

# Histories of Color: Blackness and Africanness in the Soviet Union

Hilary Lynd<sup>a</sup> and Thom Loyd<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of California Berkeley, hilary.lynd@berkeley.edu

<sup>b</sup>Cardiff University, LoydT@cardiff.ac.uk

When the Soviets set out to court dark-skinned people of African descent, the first challenge was deciding what to call them.<sup>1</sup> In the Moscow-based Communist International (Comintern), native speakers of different languages came together to debate the future of a race they named and circumscribed in different ways. In 1921, the (all white) South African delegation noted that “the word ‘Negro’ is never used in South Africa, except its corrupted form ‘N\*\*\*\*r’ in an insulting sense. Technically, the Negro is the more northern natives. The southern race of Africa is known by their own term ‘Bantu’ to ethnologists.” Bowing to convenience and mirroring the predominance of racial vocabulary borrowed from the United States, the delegation reported that “we have used the better known word ‘Negro’ to cover the lot.”<sup>2</sup> In 1923, David Ivon Jones, the Comintern’s white “Delegate for Africa,” wrote that “if the COMINTERN should popularize the far more inclusive and more dignified term ‘ETHIOPIAN’ as a sign of the race’s emergence to proletarian consciousness, it would be an achievement.”<sup>3</sup> In the interwar period, the Soviets referred to Africans alternately as natives (*tuzemtsy*), Negroes (*negry*), and members of the black race (*chernaiia rasa*).<sup>4</sup> In the postwar period, Negroes (*negry*)

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1. Cognizant of the historicity of racial terms and their different meanings in varying settings, in this essay we use “Black” in an American context and “black” in an African context to emphasize the political importance of Black ethnicity in the United States, a usage that is less common on the African continent. Our varied use of Black/black is an imperfect solution, but we hope it underscores a central point: historians of the Soviet Union should be wary about exporting American categories and experiences to explain racial formations that vary across contexts.

2. “Statement of South African Delegation to Comintern, 16 July 1921,” in Apollon Davidson et al., eds., *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History*, 2 vols. (London, 2003), I, 77. We have chosen to translate *negr* as “Negro,” reflecting direct borrowing of terminology in the earlier periods. Since the 1960s, “Negro” has aged to obsolescence in the English language and *negr* has gathered more derogatory connotations in Russian.

3. David Ivon Jones to the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), January 8, 1923, in *South Africa and the Communist International*, I, 119.

4. Apollon Davidson, ed., *Komintern i Afrika: Dokumenty* (St. Petersburg, 2003), 97, 99.

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declined in formal usage as Africans (*afrikantsy*) and African Americans (*afro-amerikantsy*) became more common.<sup>5</sup> Colloquially, Soviet citizens often called people of African descent *chernyi* (black), grouping them with people from Central Asia and the Caucasus. Terminology continued to spark debate among African Studies experts, as captured in a 1968 report for the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences. While *negry* was commonly spoken, the report argued, experts only used the term to define an “anthropological type,” a “particular negroid race.”

“Negro” is a term of abuse given by Europeans to Africans that means “black.” Although in America the word “Negro” for designating a people (*narod*) is already firmly established in everyday life, these days they prefer to call themselves African Americans. In Africa the word “Negro” always was and is taken as a slur. Therefore, we must abandon this term decisively.

The report cautioned against *all* categorizations by skin color and instead recommended referring to Africans either by ethnicity or state to which they belonged.<sup>6</sup> Naming and translation problems, however, reflected a deeper conceptual problem. What was the meaning of blackness in the Soviet Union?

There are two stories scholars tell about race and blackness in the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> For historians of the first variety, what distinguished the Soviet Union was the absence of a system of “racial” classification for dark-skinned people of African descent, who did not experience there the kind of systematic social and economic discrimination that they endured in the west. Particular historical developments propelled the process of racialization in the west: the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the creation of overseas empires, and the exploitative logics of capitalist expansion all contributed to the making of blackness as a racialized category for African-descended people.<sup>8</sup> These developments did not pertain to the Soviet case. Nor did race feature in Soviet administrative categories, which prioritized “nationality.” Historians of this ilk often bristle

5. Google Books Ngram Viewer: <http://books.google.com/ngrams> (accessed February 26, 2022).

6. Arkhiv Rossiiskoi akademii nauk (ARAN), fond (f.) 1731, opis (op.) 1, delo (d.) 101, list (l.) 30, (Natsional’nyi vopros v nezavisimykh stranakh Tropichestkoi Afriki, March 25, 1968).

7. Previous debates centering the concept “race” in Soviet history have not usually emphasized color or taken “blackness” as a central category. Instead, the key question has been about the extent to which Soviet categories of nationality or ethnicity became biologized. See Eric D. Weitz, “Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges,” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002), and replies by Francine Hirsch and Amir Weiner; Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005); Amir Weiner, “Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia: Delineating the Soviet Socio-Ethnic Body in the Age of Socialism,” *American Historical Review* 104, no. 4 (October 1999): 1114–55; David Rainbow, ed., *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context* (Montreal, 2019); Mark Bassin, *The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism, and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia* (Ithaca, 2016); Eugene M. Avrutin, *Racism in Modern Russia: From the Romanovs to Putin* (London, 2022).

8. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944); Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968); Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800* (London, 2010).

at what they see as ill-informed attempts to import American taxonomies and preoccupations to a Eurasian context shaped by different historical forces.<sup>9</sup>

For the other group of scholars, this story of racial “absence” itself reflects a long history of erasure. In this second account, ideas of race and blackness were pervasive in the Soviet Union, manifested in aesthetic representations of the oppressed, civilizational hierarchies, policy and pedagogy aimed at darker-skinned populations, and countless everyday interactions. Administrative categories may have been different. There was no differentiated citizenship for people of darker skin, no system of segregation or formal inequality in labor markets. But that does not mean that race—or anti-black racism—did not exist.<sup>10</sup>

At first glance, these stories seem irreconcilable. The first considers causes of racialization, emphasizing the Soviet Union’s exceptionalism; the second highlights consequences of racialization, undermining claims to Soviet uniqueness. We contend that both contain elements of truth. If we take both seriously, we confront a yet more difficult problem: if the usual suspects—the trans-Atlantic slave trade and overseas European empires—cannot be invoked to explain the making of blackness in the Soviet Union, we must look elsewhere for explanations. Regarding African-descended people racialized as black, the imperial Russian past offered only indirect historical references. Literature in translation from the French, British, and American empires provided Russian readers with foundational ideas about black people’s supposed childlike innocence.<sup>11</sup> Some among the Russian intelligentsia referenced American slavery to clarify their thinking on forms of oppression in their midst, arguing that the social position of Russian serfs, or perhaps Jews in the Russian Empire, echoed the plight of Black Americans.<sup>12</sup> Marxist thought provided no clear guidance, either; theorizing race was not a pressing concern in the European socialist tradition.<sup>13</sup> But anti-black discrimination

9. Meredith L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928–1937* (Lincoln, 2012); Amir Weiner, “Nothing but Certainty,” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2002); Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson, *The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era* (Johannesburg, 2013).

10. Maxim Matusevich, “Black in the USSR: Africans, African Americans, and the Soviet Society,” *Transition*, no. 100 (2008); Alaina Lemon, “The Matter of Race,” in Rainbow, ed., *Ideologies of Race*; Adrienne Edgar, *Intermarriage and the Friendship of Peoples: Ethnic Mixing in Soviet Central Asia* (Ithaca, 2022); Jeff Sahadeo, *Voices from the Soviet Edge: Southern Migrants in Leningrad and Moscow* (Ithaca, 2019); Nana Osei-Opare, “Uneasy Comrades: Postcolonial Statecraft, Race, and Citizenship, Ghana-Soviet Relations, 1957–1966,” *Journal of West African History* 5, no. 2 (2019).

11. John MacKay, *True Songs of Freedom: Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Russian Culture and Society* (Madison, 2013).

12. Avrutin, *Racism in Modern Russia*; Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Cambridge, UK, 2011).

13. Critical of the Eurocentric outlook of Marxist thought and Communist parties, several generations of Black radical thinkers developed alternative ways to theorize the articulation of class exploitation and race domination. See W.E.B. Du Bois, “Marxism and the Negro Problem,” *The Crisis* 40, no. 5 (May 1933); George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?: The Coming Struggle for Africa* (London, 1956); Aimé Césaire, *Letter to Maurice Thorez* (Paris, 1957); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London, 1983).

was a major political and ideological problem of the twentieth century that the Soviet Union could not ignore.

Color mattered in the Soviet Union. But how? The answer changed over time, reflecting the country's shifting engagement with human diversity within and beyond its borders. Soviet ideas about race and color evolved in conversation with both black people who sought to dismantle or escape racist oppression and the Soviet Union's great power peers that perpetuated white dominance. A series of actors and institutions tried, given the exigencies of their respective eras, to bridge the basic incommensurability of multiple systems for thinking about human difference. Analogy became a central tool for doing so. Soviet policymakers and scholars, as well as a broad array of visitors from afar, used analogies to make blackness legible by likening it to something else.

