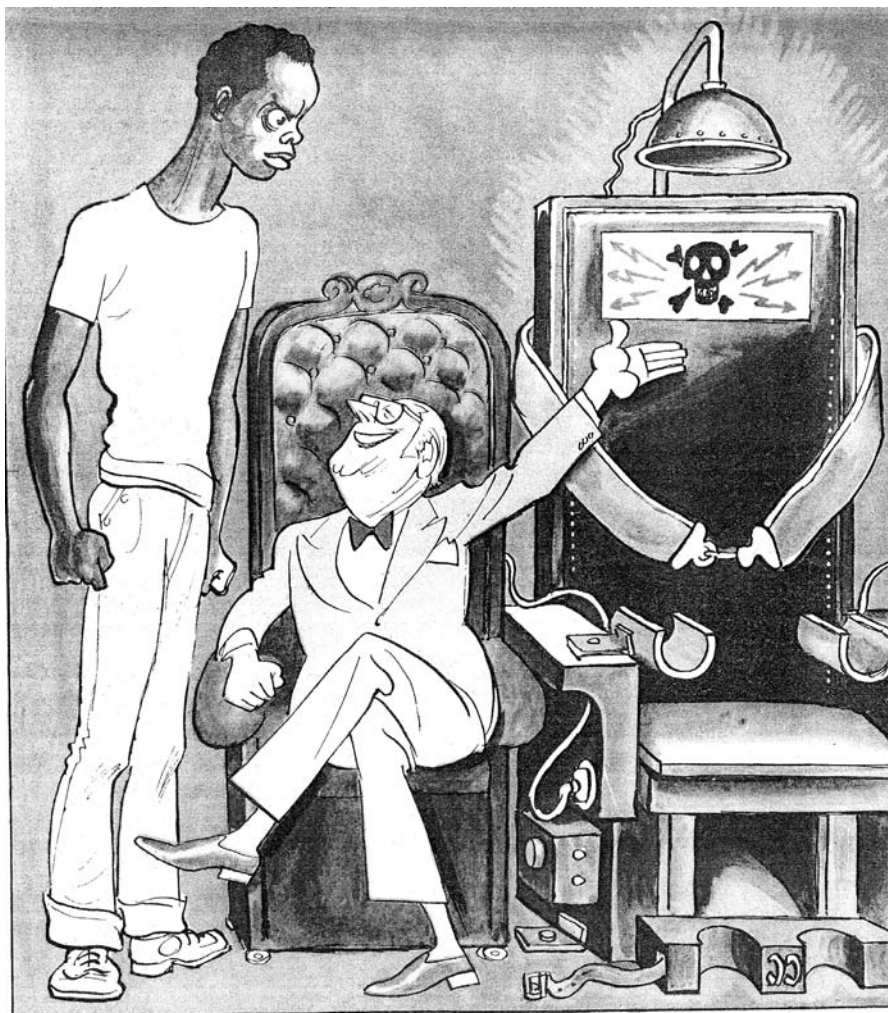
But affairs of the heart couldn’t overshadow the public significance of the Soviet sojourn. For the true believers in the promise of Soviet communism, the Soviet Union offered a ready political platform and an opportunity to actively participate in the grand experiment of creating a new socialist nation. Disempowered and alienated from the political process back home, black radicals experienced upon their arrival in the U.S.S.R. a dizzying

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uplift in social status, along with considerable gain in political clout. Take Otto Hall, for example. This son of a night watchman from Nebraska, fresh “off the boat,” entered the higher echelons of

Soviet power, actively participating in the formulation of colonial policies within the Comintern and updating Joseph Stalin, over a cup of tea, on the state of race relations in the United States. Otto’s brother Harry Haywood achieved an even larger prominence within the Soviet political establishment. A graduate of the prestigious Lenin School in Moscow, Haywood became one of the original sponsors of the so-called “Black Belt Thesis”—a highly controversial 1928 Comintern initiative that envisioned the creation of an independent “Negro republic” in the U.S. South. While the scheme itself came to naught, it nevertheless constituted a remarkable chapter in the history of black nationalism in the United States. It also fleshed out the special relationship between the Soviet and Comintern leadership and those black activists who, like Harry Haywood, operated in close proximity to the epicenter of Soviet power.

For many of these “race travelers,” coming to the Soviet Union was also attended by some tangible material benefits. Homer Smith, unemployed and with few prospects in his native Minneapolis, found gainful employment at the Moscow Post Office. Another young African American, Robert Robinson of Detroit, received a lucrative contract to work as a fine tool-maker at one of the biggest factories in Moscow. A team of young agricultural experts, graduates of Tuskegee and Hampton, traveled to Soviet Central Asia in the early 1930s. At the height of the Great Depression back home, not only were they pleased with their \$700-a-month contracts, but



— Права человека для негров? Что ж, садитесь, поговорим!

Рисунок Н. ЛИСОГОРС

“Human rights for Negroes? Well, take a seat, let’s talk!”

some members of the group—Oliver Golden, George Tynes, and John Sutton, among them—were put in charge of local engineers and given the resources and authority to implement technological and structural innovations in their respective fields of expertise. Needless to say, this was a far cry from Jim Crow America, where a black man exercising authority over white workers would have run a risk much graver than the loss of his job.

Even more satisfying were the experiences of African-American celebrities whose appearances in the pre-war Soviet Union were accompanied by nationwide media coverage and mass celebratory events. In 1932, Langston Hughes led a group of young African Americans to participate in a propaganda movie project, *Black and White*, to have been filmed in the Soviet Union. Even though the film plans would eventually fall through, the members of the hapless cast (very few of them had even the remotest connection to the world of acting), by most accounts, thoroughly enjoyed their time in the Soviet Union. Their travel expenses were reimbursed, they stayed at the best Moscow hotels,

Source:
Krokodil, no. 18
(June 1978), p. 16

traveled to a Black Sea resort, and got paid handsomely despite the fact that they never got to act, and the movie never got produced. Langston Hughes, by far the biggest name on the roster, stood to benefit more than others. By his own admission, during the several months he spent in the U.S.S.R., he made more in advances on his writing than in the course of his whole career up to that point. Like Claude McKay ten years before him, Hughes experienced a dizzying status enhancement. Treated like a true celebrity, he published and traveled widely, presented to rapt and enthusiastic audiences, and became an immediate center of fawning attention, whether among the Moscow literati or the cotton growers in Uzbekistan. Hughes' celebrated memoir, *I Wonder as I Wander*, is to a significant extent the travelogue of his Soviet odyssey and a testimony of his fascination with the Soviet Union.

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This fascination was fully shared by another great African American, the actor and singer Paul Robeson. Probably more than any other foreign celebrity, Robeson's would become a household name in the Soviet Union. Beloved by Soviet ideologues and common people alike, Paul Robeson was virtually adopted by the Soviet public as a national cultural icon. Robeson seems to have been seduced by this adoration, developing a deep personal connection to the Soviet Union (he even placed his son in a Soviet high school) and stirring controversy by declaring America's Cold War rival to be his adopted motherland.



THE SOVIETS RELISHED their antiracist image. Soviet film and literature prominently featured the themes of racial tolerance and multiethnic coexistence, whereby Soviet openness was usually contrasted with Western bigotry. The most popular Soviet film of the 1930s, *The Circus*, presented to cheering audiences the story (purely fictional) of a white American woman and her black child escaping American racism and discovering acceptance and happiness in the land of socialism. In the popular poem *Mr. Twister*, by Samuil Marshak, learned by heart by millions of Soviet schoolchildren, the Soviet society performs an important corrective function by teaching a poignant lesson in racial tolerance to a cartoonishly nasty American capitalist. The capitalist of Marshak's poem ("Mr. Twister the Millionaire") decides on a whim to tour the U.S.S.R. Having arrived in Leningrad and checked into a prestigious hotel, he is shocked to realize that the hotel provides accommodations to black guests. Appalled at this violation of racial hierarchy, Mr. Twister demands "all-white" accommodations for himself and

his family, only to discover that none are to be found in this land of racial egalitarianism. The humiliated racist spends a most uncomfortable night sleeping on his bags in a hotel lobby before fleeing to a steamboat that will take him back to the country where he can indulge his bigotry. The message of Marshak's poem did not fall on deaf ears: black visitors cherished the time spent within a society ostensibly free of Western racism, and Soviet citizens saw in their guests' goodwill yet another confirmation of the righteousness of their cause.