To understand the making of blackness in the Soviet Union, our view must encompass the African continent *and* diaspora. We suggest thinking in terms of three broad conjunctures: the Comintern period of the 1920s–30s, when Black America was the center of attention; the decolonization period of the late 1950s–mid 1960s, when black Africa was the focus; and the period of disillusion from the mid 1960s–1990s, as the projects of socialism and post-colonial development decayed alongside one another. While Soviet citizens' exposure to ritualized denunciations of racial violence and to people from the African diaspora grew over time, we caution against reading a simplistic arc from racial innocence to anti-racist enlightenment and finally to racist prejudice. Rather, the distinctiveness of Russian and Eurasian ideas about human difference eroded partially—but not completely—over decades of engagement with the Atlantic world and beyond.

### **Africa by Analogy: Blackness in the Interwar Period**

After the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks adapted their millenarian aspirations to complex realities. Quickly, they made peace with the existence of nations, defined in Stalin's terms by language, territory, culture, history, and psychology. The nations of the former tsarist empire were real, if perhaps impermanent, and had to be accommodated rather than effaced.<sup>14</sup> Far more challenging was deciding how, if at all, to think about race and color. While prioritizing class, Soviet ideology marginalized biological race as a category for thinking about community, conflict, and the way the past was connected to the future.<sup>15</sup> Bolsheviks believed that anthropological types existed, but the main reason to study them was to prove their social and political irrelevance.<sup>16</sup> Still, the Bolsheviks made their revolution in a world marked by a global color bar privileging lighter-skinned over darker-skinned people. Moreover, the

14. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*; Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 414–52; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001).

15. Marina Mogilner, *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia* (Lincoln, 2013), 347–73.

16. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 231–72.

Bolsheviks attempted to export their revolution amidst the growing appeal of organized attempts, spanning the Atlantic, to dismantle the institutions of white supremacy and segregation. Presented in just the right way, a case could be made (and was, beginning in 1928) that Black Americans were an oppressed national minority. Yet no amount of stretching Stalin's definition of a nation could encompass black people living on the African continent and in diaspora, geographically dispersed by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Soviet policymakers and scholars usually took as given that black people on both sides of the Atlantic shared a connection, but they struggled to define the nature of the connection. Was it based on common structures of oppression or on common culture, origins, and consciousness among the oppressed? If oppressive structures could be demolished, would common consciousness prove durable or ephemeral? Would blackness outlast racism? In trying to clarify the meaning of blackness on a global scale, one source of guidance was fragmentary exposure to black radicals who came into the Comintern's orbit; another was an ongoing search for analogues.

When the Comintern first convened a "negro commission" to define the international communist movement's stance on racial oppression, no black Africans participated. Generally, the Comintern structure was organized in terms of existing states, but the African diaspora challenged this logic. At the Fourth Congress in 1922, Black Americans born in the West Indies and white South Africans born in Britain spoke for black Africans on the basis of different kinds of adjacency. Diasporic, linguistic, and administrative logics collided. It was unclear what was most important: shared historical and cultural ties across an African continent and diaspora united by shared subjection to a global color bar, or the common political space of people organizing in a given language within a particular state and against a specific economic apparatus.

Knowing that communists had to compete with pan-Africanist rivals whose visions for black liberation spanned the Atlantic, the Negro Commission took the appeal of pan-Africanism as a given: "It only remains to influence the content to be given to the common action of the Negroes as a race."<sup>17</sup> At the same time, members worried that "race solidarity is used for counter-revolutionary purposes among the Negroes." One argued that "as a colour question which divides the working class the matter [race prejudice] demands the immediate attention of the Comintern. But not as a race question uniting the Negroes."<sup>18</sup> Considering Black Americans to be the most politically conscious and "advanced" in the African diaspora, the Negro Commission determined that "the history of American Negroes prepares them to play a decisive role in the liberation struggle of the entire African race."<sup>19</sup> In presenting Black

17. "David Ivon Jones to ECCI, 8 January 1923," in Apollon Davidson et al., eds., *South Africa and the Communist International*, vol. 1, 118–19.

18. "I. Amter to David Ivon Jones, 10 May 1922," Apollon Davidson et al., eds., in *South Africa and the Communist International*, vol. 1, 106.

19. "Chetvertyi kongress, 5 noiabria–5 dekabria 1922 g.: Negritianskii vopros," in Béla Kun, ed. *Kommunisticheskii internatsional v dokumentakh: Resheniia, tezisy i vozzvaniia kongressov Kominterna i plenumov IKKI, 1919–1932* (Moscow, 1933), 366. For an exception to this focus on Black Americans, see Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the*

Americans as the political vanguard of the African diaspora, the Comintern echoed the Pan-African Congress.<sup>20</sup>

With little knowledge of Africa and without black African representation in the Comintern until 1927, policy regarding the continent was formulated mainly by analogy, and policy debates often took the form of arguments over which of multiple possible analogies was more appropriate. On one hand, thinking that the struggle of black Africans paralleled the struggle of national minorities in the Soviet east or anti-imperialists in China and India propelled the growth of African Studies within the institutions of Oriental Studies and the recruitment of students from Africa to the Communist University of Toilers of the East (KUTV). This analogy clustered a set of associations among the concepts “East,” backward, native, and oppressed.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, thinking that the situation of black Africans paralleled the situation of Black Americans propelled the creation of institutions speaking for, and policies addressed to, all black people, such as the Comintern’s Negro Commission and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers. Especially difficult to characterize were the West Indies, still under European imperial rule, but economically and politically linked to the US. Caribbean- and US-born communists engaged in fierce debate over categories and analogies: how were the struggles of Black people in the West Indies and in the US the same and how were they meaningfully different?<sup>22</sup> At stake was the relative usefulness of aggregating and disaggregating approaches in a situation where aggregating almost always meant adopting American ideas and vocabularies.<sup>23</sup>

After the Sixth Congress in 1928, the Comintern’s ignorance of the African continent was identified as a problem. In 1929, Hungarian Communist Endre Sík formulated a preliminary Marxist research program for African Studies.<sup>24</sup> From limited secondhand exposure through black radicals who passed through Moscow, Sík tried to articulate a coherent Soviet approach to blackness. He identified black Africans as “the most backward and undeveloped peoples” and “the most defenseless of imperialism’s victims.” Before

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*Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963* (Durham, NC, 2002), 25–85.

20. Sarah Claire Dunstan, “Conflicts of Interest: The 1919 Pan-African Congress and the Wilsonian Moment,” *Callaloo* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2016).

21. Masha Kirasirova, “The ‘East’ as a Category of Bolshevik Ideology and Comintern Administration: The Arab Section of the University of the Toilers of the East,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2017); Marcia C. Schenck, “Constructing and Deconstructing the ‘Black East’—a Helpful Research Agenda?” *Vienna Journal of African Studies* 18, no. 34 (2018): 135–52.

22. Margaret Stevens, *Red International and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919–1939* (London, 2017), 151–52.

23. In one example, an animated film about racism in Cuba was replete with references to recognizable Americanisms: jazz music, lynchings, and executions by electric chair: Christina Kiaer, “A Comintern Aesthetics of Anti-Racism in the Animated Short Film *Blek end uait*,” in Amelia M. Glaser and Steven E. Lee, eds., *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto, 2020), 372.

24. Apollon Davidson, “Avtor pervoi mnogotomnoi ‘Istorii Chernoi Afriki,’” in *Stanovlenie otechestvennoi afrikanistiki* (Moscow, 2003), 78; Irina Filatova, “Soviet Historiography of Anti-Colonial Struggle (1920s–1960),” in P. T. Zeleza, ed., *The Study of Africa*, 2 vols. (Dakar, 2007), 2: 203–34.

European empire, Sík argued, “the Black continent was a single broad territory, which had still not been divided.” In this flat, uniform conception of Africa, divisions were artificial because they were introduced by imperialist outsiders.<sup>25</sup> As to whether those divisions—or any distinctions among black people—mattered now, Sík was torn. Studying Africa, he wrote, was “necessary for the resolution of the Negro problems of other countries,” and studying “the American Negro question” was “necessary for African Negroes.” Elucidating the horrors of empire in Africa was needed to “overcome the racial pacifism” of Black Americans. Illuminating the “treachery of the American Negro bourgeoisie” would help “overcome the influence of supra-class racial solidarity of the oppressed African peoples.”<sup>26</sup> In short, Africans and Black Americans were to be considered both separately and together because both were likely to believe themselves united by history, culture, and opposition to the color bar—a belief Sík partially endorsed and simultaneously characterized as reactionary.

While some racial linkages were fluid and open for debate, there were hard limits to the Comintern’s willingness to accommodate pan-African organizing linking the continent and diaspora. It was common to represent all black people as sharing oppression, goodness, and “a common tie of interest. . . for the revolutionary struggle,” but the Comintern refused to tolerate black activists asserting a shared revolutionary consciousness *as a race*.<sup>27</sup> Best known was the case of George Padmore, the Trinidadian Communist and pan-Africanist who headed the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers.<sup>28</sup> In 1934, the Comintern accused Padmore of taking “the wrong approach to the national question” and prioritizing the “unification of all Negroes on a racial basis” over the unification of Negro workers on a class basis.<sup>29</sup> Padmore, like others, concluded that the Comintern never really understood or cared about racial domination. He later wrote that “colonial peoples are resentful of the attitude of Europeans, of both Communist and anti-Communist persuasion, that they alone possess the knowledge and experience necessary to guide the advancement of dependent peoples.”<sup>30</sup> The Comintern expelled Padmore.

Even as the demand for conformity intensified, clarity remained elusive. Debates about analogies were further unsettled as more Africans participated in them, as they did in the early 1930s. Moses Kotane, of the Communist Party

25. Endre Sík quoted in Colin Darch and Gary Littlejohn, “Endre Sík and the Development of African Studies in the USSR: A Study Agenda from 1929,” *History in Africa* 10 (1983): 96.

26. Darch and Littlejohn, “Endre Sík,” 103–4.

27. Katerina Clark, “The Representation of the African American as Colonial Oppressed in Texts of the Soviet Interwar Years,” *Russian Review* 75, no. 3 (June 2016); Christina Kiaer, “African Americans in Soviet Socialist Realism: The Case of Aleksandr Deineka,” *Russian Review* 75, no. 3 (June 2016): 402–33.

28. Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke, Eng., 2015).

29. Davidson, *Komintern i Afrika*, 238–42.

30. Padmore, *Pan-Africanism*, 17. On the circumstances of Padmore’s break with the Comintern—and the changing reasons Padmore gave—see Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919–1939* (Trenton, 2013), 152–61.

of South Africa, found himself embroiled in conflict over analogies during his time in Moscow. In 1934, Kotane wrote to the Comintern to contest the application of conventional wisdom about Chinese and Indian native bourgeoisies to South Africa. Kotane characterized the then-dominant position as “ass-like ignorance” that “[flowed] from the ridiculous standpoint that ‘all the colonial countries are the same, with regard to political, economical and cultural development.’” In one example, Kotane argued that in South Africa, unlike in China or India, racist legislation concerning property ownership and employment precluded the creation of an indigenous exploiting class.<sup>31</sup> While Comintern officials depended on Africans as sources of information, they were generally reluctant to use that information to disaggregate the “negro question” or to respond flexibly to local contexts. The absence of organizational ties on the continent outside South Africa—except those channeled through the imperial metropolises of London and Paris—worsened this tendency to generalize.<sup>32</sup> Analogic thinking fed off ignorance about specificities.

It was not only Soviet authorities, however, who thought in analogies. Analogies came also from below—or rather from outside. As he traveled in Central Asia in 1932, the Black American poet Langston Hughes catalogued phenotypic variation among the people he met with extraordinary attention to detail.<sup>33</sup> For Hughes, Turkmenistan was a “*colored* land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites.”<sup>34</sup> Understanding the Soviet revolution as an assault on the color line entailed finding darker-skinned people to identify with as honorary Blacks. When Oliver Golden, a Black American agricultural specialist, was recruiting others to go to Uzbekistan in 1931 as experts in cotton production, he urged a potential sponsor to go and see “the only country in the world today, that gives equal chances to black and white alike.” “You owe it to your race,” Golden wrote.<sup>35</sup> Golden’s wife recalled: “It meant something special for him as a black to help other people of color.”<sup>36</sup> Black American visitors brought with them their own very American ideas about racial categories and expectations about racial solidarities that colored their perceptions of Soviet realities. Soviet authorities, in turn, noted early Black travelers’ interest in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and later black visitors were routed to those southern peripheries, whether they requested it or not.<sup>37</sup>

31. “M. Kotane to ECCI, 31 October 1934,” in Apollon Davidson et al., eds., *South Africa and the Communist International*, vol. 1, 119.

32. A 1929 report of the Negro Section of the Eastern Secretariat frankly admitted this nearly continent-sized weak spot in Comintern policy. See Davidson, *Komintern i Afrika*, 163.

33. David Chioni Moore, “Local Color, Global ‘Color’: Langston Hughes, the Black Atlantic, and Soviet Central Asia, 1932,” *Research in African Literatures* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 55.

34. Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (New York, 1993), 116.

35. Oliver Golden to G. W. Carver, April 165, 1931, reprinted in Lily Golden, *My Long Journey Home* (Chicago, 2002), 203. Typographical error in the original.

36. Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, 2010), 92.

37. Maxim Sivogrov, “The Earliest Visits of ANC Leaders to the USSR,” *New Contree* 45 (May 1999): 37.



In the late 1930s, Soviet political life was dominated by mass terror and fears of impending war with Nazi Germany, an enemy that characterized Slavs as racially inferior.<sup>38</sup> Amid escalating terror, Soviet interest in Africa and the diaspora largely disappeared. Soviet Africanists and Comintern officials who had been interested in Africa faced repression because of their contacts with foreigners. Many were sent to camps; some perished there.<sup>39</sup> Comintern activities virtually ceased in 1938 and the body was formally dissolved in 1943. It was only after some 26 million Soviets had died in the Nazis' war of racial annihilation, after Stalin's death in 1953, and after European empires in Africa and Asia began to unravel, that the Soviet Union again looked south.

### **Back to Africa: African Decolonization and Khrushchev's Thaw**

If one year marked the beginning of the decolonization era, it would be 1957, the year Ghana became Africa's first independent country and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev invited tens of thousands of young people to Moscow from all over the world. The dynamics of decolonization and the Cold War collided, overlapped, and together generated a new international landscape dominated by ideas about development and self-determination. As newly independent African states—and not yet independent liberation movements—sought technical expertise, funding, military aid, and political support from abroad, the Soviet Union competed with both capitalist and Communist rivals to cultivate adherents in the Global South. While both American and Soviet leaders recognized the enormous international significance of America's oppressive racial order, Soviet policymakers and their black interlocutors in this period assumed the revolutionary subject to be firmly grounded in the African continent. In an expansion of the earlier era's logic, Central Asians became the Soviet Union's honorary Africans, summoned by Soviet policymakers to demonstrate the potential of socialist decolonization. But as the Soviet Union sought to court, educate, and study Africans in new modes for the new era, the meanings of blackness had to be renegotiated yet again.

In the late 1950s, pan-Africanists and communists called upon Africa to play a new role in international politics. If in the interwar period Black Americans were to be the revolutionary vanguard leading colonized Africans towards socialism, in the late 1950s Black radicals' hopes for liberation shifted to the African continent.<sup>40</sup> In 1958, on his last of several trips to the Soviet Union, the American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois reportedly told his host: "I always thought that we Black Americans will go to Africa to help them. I was mistaken. It is Africans who will help Black Americans to free themselves."<sup>41</sup> Soviet policymakers echoed this shift from Black America to black Africa as part of a larger reorientation of Soviet soft power away from the west it seemed to have lost and towards the Global South it hoped to win. Decolonization

38. John Connelly, "Nazis and Slavs: From Racial Theory to Racist Practice," *Central European History* 32, no. 1 (1999).

39. Filatova and Davidson, *Hidden Thread*, 92–93.

40. Allison Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington, DC, 1986), 105.

41. Golden, *Long Journey Home*, 189.

displaced Soviet attention to the US-centric “Negro question” and opened new avenues for black people to engage with the Soviet Union. Once again, the Soviets followed a geographical reorientation in the struggle for black emancipation.

Unlike Du Bois and other pan-Africanists, however, the Soviet academic and foreign policy worlds tried to treat the African continent as separate from the diaspora. When Du Bois met with Khrushchev in 1959, he argued that black people the world over required specialized knowledge uncontaminated by imperialist ideologies. Du Bois proposed a “scientific institute for the study of pan-African history, sociology, ethnography, anthropology,” staffed by people of every race and ethnicity but especially scholars from the black diaspora.<sup>42</sup> Khrushchev adopted the recommendation but stripped away its focus on blackness: the Africa Institute did not include the diaspora within its object of study and did not actively recruit black staff.<sup>43</sup> While the Africa Institute differed from its African Studies counterparts in the west by studying North Africa, its purpose in relation to the state was quite similar: to produce research on Africa that was meant to aid superpower ambitions on the continent.<sup>44</sup> Even one of the clearest instances of the Soviet Union adopting the recommendation of a Black intellectual demonstrated the partial and conflicted willingness of Soviet policymakers to accept an understanding of blackness that did not suit their larger aims.