There was a strong element of romance in these early encounters between "black" and "red": initial infatuation, excitement, naïve idealization of the *other*. The emotionality of the first encounter, though, was not to be repeated. Under Stalin's iron rule, the Soviet Union underwent a metamorphosis—its early revolutionary idealism and fiery enthusiasm giving way to heavy-handed bureaucratization and cynical pragmatism in the conduct of foreign policy. More and more, the U.S.S.R. was acting less like a revolutionary force and more like yet another nation-state, and, according to a growing number of contemporary black observers, a "white" nation-state at that. The antiracist and anticolonial rhetoric emanating from the Soviet Union

proceeded unabated, but the deeds occasionally failed to match the words. So the Soviets reportedly shelved the *Black and White* film project in anticipation of the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States. During the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the U.S.S.R.

vociferously condemned the fascist aggression in Africa, yet it soon became known that behind the scenes it was supplying Mussolini's Italy with oil and grain. And then came what a bitter editorial in *The Crisis* called "The Great Betrayal" of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939. Only the most hard-headed of black Communists could accept the necessity of an alliance between the self-proclaimed champions of the oppressed non-white races and the most viciously racist regime on earth. By the outbreak of World War II, the majority of black sojourners had left the Soviet Union, leaving a smattering of mixed-blood descendants, many of whom would constitute the core of a small but culturally significant diasporic community of black Russians.

Some three decades separated the first and the second wave of black arrivals in the Soviet Union. These migrations occurred within strikingly different historical contexts and under circumstances with very little in common. The post-revolutionary wave was almost exclusively African American and consisted of people desperately trying to affirm their dignity in the land rumored to be free of racism. On the force of these euphoric expectations, some of the early arrivals joined the Communist Party or became Communist sympathizers and fellow travelers. While many remained non-ideological and sufficiently

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pragmatic, their positive experiences in the Soviet Union made them, if not accepting of, at least sympathetic to Soviet ideals.

The second wave originated largely in the newly independent nations of postcolonial Africa. It consisted of young (mostly male) students in search of affordable education. They embarked on their travels in a post-World War II geopolitical milieu—shaped by the disintegration of old European empires and dominated by a Cold War standoff between the Soviet Union and the United States. Many of these young Africans came from locations awash with nationalist politics, full of pride for their recently liberated nations, and, as a result, they were less inclined to accept uncritically Soviet patronage. Just as their young countries were attempting to navigate (not always successfully) a “third way,” outside the parameters of the superpower contest, so did they see their presence in the Soviet Union as more an opportunity than a source of loyalty to the host nation. Besides, they entered a society that since its early experimental days had grown decidedly more introverted. During the war, Stalin had revived Russian nationalism and appealed to it consistently in order to raise the fighting spirit of the nation. Suspicious of possible collaboration between the advancing German armies and some of the ethnic groups falling under their sway, the regime singled out several ethnic minorities—the Crimean Tartars, the Chechens, the Ingush, and the Germans—for collective punishment and expulsion to the far reaches of the Soviet Union. The post-war years were marked by political campaigns (some of them quite homicidal) exploiting Russian national pride and feeding the growing xenophobia. During his last years, Stalin launched a series of paranoia-fueled attacks on a mythical cabal of “rootless cosmopolites,” accused of harboring not only anti-Soviet but also anti-Russian designs. The arrested, expelled, and ostracized more often than not sported Jewish names.

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THE PROFOUNDLY ISOLATIONIST Soviet Union of the late-Stalin and immediate post-Stalin years exhibited few of the earlier internationalist trappings—the Comintern-directed attempts to export the Bolshevik revolution to the remotest corners of the globe, along with the Comintern itself, had long since been abandoned. It took Stalin’s death, the rise of a less medieval and more humane Khrushchev, and his subsequent denunciation of Stalin’s crimes to pry slightly open the hermetically shut Soviet Union. The International Youth Festival, celebrated in Moscow in the summer of 1957, remains a major milestone in the history of Soviet advancement toward greater openness.

In his recent memoir, *Afrikanskaya Moskva* [Africa in Moscow], the doyen of Soviet African Studies, Apollon Davidson, remembers the cultural and emotional shock that the festival produced in him and his fellow Muscovites.



— Вы домогались моей руки? Получайте!