Whether the Soviets should continue lumping Africa with the colonial and post-colonial “East” was a tricky question. Keeping them together, Soviet Africanists worried, looked rather like replicating old imperial habits of mind. South African Communist Lionel Forman chastised the leading Soviet Africanist for a clumsy invitation to a Congress of Oriental Studies in 1959: “I only realized afterwards that African studies are probably a subsidiary of your Oriental studies. Really, I must say that it is time that the scholars of the USSR ceased to think of Africa merely as a big peninsula hanging down at the bottom of Asia.”<sup>45</sup> When the Africa Institute was created in the same year, most of its staff came from the Institutes for Ethnography and Oriental Studies. Anthropology and linguistics, both disciplines classically oriented towards

42. Sergei Mazov, “My uvelichim armiiu pobornikov mira i sotsializma’: K 60-letiiu Instituta Afriki AN SSSR (RAN). 1959 g.,” *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 82, no. 6 (2019).

43. Lily Golden, the Uzbekistan-born child of a Black American immigrant, was a rare exception. Golden, *Long Journey Home*. Some African scholars did complete degrees at the Africa Institute but did not commonly stay on in more permanent roles. See Steffi Marung, “Out of Empire into Socialist Modernity: Soviet African (Dis)Connections and Global Intellectual Geographies,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41, no. 1 (2021): 61–63.

44. ARAN, f. 1731, op. 1, d. 50, ll. 13–15 (Stenogramma Zasedaniia sektsii obshchestvennykh nauk Prezidiuma AN SSSR, 11 June 1965). On the Africa Institute in its earlier years, see Sergei Mazov, “Organizovat’ v akademii nauk SSSR institut Afriki,” in A. M. Vasil’ev et al. eds., *Chelovek na fone kontinenta: Materialy nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashchennoi 100-letiiu I. I. Potekhina* (Moscow, 2005); Davidson, *Stanovlenie otechestvennoi afrikanistiki*; Steffi Marung, “Peculiar Encounters with the ‘Black Continent’: Soviet Africanists in the Global 1960s and the Expansion of the Discipline,” in Matthias Middell, ed., *Self-Reflexive Area Studies* (Leipzig, 2013), 103–34.

45. Lionel Forman, *A Trumpet from the Housetops: The Selected Writings of Lionel Forman*, eds. Sadie Forman and Andre Odendaal (London, 1992), 201.

the study of supposedly “backward” imperial subjects, were quickly sidelined in favor of the ostensibly more universal discipline of economics.<sup>46</sup> In the hopeful view of the Institute’s second director, Vasilii Solodovnikov, western African Studies was fixated on African difference, while the purpose of Soviet African Studies would be “the struggle against African exceptionalism.”<sup>47</sup>

Within the Soviet cultural bureaucracy, however, it made little sense to treat the African continent as a discrete entity with ties neither to the east nor the postcolonial world. In Africa after empire, the Soviet solidarity project competed against other forms of solidarity. Pan-Africanists pursued unity for the continent; the Non-Aligned Movement worked to build Afro-Asian solidarity; Cuban internationalists supported Third World revolutionary movements; Maoists eventually saw the world divided among rich, conservative white powers and poor revolutionaries of color.<sup>48</sup> The Soviet Union’s place in this landscape was ambiguous. In the Soviet Union’s self-presentation and for African sympathizers, it was the first country to set out to catch up with the capitalist west and succeed; perhaps this accomplishment made the Soviet Union a natural mentor and ally for others hoping to do the same (more natural, by far, than the western powers implicated in exploiting the colonies). Furthermore, the Soviet Union had defeated Nazi Germany’s attempts to subjugate Slavs as racial inferiors and, in the process, established itself as a military superpower. In this view, the Soviet Union was—to borrow from Rossen Djagalov and Christine Evans—both “a superpower offering a successful model of development and also the greatest Third-World country of all time.”<sup>49</sup> For Africans more sympathetic to Maoist arguments, the Soviet Union had taken up the imperialist grammar, the civilizing mission, and the self-referential arrogance of the white, western powers it claimed to oppose.<sup>50</sup> At the Bandung Conference in 1955, delegates debated whether to censure Soviet

46. ARAN, f. 2010, op. 1, d. 57, l. 1 (Perepiska s uchrezhdeniiami AN SSSR po reorganizatsii struktury Instituta, 1965).

47. ARAN, f. 2010, op. 1, d. 155, l. 22 (V.G. Solodovnikov, “Ob itogakh i zadachakh deiatelnosti Instituta Afriki AN SSSR” na zasedanii Biuro Otdeleniia Ekominiki AN SSSR, April 8, 1969).

48. On Pan-Africanism, see Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History* (London: 2018). On Afro-Asian solidarity, Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH, 2010). On Cuba, see Michelle Getchell, “Cuba, the USSR, and the Non-Aligned Movement: Negotiating Non-Alignment,” in Thomas C. Field Jr., Stella Krepp, and Vanni Pettinà, eds., *Latin America and the Global Cold War* (Durham, NC, 2020), 148–73. On Maoism, see Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, 2015), and Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, “Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution,” in Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen, eds., *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans* (Durham, NC, 2008), 97–154.

49. Rossen Djagalov and Christine Evans, “Moskau, 1960: Wie man sich eine sowjetische Freundschaft mit der Dritten Welt vorstellte,” in Andreas Hilger, ed., *Die Sowjetunion und die Dritte Welt: USSR, Staatssozialismus und Antikolonialismus im Kalten Krieg, 1945–1991* (Munich, 2009), 90.

50. Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*. On the relationship between eastern Europe and global imperialism, see James Mark, Paul Betts, et al., *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonization* (Oxford, 2022).

actions in Central Asia as imperialist.<sup>51</sup> At local, national, and continental scales, Africans debated whether the Soviet Union had anything of use to contribute to the project of postcolonial development.<sup>52</sup>

Among policymakers in the Khrushchev era, the idea of natural solidarity among people of color was both dangerous and appealing: dangerous because it took what they understood to be entirely the wrong attitude towards race, and appealing because it obviously had real purchase in some formerly colonized parts of the world. Much like the Comintern's tortured approach to assertions of diasporic unity across the Atlantic, Party and state organs in the Cold War era rejected the assertion of color as a basis for transnational solidarity while reproducing it in institutions like the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee and the Afro-Asian Writers' Association.<sup>53</sup> Analogic thinking took a new direction. If in the 1930s, Black Americans had come to Central Asia as privileged experts especially suited to aid people of color in escaping "backwardness" and overcoming discrimination, by the end of the 1950s Soviet Central Asians were to serve the same purpose for black Africans. As Artemy Kalinovsky has shown, under Khrushchev's leadership the Central Asian republics became showcases of decolonization, Soviet style.<sup>54</sup> Experts proposed, based on implicit and explicit affinities, that a Central Asian development model would be especially appropriate to postcolonial African contexts.<sup>55</sup>

Here we should note that in the 1950s, the whiteness of Slavs remained unstable and subject to conflicting interpretations. In 1953 and again in 1956, Du Bois celebrated the Soviets' "refusal" to be white.<sup>56</sup> Laurens van der Post, a white South African novelist known for his tales of adventure among the natives, traveled across the Soviet Union in 1961 and concluded that Russians belonged with black Africans at the bottom of civilizational hierarchies. "In Russia," van der Post wrote, "without my upbringing and love of the primitive peoples of Africa I could have felt quite at a loss."<sup>57</sup> Journeying in Indonesia prior to Bandung, the Black American (and ex-communist) writer Richard Wright canvassed those he met: were Russians white or Asiatic? Responses

51. Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (Cleveland, 1956), 157.

52. Elizabeth Banks, "Socialist Internationalism between the Soviet Union and Mozambique, 1962–91" (PhD. diss., New York University, 2019); Nana Osei-Opare, "The Red Star State: State-capitalism, Socialism, and Black Internationalism in Ghana, 1957–1966" (PhD. diss., UCLA, 2019).

53. Note that the Russian original hews to a narrowly geopolitical definition of Afro-Asian: "Soviet Committee for Solidarity with Countries of Africa and Asia" (*Sovetskii komitet solidarnosti stran Afriki i Azii*). On the Writers' Association, see Djagalov, *From Internationalism*, 65–110.

54. Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, 2018); Paul Stronski, *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City, 1930–1966* (Pittsburgh, 2010), 234–56.

55. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 9540, op. 1, d. 165, l. 40 (Stenogramma sobraniia obshchestvennosti Tatarskoi ASSR, March 20, 1964); ARAN, f. 2010, op. 1, d. 146, l. 54 (O merakh po usileniu propagandy za rubezhom v sviazi so 100-letiem so dnia rozhdeniia V. I. Lenina).

56. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line*, 157–61.