Рисунок М.

Source:
Krokodil, no.
30 (October
1976), p. 16

“You were asking for my hand? Now take this!”

All of a sudden the drabness and grayness of Moscow dissipated with the onslaught of color. Young people from dozens of countries descended upon the Soviet capital and turned it into a stage set for the celebration of youth and cultural diversity. Africans figured prominently among the delegates. By many accounts, African guests 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 the hope of getting acquainted with the exotic newcomers. Soviet authorities had planned the festival to showcase Soviet values, but the event overwhelmed them and produced some broad and unintended consequences. During those summer weeks of 1957, millions of Soviet citizens received their first exposure to lifestyles, mannerisms,

aesthetics, cultural expressions, and political debates that contrasted most sharply with the Soviet everyday. The festival itself lasted for only about two weeks, but its effects would linger on for decades; it created an opening through which foreign ideas and art forms began to seep into the Soviet society. And it also reintroduced Africans to the country whose rulers continued to stake their international reputation on a commitment to the struggles against racism and the remnants of colonial rule.

In the aftermath of the 1957 festival, the Soviet government began to extend generous educational scholarships to students from Africa. The initial trickle grew into a flood, and, eventually, thousands of young people from the continent and other parts of the developing world would pursue education at Soviet institutions of higher learning, especially the Lumumba University in Moscow, created expressly for this purpose. After decades of isolation, Soviet citizens once again found themselves face-to-face with a colorful cast of exotic visitors. But, even more importantly, they were now facing an entirely new phenomenon: the presence in their midst of the growing population of foreigners who shared with them the space of their cities and their educational institutions, yet by and large remained outside the system.



THE MAJORITY OF African students cared little for Soviet ideology—as far as they were concerned, there wasn't much symbolic or emotional significance to their arrival in the U.S.S.R. The task at hand was to seek not racial equality but, rather, an affordable quality education. Consequently, attempts by Soviet authorities to infuse educational programs with ideology or to add courses in Marxism/Leninism or Communist Party history to the curriculum were usually met with suspicion and sometimes outright hostility.

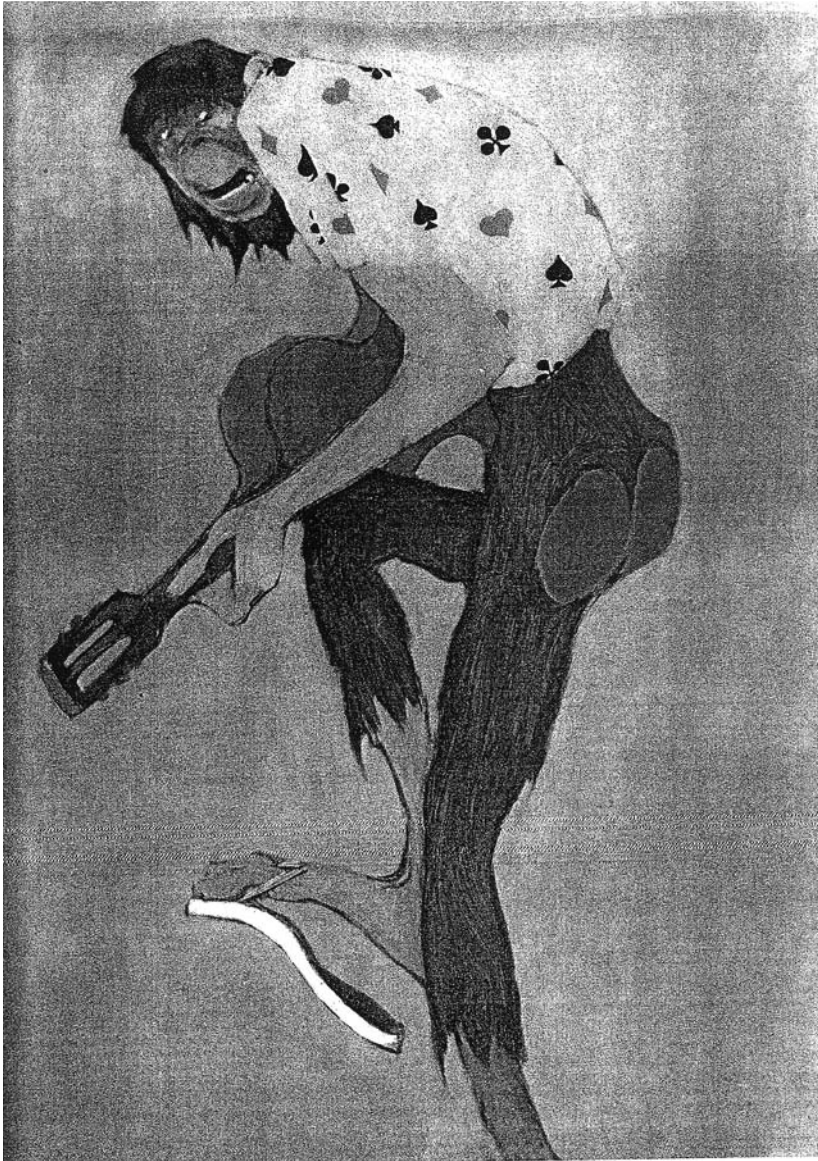
Controversies pitting African students against university administrations, Soviet authorities, or Soviet student bodies arose with some regularity and resulted on occasion in the exodus or expulsion of “troublesome” Africans. Such incidents also received in-depth coverage in the Western media, which, in the best traditions of the Cold War, was only too eager to expose Soviet deficiencies. One particularly notorious episode occurred in December of 1963, when dozens of Africans protested (in Moscow's Red Square) the death of a fellow Ghanaian student whose demise, ruled a drunken accident by the Soviet police, was rumored to have been a racially motivated homicide. An unsanctioned public expression of dissent violated the unspoken (but strictly enforced) rules of public conduct in the Soviet Union. Very few Soviet citizens at the time would have dared so flagrantly to challenge the authorities. The 1963 “March on the Kremlin” and the subsequent submission of a formal petition by African students to the Soviet government—along with a number of similar later incidents—challenged most unambiguously the seemingly

unassailable laws guiding political discourse in the U.S.S.R. Such uninhibited political actions on the part of African students put the Soviet establishment in a tight spot. Fearful of antagonizing the much-courted Third World, the Soviets, in dealing with African students and the periodical flare-ups of their discontent, exhibited an unusual degree of flexibility. In the 1963 demonstration, as in the case of later protest petitions in 1965 and 1975, Soviet authorities were willing to hear out the grievances presented by disgruntled African students, a democratic privilege not extended to the Soviet population at large. Those who, like Nigerian Theophilus Okonkwo or Andrew Richard Amar and Stanley Omar Okullo of Uganda, confronted the officialdom head-on, and—an even worse transgression—vented their grievances to the Western press, could expect to be singled out for public denunciation and expulsion from the university and the country. However, compared to the punishments routinely meted out to Soviet dissidents, the rebels among African students in the U.S.S.R. received a fairly mild treatment by the powers that be.

By engaging in a direct debate with the Soviet system, Africans inadvertently subverted it. Their place within the Soviet society, then, was peculiarly ambiguous. Having entered as the presumptive “allies” of the system, they in fact carved out for themselves a separate and highly unusual space—a place of *relative freedom* from the political and cultural constraints of Soviet life day-to-day. Compared to an average Soviet citizen, African students in the U.S.S.R. enjoyed greater freedoms of expression and movement, freedoms that they did not hesitate to claim. Many of them arrived from settings more cosmopolitan than the Soviet Union, were multilingual and usually better off (due to higher stipends) than their Soviet peers, and had opportunities for foreign travel. As a result, Africans of the second wave often acted as the conduits of Westernization, giving their Soviet friends, fellow students, and girl friends their first taste of things foreign: jazz and rock ’n’ roll records, blue jeans, popular magazines, books in a variety of European languages, etc. Living in Moscow in the early 1960s, Ugandan Andrew Amar noted the Russian students’ fascination with jazz music and their awareness of its historical roots:

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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.



Source:
Krokodil, no.
17 (October
1964), p. 7

(*Chic-Modern*: Soviet cartoonists mocked the “jungle nature” of jazz and rock music)

With its strong emphasis on improvisation and free spontaneous expression, jazz forged—as rock music did later—a special kind of camaraderie between its listeners, one that knew no borders or ideological divides. Jazz as an art form, then, was bound to run afoul of 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 convinced the Soviet authorities to condemn this kind of music.”