57. Laurens van der Post, *Journey into Russia* (London, 1964), 272.

were mixed.<sup>58</sup> After the Sino-Soviet split, Maoists painted the Soviet Union as a white power beholden to an American and European-dominated world order.<sup>59</sup> In the 1960s and 70s, Soviet objections to this characterization tended more often to point to the emancipation of darker-skinned populations in Central Asia than to register discontent with the idea of Slavs' whiteness, as was sometimes done in the interwar period.<sup>60</sup> In general, Slavs' whiteness began to be taken more for granted in the 1960s due to the combined forces of the Maoist/Third Worldist critique of Soviet whiteness alongside the new-found high status claimed by a superpower that saw itself as a liberator and developer on par with western powers.<sup>61</sup> The indexing of "Slavic" and "white" was most potent in relation to the south and east.

While the Soviet bureaucracy attempted to define the African continent as a non-racial geographical designation, representations in media and popular culture emphasized a highly stylized, undifferentiated blackness.<sup>62</sup> In cartoons, posters, and films, few meaningful distinctions were made among black people from Congo, Cuba, the US, or anywhere else; the overwhelming impression was of crushing oppression.<sup>63</sup> Soviet visual portrayals of the oppressed consistently highlighted phenotypic variation, with Africans' very dark—often literally black—skin against the white and yellow of their European and East Asian counterparts.<sup>64</sup> Representations of Africans in the postwar period drew on two main sets of imagery: the enslaved (with visual clues of rebellion or chains broken and unbroken) and the ethnographic (with visual clues of drums, dances, animals). The enslaved African, like the oppressed Black American of the 1930s, was a man; the ethnographic African was usually a child.<sup>65</sup> Black women, if represented at all, were often portrayed as victims who looked on with a stoic suffering, lending extra pathos to moral condemnation of racism and imperialism. These images played into the heroic elevation of the Soviet Union as liberator and protector of the weak, tutor or *vospitatel'* in the development of "backward" peoples.

Soviet views on blackness had to be worked out in relation to real people who complicated official patterns for analyzing and representing Africa and Africans. As one student put it: "living together under the same roof. . . gives

58. Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 49, 68.

59. Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*.

60. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow*, 184.

61. Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, 1994), 368.

62. On the image of Africa in Soviet media, see Catherine Mary Ratcliff, "Seeing Africa—Construction of Africa and International Development in Soviet and Russian Public Discourse: Freedom as Development?" (PhD. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2017).

63. On Soviet paternalism towards Afro-Cubans, see Anne E. Gorsuch, "'Cuba, My Love': The Romance of Revolutionary Cuba in the Soviet Sixties," *American Historical Review* 120, no. 2 (April 2015): 497–526.

64. Quinn Slobodian, "Socialist Chromatism: Race, Racism, and the Racial Rainbow in East Germany," in Quinn Slobodian, ed., *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York, 2015), 24.

65. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow*, 69.

students a wealth of material for interesting conclusions.”<sup>66</sup> By the late 1960s, several thousand Africans came annually to study in the Soviet Union.<sup>67</sup> This dwarfed the number of representatives of Black America. Celebrity figures such as Paul Robeson and Angela Davis featured prominently in Soviet propaganda, but their physical presence was quite limited.<sup>68</sup> Most African students were men: women were outnumbered by eight or nine to one.<sup>69</sup> With the exception of the Women’s Committee, Soviet organizations did not prioritize women in allocating scholarships, and often, as Elizabeth Banks has shown, women in African countries did not take up spots set aside specifically for female students.<sup>70</sup> The new cohorts of African students came from a range of class backgrounds. The group that caused the most consternation among Soviet host institutions were the sons (and occasionally daughters) of prominent or wealthy public figures in their home countries, who arrived in the world’s first workers’ state as representatives of the “exploiting classes.” African students were often more modern in their personal style, more assertive in their relation to Soviet authority, and altogether less inclined towards revolution than their Soviet hosts had been led to expect.<sup>71</sup> Their mixed experiences shed a different kind of light on the unsettled questions of the era.

When they arrived in the Soviet Union, African students sought out community and solidarity in a difficult environment. Many African students tried to organize themselves on the basis of blackness. In the late 1950s, a group of students sought to carve out a pan-African space in a Black African Students’ Union. Soviet authorities refused to recognize the union, and in the resulting fallout, a handful of students were expelled or chose to leave. In an open letter to “all African governments,” the Union’s executive committee in Moscow decried the “shocking humiliations” they suffered.<sup>72</sup> In response, the leadership of Moscow University denounced the union for its “separatism”

66. Haluzevy Derzhavnyy Arkhiv SB Ukrainy (HDA SBU), f. 16, op. 1, spr. 977, ark. 217–50 (Obzor “Odesskoe studenchestvo,” September 13, 1968). See also Anika Walke, “Was Soviet Internationalism Anti-Racist?: Towards a History of Foreign Others in the USSR,” in Rainbow, *Ideologies of Race*.

67. Constantin Katsakioris, “Burden or Allies?: Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 541.

68. On Robeson, see Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line*, 202–52. On Davis, see Meredith Roman, “Soviet ‘Renegades,’ Black Panthers, and Angela Davis: The Politics of Dissent in the Soviet Press, 1968–73,” *Cold War History* 18, no. 4 (2018): 503–19; Yana Skorobogatov, “Angela Davis in the USSR, 1970–1972,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* (forthcoming).

69. Julie Hessler, “Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics, and the Cold War,” in “La Russie vers 1550: Monarchie nationale ou empire en formation?” special issue, *Cahiers du monde russe* 47, no. 1–2 (January–June 2006): 35–36.

70. Elizabeth Banks, “Sewing Machines for Socialism?: Gifts of Development and Disagreement between the Soviet and Mozambican Women’s Committees, 1963–87,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 41, no. 1 (May 2021): 27–40.

71. Sean Guillory, “Culture Clash in the Socialist Paradise: Soviet Patronage and African Students’ Urbanity in the Soviet Union, 1960–1965,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 2 (April 2014): 271–81; Maxim Matusevich, “Expanding the Boundaries of the Black Atlantic: African Students as Soviet Moderns,” *Ab Imperio* 2 (2012): 325–50.

72. Theophilus Okonkwo, Andrew R. Amar, and Michel Ayih, *An Open Letter to All African Governments* (London, 1960).

and “divisiveness.”<sup>73</sup> When the officially sanctioned Federation of African Students in the Soviet Union (FASSS) was established in 1962, it included student unions from both “Arab” North Africa and “black” sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>74</sup> In 1969, one black African student decried FASSS as “dead,” noting its membership was drawn overwhelmingly from North Africa.<sup>75</sup> Soviet officials could define Africa in non-racial terms, but many African students vigorously resisted that definition.

African students engaged each other as well as the authorities in defining, contesting, and policing the boundaries of Africanness. In many African nation-states in the 1960s, the removal of foreign rule precipitated a reckoning with the definition of native belonging. Anticolonial nationalists in varying contexts echoed former colonial rulers in excluding mixed-race and Asian-descended populations from definitions of “African” and “native.”<sup>76</sup> Students brought these painful questions with them to the Soviet Union.<sup>77</sup> In 1963, in the aftermath of the mysterious death of Ghanaian student Edmund Asare-Addo in Moscow, a pan-African coalition of students gathered in Kyiv to protest. At a meeting organized by protestors to discuss their demands, “fake Africans” (*nespravzhni afrykantsi*) were asked to leave. Among those forced out of the meeting was a South African, and while no reason for his ejection was given, the implication was that he was not black.<sup>78</sup> In 1969, students gathered to protest the murder of Kenyan student James Gakio. A roll call of African countries caused confusion when the Moroccan delegation was introduced by the Sierra Leonian chair as “not. . . African.” “But Morocco is Africa!” came the cry from the collected delegates.<sup>79</sup> Incidents of anti-black racism provoked repeated reassessments of who counted as black and who belonged as African.

Soviet authorities constructed male African students as a problem to be handled, paying close attention to incidents of violence both by *and* against black men. Popular racism was a problem that Soviet authorities were aware

73. Hessler, “Death of an African,” 48.

74. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. M1, op. 1, d. 419, ll. 18–24 (Informatsiia o Federatsiia afrikanskikh studentov v Sovetskom Soiuzu i itogakh raboty II-go kongressa, n.d.).

75. Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads'kykh ob'ednan' Ukrainy (TsDAHOU), f. 1, op. 25, spr. 264, ark. 22–27 (Iu. M. Dadenkov to TsK KPU, 26 November 1969); RGASPI, f. M1, op. 1, d. 1021, ll. 148–71 (V.I. Il'chenko, *Zemliachestva i organizatsii afrikanskikh studentov v SSSR v 1960–1970 gg.* Moscow, c. 1976).

76. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996); James Brennan, *Taifa: Making Nation and Race in Urban Tanzania* (Athens, OH, 2012); Christopher J. Lee, *Unreasonable Histories: Nativism, Multiracial Lives, and the Genealogical Imagination in British Africa* (Durham, NC, 2014); Jonathon Glassman, “Slower Than a Massacre: The Multiple Sources of Racial Thought in Colonial Africa,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 3 (June 2004): 720–54.

77. Constantin Katsakioris, “Nationalismes dans la patrie du socialisme: Mobilisations nationales des étudiants du tiers-monde en Union soviétique,” *Diasporas: Circulations, migrations, histoire* 34 (2019).

78. TsDAHOU, f. 1, op. 24, spr. 5661, ark. 63–7, l. 65 (I.T. Shvets' to A.D. Skaba, January 21, 1964).

79. HDA SBU, f. 16, op. 1, spr. 992, ark. 2–13, l. 8 (Stenogramma sobraniia afrikanskikh studentov, November 17, 1969).

of but reluctant to acknowledge as more than simply “hooliganism.”<sup>80</sup> In the archives, drunkenness and complaints about living conditions abound, while instances of success are noted briefly, if at all. Flashes of violence punctuate the usual dry bureaucratise at regular intervals: an Algerian refused an invitation to drink with locals in Kryvyi Rih and one of them punched him in the face; a South African in Kyiv threatened a Ghanaian classmate with a knife and knocked an Afghan student’s teeth out for reporting his drunken rowdiness.<sup>81</sup> A tacit relationship between black masculinity and violence pervades the records of the Komsomol, the Ministry of Education, the KGB, and other organizations that engaged with African students. When read against the grain, these preoccupations demonstrate how Soviet institutions struggled to conceive of blackness beyond narrow masculine tropes: emasculation, victimhood, aggression, and disorder.

By the late 1960s, decaying hopes of developmental modernist schemes brought this era to a close, though it left complex legacies. In time, countries that continued to struggle against white minority rule would displace independent countries as the Soviet Union’s most important political allies and propaganda assets. From the early 1970s, the fight against settler colonialism in southern Africa and Palestine assumed greater prominence in Soviet foreign policy. The terrain of struggle shifted from overcoming “backwardness” through development to defeating racism through force of arms.<sup>82</sup> In the last socialist decades, Soviet ideas about blackness tilted towards despair.

### Disillusion and Dissolution: Fixed Essences and Static Hierarchies

In the 1970s and 80s, Soviet understandings of blackness pulled in many opposing directions at once. The ritualistic cadences of Soviet officialdom echoed previous eras, but they were gradually drained of authority and increasingly drowned out by other voices. The geopolitical imperative to quiet talk of natural racial solidarities ran at odds with the steady biologization of Soviet thinking about community, culture, and descent.<sup>83</sup> Central Asians remained the honorary Africans of Soviet space, popularly refigured in a highly jaundiced and racist version of this analogy. The era of disillusion featured a gradual—and then accelerated—turn to primordial and hierarchical understandings of difference, creeping pessimism about the possibility of progress, and fatal decay in the very idea of a revolutionary subject.

80. Hessler, “Death of an African Student.”

81. HDA SBU, f. 16, op. 1, spr. 988, ark. 144–45 (V.F. Nikitchenko to TsK KPU, September 11, 1969); GARF, f. 9540, op. 1, d. 178, l. 90–93 (Kievskii politekhnicheskii institut to Dolidze, December 2, 1964).

82. ARAN, f. 2010, op. 1, d. 417, ll. 45–53 (Report prepared by the Southern Africa Sector for a special session of the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization, April 1974); ARAN, f. 1731, op. 1, d. 263 (Godovye otchety organizatsii sektsii po nauchnoi rabote za 1978, tom II). On the mid-1970s shift from development aid to arms, see Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*, 210–14, and David Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018).

83. Edgar, *Intermarriage*; Mark Bassin, *Gumilev Mystique*.



This diffuse and contradictory period began in the late 1960s with the erosion of the developmental romance; it continued through the ideological drift of the Soviet 1970s and early 80s, radicalized in the context of Gorbachev's reforms, and found its maximal expression in the crisis years of the 1990s. In many ways, we still live in its shadow. No clear line separates this era from the preceding one, as so much symbolic and institutional architecture persisted long after Khrushchev's removal. The early part of this period, the long 1970s, brought together contradictory tendencies, some of which were foreclosed and some amplified by the distinctive conditions of the Soviet collapse, the proliferation of structural adjustment programs across the African continent, and the global plunge into market fundamentalism. While it may seem curious to combine the last Soviet decades with the first post-Soviet one, we do so deliberately to highlight some of the underlying dynamics that preceded and produced the highly visible prejudices of the 1990s.

In the late 1960s, Africa after the first blush of independence and the Soviet Union after the heyday of industrial modernity entered a shared condition of uncertainty about the future.<sup>84</sup> In many African countries, the optimism of decolonization dissipated amid a series of military coups and the disappointing results of development schemes. A cohort of thinkers from the Global South proposed that continued challenges apparent in the 1970s reflected deep structural inequalities that needed a total overhaul in a "New International Economic Order."<sup>85</sup> But their revolutionary vision did not attract backers among the conservative Brezhnev-era elite. In the Soviet Union, it was politically impermissible to blame programs of "non-capitalist development" themselves (in public at least), so blame for failures was unloaded onto Africans or redirected to malevolent forces of imperialism.<sup>86</sup> Across much of the African continent, the dream of industrial modernity seemed to recede out of reach.<sup>87</sup> From the late 1960s onwards, many Soviet writers and intellectuals came to regard industrial modernity as a joke, a nightmare, or the apocalypse itself.<sup>88</sup> Soviet citizens of various nationalities went looking for authenticity and many of them found it in ethnic selves and ethnic pasts, traditional ways of life and rural idylls.<sup>89</sup> Others found refuge

84. On the importance of 1968 as a rupture in Soviet and global history, see Georgi Derluguian, "1968/89: The Historical Peak and Fracture of Modernity," *Russian Politics & Law* 57, no. 3–4 (February 2020): 88–107.

85. On the NIEO, see Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019).

86. Filatova and Davidson, *Hidden Thread*, 370–72.

87. James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, 1999).

88. Christopher J. Ward, *Brezhnev's Folly: The Building of BAM and Late Soviet Socialism* (Pittsburgh, 2009); Valentin Rasputin, *Proshchanie s materoi* (Moscow, 1980).

89. Erin M. Hutchinson, "The Cultural Politics of the Nation in the Soviet Union after Stalin, 1953–1991" (PhD. diss., Harvard University, 2020); Kathleen Parthé, *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past* (Princeton, 1992); Yitzhak Brudny, *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953–1991* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors*, esp. 337–85.

in an imagined west.<sup>90</sup> Whether the idealized guides to a rehabilitated future were wise Russian matriarchs and Abkhazian patriarchs or jeans-wearing, punk rock-listening young people in the west, the hope for a revolutionary wave originating in the Global South to bring emancipation to the planet was a zombie slogan—dead but not gone.

Soviet propaganda continued to condemn US racism, but Soviet engagement with Black Americans never resumed its interwar importance. In the wake of the Civil Rights movement and the rise of Black Power in the United States, few Black Americans looked to the Soviet Union for inspiration or substantive support. When lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde visited Tashkent in 1976, she gently mocked the requirement of her presence at yet another “meeting for the oppressed people of Somewhere,” while noting “the only thing I was quite sure of was that it was not for the oppressed Black people of America.”<sup>91</sup> The Soviet Union no longer aimed to be a facilitator of revolutionary links between the continent and the diaspora.

While the Comintern had tried to compete with interwar pan-Africanism by mirroring some of its premises, Soviet policy and ideology was estranged from the pan-Africanism of the 1950s–60s and even more so from Black Power in the 1960s–70s.<sup>92</sup> Angela Davis, imprisoned from 1970–72, could be the subject of an enormous solidarity campaign because she, unlike others associated with the Black Panthers, was a member of the Communist Party.<sup>93</sup> The Soviet press decried the Panthers’ repression, but Soviet officials privately lamented the growing appeal of Black Power and worried about its possible consequences. When exiled South Africans in the African National Congress met with the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee in early 1976, the Soviets shared their worries about Black Power, Black Consciousness, and American influence back in South Africa. “There is a growing influx of African Americans carrying with them the ideas of [Stokely] Carmichael and other ‘theoreticians’ from the African American Civil Rights movement. This infiltration is accompanied by the infiltration of American culture.”<sup>94</sup> In this period, Soviet bureaucrats were inclined to see the politicization of continent-diaspora links as counterrevolutionary.<sup>95</sup>

Soviet Africanists might have disliked some Black nationalists’ racial essentialism, but they harbored their own deeply conflicted ideas about racial essences. Any form of politics based on racial nationalism was likely to be labelled chauvinist, narrow nationalist, or black racism. But explaining

90. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2005), 158–206; Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018).

91. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY, 1984), 28.

92. Ivan Potekhin, “Pan-Africanism and the Struggle of the Two Ideologies,” *African Communist* 19 (1964); A. A. Makarov, “‘Chernoe Samosoznanie’ i osvoboditel’ noe dvizhenie v Iuzhnoi Afrike,” *Narody Afriki i Azii* 2 (1975).

93. Roman, “Soviet ‘Renegades.’”

94. GARF, f. 9540, op. 1, d. 405b, l. 20 (Zapis’ besedy s predstaviteliami ANK J. Makhathini i C. Make, February 11, 1976).