CLEARLY, THE PLACEMENT of thousands of young Africans within the Soviet society, something that had been conceived by the Soviet officialdom as a part of a winning Cold War strategy, had some unintended political and cultural consequences. Not only did Africans, by dint of their “foreignness” and detachment from the Soviet mainstream, remain “above the system,” but they also provided inspiration to the burgeoning Soviet counterculture. Being black in the U.S.S.R. often implied an intrinsic link to unconventional political and cultural tropes—those of liberation, youthful rebellion, emancipation from the strictures of convention. Africa, without a doubt, supplied its fair share of dedicated Marxists and staunch Soviet allies, but “black causes”—anticolonial struggles, the civil rights movement in the United States, and black liberation in general—had a way of getting out from under the harness of Soviet patronage. The post-Stalin generation of young Soviet intellectuals was fond of evoking African themes in their works. The popular poets Yevgenii Yevtushenko and Andrei Voznesensky, generally viewed as moderately iconoclastic, looked at Africa with longing; they imagined it as a poetic battleground for freedom—a freedom as enticing as it was contagious. To them, and to the underground rock bard Boris Grebenshchikov, Africa offered a contrasting image to the Soviet experience of everyday. One of Grebenshchikov’s early albums, *Radio Africa*, is set to the sound of short-wave radio static—an unambiguous evocation of Africa’s remoteness and foreignness, its fantasy-land status among those dreaming of an escape from the drabness and restrictiveness of Soviet existence. And this escapism might be the reason why one of the pioneers of the late-Soviet underground, musician, actor, and installation artist Sergei Bugaev, became known to thousands of his fans under the moniker *Afrika*.

This fascination with Africa extended into the *perestroika* [restructuring] period of the late 1980s. Africa-related themes and even black characters featured prominently in such cinematic hits of the late-1980s as *ASSA* (dir. Sergei Soloviev, 1988) and *Little Vera* (dir. Vasilii Pichul, 1989). Both films employed grotesque imagery to flesh out and critique the essentials of Soviet experience—its dreariness and lack of color, its insular nature, an apparent disconnect from the outside world. Africans—African-Russians, to be more precise—function in these films to highlight the absurdity and “strangeness” of life in the U.S.S.R., where the lofty rhetoric of internationalism often failed to capture the reality of African-Soviet encounters. Africans in the *perestroika* films are invariably juxtaposed with the Soviet system, used as an artistic foil to reveal the system’s deficiencies. They symbolize Soviet ideals gone awry. In *ASSA*, we meet a rebellious youth (played by Bugaev-Afrika) who goes by “Boy Bananan” and his black Russian friend. The pair embraces aesthetics and lifestyles alien to the Soviet regime. Africa for them

is a countercultural idea, a constant point of reference, a source of artistic inspiration and irony permeating their cat-and-mouse games with the establishment. *Little Vera*, probably the most-watched Soviet film of all time—it contained the first explicitly sexual scene ever to have been depicted in a Soviet movie—similarly makes use of this idea of Africa to satirize the hypocrisy of the regime. In one particularly tongue-in-cheek scene, the viewer is brought into a typically shabby Soviet flat. We see a little black boy, seated in front of a TV, oblivious to his immediate surroundings and completely engrossed in a popular children’s cartoon. At one 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 . . .*

The incongruity of the situation—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 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 far beyond a passing movie moment. *Little Vera* gives us a glimpse into the popular Soviet imagery of Africa and alerts the viewer to Africa’s presence in late-Soviet public and cultural domains. Yes, Africa is of 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 might have thought that to be the case—his mother was 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 in training in the U.S.S.R., or maybe even a visiting black American musician (the partisans of Soviet counterculture worshipped the likes of Louis Armstrong, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley, and others).