95. For example, GARF, f. 9540, op. 2, d. 68, l. 10 (Maksudov to Dolidze, April 20, 1963); Mazov, *Rossiiia i Afrika*, 960; ARAN, f. 2010, op. 1, d. 691, ll. 90–92 (Zapis’ besedy s predstavitelem ANK v Londone Ronald Press, May 30, 1986).

political behavior with reference to racial essences was common. Black people were considered the most oppressed, which meant they were supposed to be both the most revolutionary and the most socially “backward.” Scholars at the Africa Institute worried a great deal about what was to be done with the revolutionary passions of allegedly primitive people who could be easily led astray by ethnic demagogues, racial nationalists, or imperialist propaganda. Their distrust of the black masses ran deep. Neither did Soviet Africanists like the new directions taken by some African intellectuals, especially those interested—like so many late Soviet intellectuals—in roots and essences. Roza Ismagilova reported to the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences in 1968:

The African intelligentsia, and especially people who study history and culture, are promoting new conceptions of not only the distinctiveness of African culture and history, but above all exclusivity in Africa’s development in isolation from worldwide civilization. These tendencies are extremely dangerous as they are an unusual manifestation of black racism.

It was not only the intelligentsia that was at fault.

Speeches of party and trade union figures, brochures and pamphlets branding Europeans as colonizers have aroused in Africans feelings of hatred towards Europeans—a very dangerous feeling given the undevelopment, low cultural level, and great emotionality of Africans.<sup>96</sup>

Beginning from such a strong assumption of black inferiority, black pride could only be a delusion and a danger.

As Soviet ideas about culture and difference drifted further towards fixed essences and hierarchies, Africans and Central Asians were more commonly grouped as inferiors of the human family. In a parallel development, linking Slaviness or Europeanness to whiteness became more pronounced in the late Soviet period, though the unsanctioned character of this tendency makes it especially difficult to study. Calling fellow citizens from Central Asia and the Caucasus *chernyi* (black), as European Soviets sometimes did from at least the 1960s if not earlier, marked relative status in cultural and civilizational hierarchies.<sup>97</sup> *Chernyi* evolved into a popular category—loose and inconsistent—denoting color in ways that sometimes echoed and sometimes steered clear of biological race. The linkages and evasions it generated were idiosyncratic and unpredictable.<sup>98</sup> Jeff Sahadeo’s interviews with migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus suggest ways they distanced themselves from being “*chernyi*,” trying to refuse being racialized in this pejorative way.<sup>99</sup> Adrienne Edgar’s interviews with people in ethnically mixed families in Central Asia show how one could demonstrate belonging in multinational Soviet society

96. ARAN, f. 1731, op. 1, d. 101, l. 14 (“Natsional’nyi vopros v nezavisimyykh stranakh Tropicheskoi Afriki,” March 25, 1968).

97. Victor Shnirelman, “Migrantofobiia i ‘kul’turnyi rasizm,” *Ab Imperio* 2 (2008); Meredith L. Roman, “Making Caucasians Black: Moscow since the Fall of Communism and the Racialization of Non-Russians,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 18, no. 2 (September 2002): 1–27.

98. For example, Hamid Ismailov, “Mbobo,” *Druzhba narodov* 6 (June 2009).

99. Sahadeo, *Voices from the Soviet Edge*, 93–115.

by distinguishing marriageable Central Asians from clearly unmarriageable Africans.<sup>100</sup> Being linked with Africans was obviously and seriously insulting.

Blackness was, according to a perspective that grew in popularity among street traders as well as professional anthropologists, a marking of inherent outsider status to the norms, values, and privileges of European modernity.<sup>101</sup> An older strand of Soviet thinking expected black people to be the most revolutionary because they were the most oppressed; the new primordialists who became dominant by the 1990s resigned themselves to the expectation that black people would be the poorest and neediest because they were the least able to help themselves. The most radical expression of this idea, publicly aired for the first time during perestroika, held ungrateful people in the Soviet south and the Global South responsible for draining Moscow's coffers and immiserating the Soviet Union. In 1987, two members of the Moscow creative intelligentsia circulated a letter addressed to Gorbachev, arguing that Russia had impoverished itself by subsidizing non-Russian republics.<sup>102</sup> One pensioner from Vinnytsia wrote to Yeltsin in 1990 blaming Soviet "poverty" on the fact that "our country finances and feeds half of the world at the expense of our people."<sup>103</sup> If apartheid South Africa's last head of National Intelligence is to be believed, such views went all the way to the top echelons of the KGB.<sup>104</sup>

Through perestroika and into the 1990s, it became more common for Russians to assert that "backwardness" was a condition that Africans or Central Asians would never overcome, that violence, corruption, and poverty were written in biology.<sup>105</sup> Post-Soviet Africanists described Africans as endemically backward, caught in a "civilizational dead-end [*tupik*]."<sup>106</sup> Related processes unfolded in the west, as neoclassical economists blamed African governments for their alleged profligacy and white Euro-American rock stars teamed up to save Africa from its next crisis. As James Ferguson has written, in the wake of the failure of mid-century developmental modernism as both economic project and academic theory for the African continent, developmentalist promises of motion and convergence "decomposed"

100. Edgar, *Intermarriage*, 132.

101. James Mark et al., *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, Eng., 2019), 125–72.

102. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), f. 100, op. 5, d. 68 (Briusova and Ponomareva to Gorbachev et al., October 8, 1987). Thanks to Anna Whittington for this letter.

103. GARF, f. 664, op. 1, d. 61, ll. 54–57 (Ivanov to Yeltsin, c.1990); Charles Quist-Adade, "From Paternalism to Ethnocentrism: Images of Africa in Gorbachev's Russia," *Race & Class* 46, no. 79 (2005); Mark, *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe*, 143–45.

104. Niel Barnard went to the Soviet Union in July 1991 as a guest of the KGB. There, he met Vladimir Kriuchkov and Leonid Shebarshin, who told Barnard "that they have the biggest disillusion with African people." Hilary Lynd, interview with Niel Barnard, August 13, 2018.

105. Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton, 2021), 402; Madeleine Reeves, *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia* (Ithaca, 2014), 65–100.

106. ARAN, f. 2010, op. 1, d. 814, l. 54 (Materialy VI-i konferentsii afrikanistov "Afrika—Problemy perekhoda k grazhdanskomu obshchestvu," November 16–18, 1994).

into immovable hierarchies: some peoples were on top and some were not.<sup>107</sup> Black people, in both western and Soviet understandings, became the limit case at the bottom of a hierarchy organized increasingly by need: donors and recipients, ostensible givers and takers.

The social dislocations of the Soviet collapse seriously exacerbated anxieties about where Russia fit into global hierarchies. No longer a superpower, no longer animated by the upward Marxist sweep of progress, Russia in the 1990s found itself in a newly insecure position.<sup>108</sup> Africans and Central Asians, publicly refigured as irredeemable ingrates, suffered violent consequences of these Russian anxieties.<sup>109</sup> The incidence of street attacks increased. Funding for African Studies dried up. Aid for African allies disappeared, and Russia itself became an aid recipient.<sup>110</sup> As it repudiated Soviet ties to the Third World, Yeltsin's Russia opened to a not-so imaginary "West" whose anti-Black racism was simply not a problem anymore.<sup>111</sup>

Black Africa—the ultimate symbol of backwardness—could be invoked in making sense of Russia's new condition in multiple ways. "Is it not ourselves we see in the African mirror?" asked a *Pravda* article in October 1991.<sup>112</sup> Africanists staved off the Africa Institute's dissolution, barely, by reinventing themselves as purveyors of knowledge about socioeconomic breakdown, ethnic conflict, and radical Islam. They used Africa's crises as a guide to the frightening future of Russia and its now independent Central Asian neighbors.<sup>113</sup> Black Africa was a touchstone for recovering Russia's own civilizational connections to the "East," useful for both those who desired westernization and those who rejected it.<sup>114</sup> One Africanist worried that the Soviet collapse had revealed fundamental commonalities among Russians and black Africans, both foreigners to European modernity: "Communal consciousness, communal ownership, denial of individual freedoms and a very low price of a human life."<sup>115</sup> Another, the Institute's new director and a specialist in Islam, sug-

107. James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC, 2006), 176–93; Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War* (Chicago, 2010).

108. For a structural analysis of the post-Soviet region's move into the world semi-periphery, see Georgi M. Derluguian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography* (Chicago, 2005).

109. Charles Quist-Adade, *In the Shadows of the Kremlin and the White House: Africa's Media Image from Communism to Post-Communism* (Lanham, 2001), 89–95. On the theme of ingratitude, see Bruce Grant, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus* (Ithaca, 2009).

110. Ratcliff, "Seeing Africa," 288–89.

111. Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*, 211–15.

112. Igor' Tarutin, "Vzgliad iz Kharare," *Pravda*, 12 October 1991.

113. ARAN, f. 2010, op. 1, d. 859, l. 18 (Otchet o vazhneishikh rezul' tatakhs issledovaniia i osnovnykh itogakh nauchno-organizatsionnoi deiatel'nosti Instituta Afriki v 1998 g.); ARAN, f. 2010, op. 1, d. 814 (Materialy VI-i konferentsii); ARAN, f. 2010, op. 1, d. 805 (Kratkii otchet o nauchnoi i nauchno-organizatsionnoi rabote Instituta v 1993 g.); ARAN f. 2010, op. 1, d. 822 (Otchet o nauchnoi i nauchno-organizatsionnoi deiatel'nosti instituta za 1995 g.).

114. Ratcliff, "Seeing Africa," 268–74.

115. Anatoly Gromyko and John Kane-Berman, *The Moscow Papers: The USSR and South Africa, Similarities, Problems, and Opportunities* (Johannesburg, 1991).

gested that Russia and Africa shared an anti-western orientation, an aversion to individualism and private property, a longing for strong government at the expense of democracy.<sup>116</sup> Whether cast negatively or positively, Africa's alterity was the ultimate extreme.

### Future Avenues

The history of color in the Soviet Union was both different from and connected to the history of racial formation in the Atlantic World. The meanings of color and race were contested among people who could be called racists and anti-racists, yes, but also among people who sought to make many kinds of sense (or nonsense) of their ascribed blackness. In the evolution of categories and identifications, in the interstices of conflicting visions, lies a rich vein of material for tackling questions that lead us beyond the well-trodden narrative of official Soviet colorblindness at odds with popular anti-Black racism. We ask: How did Black Americans and black Africans in the Soviet Union connect and contend with one another? How did Atlantic ideas of Blackness interact with Eurasian meanings of *chernyi*? How did shifting analogies shape Soviet thinking about Africa, black approaches to the Soviet Union, Central Asian engagements with blackness and black people, and Russian understandings of Russia? Drawing on a variety of voices from the African continent and the diaspora, and the Soviet center and periphery, can help us to provincialize, historicize, and denaturalize any single racial imagination.

We offer three suggestions for future research. First, we urge historians to bring a critical eye to our source base for understanding blackness in the Soviet Union. One irony inviting scrutiny is that the most-cited Soviet archives share basic fixations with the most-cited anti-Soviet memoirs. Relying heavily on the archives of Soviet institutions that dealt with African students is likely to reproduce Soviet authorities' preoccupation with violence, complaints, and disorder. The same themes, evoked for opposite purposes, appear in many Cold War memoirs published in the west, which historians have cited extensively.<sup>117</sup> Such memoirs must be handled with care, given the role of the British Foreign Office and the US State Department in soliciting, editing, and distributing accounts that portrayed the Soviet Union in a certain light.<sup>118</sup> While certain archival collections have attracted heavy traffic, others remain comparatively underutilized: material from the area studies institutes of the Academy of Sciences; records of cultural exchange organizations; collections located outside Moscow, especially outside Russia; and KGB documents where they are available. We are confident that many more useful archival destinations await future researchers' curiosity and ingenuity. Interviews, while commonly colored by nostalgia or (less commonly, we have found) disillusionment, can illuminate aspects of experience that Soviet

116. ARAN, f. 2 010, op. 1, d. 814 (Alekssei Vasiliev, "Problems in Africa's Transition to Civil Society: Myths and Realities," 1994).

117. Andrew Richard Amar, *A Student in Moscow* (London, 1961) and William Anti-Taylor, *Moscow Diary* (London, 1967).

118. Thom Loyd, "Black in the USSR: African Students, Soviet Empire, and the Politics of Global Education during the Cold War" (PhD. diss., Georgetown University, 2021).

officials did not know about, did not care about, or were keen to downplay. Students, activists, artists, and politicians who came to the Soviet Union can be traced through what Jean Allman calls the “shadow archive,” made up of the “shattered fragments” that ended up in archives of postcolonial African states, western academic institutions and intelligence agencies, and international organizations.<sup>119</sup> At present, vastly more has been done to trace Black Americans’ paths from home to the Soviet Union and back again; comparatively little research links deep knowledge of particular African contexts to Africans’ Soviet engagements.<sup>120</sup>

Second, we urge historians to let go of a heuristic that has reached the limits of its usefulness: the study of “Soviet racism and anti-racism.” Compelling work has been done to shatter the image that once existed in some quarters of the Soviet Union as a raceless society. Now that nobody can realistically harbor that unqualified perception, it is time to move beyond research questions posed in these constricting terms. The reasons are many. One is that we limit our understanding by studying Black foreigners as an isolated case, rather than connecting the making of blackness with the elaboration of other categories and hierarchies within the Soviet Union. Another is that neither racism nor anti-racism has anything like a stable or agreed upon single form. Anti-racism was and is too fiercely contested to assume that everyone understands it to mean the same thing. Are we talking about colorblindness? Black self-determination? Difference-conscious affirmative action? Advocates of all these conflicting approaches made their cases in Soviet spaces. Racism came in multiple different flavors, too, and we should care about the difference between, say, seeking to modernize peoples seen pejoratively as primitive and abandoning peoples seen as pathologically inferior or a drain on resources because of the very different consequences those two approaches generated in the lives of the people concerned.<sup>121</sup>

The “racism and anti-racism” framing generally treats the presence or absence of street violence as the test question to prove Soviet racism. We know that anti-black violence occurred, and we cannot ignore the prevalence of such incidents. Rather than considering them in isolation, however, we suggest viewing them as highly visible and painful manifestations of deeper racialized structures that have remained obscure. Moreover, scholars cannot assume the sole interesting thing about black people in the Soviet Union was the everyday racism they faced. Those were the terms on which black visitors engaged their Soviet contexts some of the time, without doubt: are these

119. Jean Allman, “Phantoms of the Archive: Kwame Nkrumah, a Nazi Pilot Named Hanna, and the Contingencies of Postcolonial History-Writing,” *American Historical Review* 118, no. 1 (February 2013): 104–29. See also Elizabeth Banks, Robyn d’Avignon, and Asif Siddiqi, “The African-Soviet Modern,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41, no. 1 (May 2021): 2–10.

120. A cohort of recent and ongoing dissertations do tackle this difficult work. Banks, “Socialist Internationalism”; Osei-Opare, “The Red Star State”; Natalia Telepneva, *Cold War Liberation: The Soviet Union and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, 1961–1975* (Chapel Hill, 2022); Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955–1968* (Ithaca, 2022).

121. For one useful typology of Russian racisms, see Rossen Djagalov, “Racism, the Highest Stage of Anti-Communism,” *Slavic Review* 80, no. 2 (Summer 2021).

people really on the side of our struggle? Am I safe here? Yet we should be careful not to flatten complex political, cultural, and intellectual engagements down to a simplistic morality tale of white prejudice and black victimhood.

Third, we ask historians to pay closer attention to distinctions among black people who spent time in the Soviet Union. Black women remain mostly invisible in existing scholarship, and the gendering of blackness in the Soviet Union has received little critical attention.<sup>122</sup> We have much to learn from tracking encounters, across racial lines, of Soviet and varying foreign conceptions of masculinity and femininity, respectability and deviance, sexuality and family. High-profile political and intellectual figures arrived with different expectations and experienced the Soviet Union in different ways than ordinary students. Celebrities enjoyed lavish attention on curated visits staged carefully by their hosts and mediated through interpreters; students stayed longer, immersed themselves further, learned more Russian, and had much less support and supervision. Some black visitors to the Soviet Union were committed communists, studying how to make revolution in their own countries. Some sought to escape racism at home and chose to settle in the Soviet Union. Some were not communists at all but came as tourists or students seeking what tourists and students want everywhere: stimulating new experiences or an academic qualification. Some found what they were looking for. Others decidedly did not.

A final note. We must take care to historicize our terms; we must approach categories and solidarities as products of history, rather than nature. One all-too-tempting response to the field's neglect of these stories has been to use a limited repertoire of famous Black Americans to illuminate a generalized "Black experience" of the Soviet Union. But synecdoche is dangerous. Looking for glimpses of a singular or authentic Black experience makes false homogeneity out of enormously rich variation and, in the process, reifies precisely the patterns of racialization we set out to study. Solidarities are made, not given.

122. With a few exceptions, little has been written about the experiences of black women in the Soviet Union, particularly about those women who were not celebrities. Exceptions include Keith Gilyard, *Louise Thompson Patterson: A Life of Struggle for Justice* (Durham, NC, 2017); Marylouise Patterson, "Black and Red All Over," in Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro, eds., *Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left* (Urbana, IL, 1998), 110–15. For more on connections between Soviet and African women, see Christine Varga-Harris, "Between National Tradition and Western Modernization: Soviet Woman and Representations of Socialist Gender Equality as a 'Third Way' for Developing Countries, 1956–1964," *Slavic Review* 78, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 758–81.