There is plenty of irony in the scene described above. And it’s also sadly ironic that, after decades of antiracist campaigns, the late-Soviet society and its post-Soviet Russian successor would succumb to an epidemic of widespread racism and racially motivated violence. There seems to have existed a certain disconnect between the internationalist ideals trumpeted by the Soviet state and Africa’s real place within the Soviet society. The Soviet state’s concern for the oppressed races easily crossed over into heavy-handed paternalism, which on occasion bore remarkable similarities to the nineteenth-century European thrust to civilize African “savages.” African residents in the U.S.S.R. sometimes



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“Hello, old hag! Double moonshine with ice and tonic!”

complained that the Soviet popular culture and propaganda objectified them as “wards of the state” in need of support and protection. Soviet cartoons, films, and children’s literature infantilized Africans, presenting them as docile and ready to please, but also gullible and prone to seek pleasure rather than work. In the minds of millions of Soviet children, Africans became forever associated with the carefree existence on the fictional island of *Chunga Changa*—the subject of a popular animated short by the same name. The little black children populating this “miracle-island” apparently spent their days dancing away and carrying on a catchy tune:

*What a miracle-island, miracle-island
Life is so easy here
Life is so easy here
Chunga Changa!*

*We're happy day in and day out:
Just munching on coconuts and bananas
Just munching on coconuts and bananas
Chunga Changa!*

The subliminal message of the cartoon and other similar productions was not lost on the audience: Africans were cheerful and entertaining, friends of dance and song, and strangers to more exacting types of labor. As long as the Soviet economy was grinding on—or at least pretended semi-successfully to be doing so—such condescending representations of Africa and Africans did little more than evoke amusement and even sympathy in the general public. But with the Soviet Union entering a period of precipitous decline during the 1980s, especially toward the end of the decade, attitudes began to change.

Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms opened the floodgates for devastating criticisms and a reassessment of Soviet historical experience. *Glasnost* [openness] also meant that Soviet journalists and politicians now felt free to pass severe judgments on the system that before had been largely shielded from domestic censure. Soviet economic failures were now routinely blamed on the deficiencies of the system itself and its impractical nature—presumably manifesting itself in a tendency to provide “too much aid for Africa” and waste national treasure on “black-skinned loafers.” Soviet society, affected by economic distress and an accelerating political transformation, lashed out against the outsiders, especially those deemed complicit in the nation's decline. Africans and African Russians began to report a steep rise in the number of racist incidents. The country that used to harangue the world on the values of racial tolerance and ethnic coexistence was now mired ever deeper in xenophobia and a variety of interethnic conflicts. Africans ended up in a particularly unpleasant fix—viewed with suspicion or even outright hostility across the political spectrum. For the apologists of the regime, Africans had come to be associated with Western influences—a bunch of ungrateful subversives who sponged on the Soviet economy only to drag it down later. But, remarkably, racism had also taken root among the so-called “liberal intelligentsia,” the educated class most critical of the Soviet Union. These avatars of *perestroika* blamed Africans for imparting leverage to the hated Soviet system. African wars of liberation, funded by the Soviets, or antiracist campaigns in the West, received vociferous Soviet support. Soviet dissidents harbored deep resentment toward the type of Western radical represented by African American Communist Dr. Angela Davis, who, while persecuted in her native land, was accorded a hero status by the Soviet officialdom. Such figures were viewed as providing legitimacy and moral high ground to the *immoral* U.S.S.R. Thus the anti-Soviet intellectuals fell into the trap of accepting at face value the old, and much disapproved, Soviet adage of a “natural alliance” between the land of socialism

and the world's non-white populations. Sadly enough, black residents in the late Soviet Union often found themselves trapped between these two competing—yet equally unfriendly—interpretations of their agency within the Soviet society, an unfortunate tendency that has stretched into the post-Soviet era in Russia with some pernicious and even deadly results.

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MY OLD SCHOOL friend called me several months ago (oh, the wonders of Google . . .). The conversation meandered and never quite picked up—it has been more than twenty years since we last saw each other, and during that time our lives proceeded in decidedly different geographical and professional directions. He has done well for himself though, having been recently appointed state prosecutor in one of the major Russian cities. Among other things, I asked him about the explosion of racial violence (physical attacks on and occasional murders of “non-Russian-looking” people in the streets of the new Russia). He scoffed at the question: “Stuff happens, like anywhere else, but it always gets overreported in the West. When it does happen we prosecute . . . mercilessly.” I then reminded him about that photographer studio incident from our youth—the drizzly Leningrad evening, our first Soviet passports, an awkward confrontation with the black man who suddenly brought up Pushkin. There was a short pause on the other end of the line. Nope, didn’t ring a bell; he didn’t remember. . . . Somehow I didn’t think he would. 🌐