



Journeys of Hope: African Diaspora and the Soviet Society¹

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Abstract

African presence in Russia predated the Bolshevik takeover in 1917. The arrival of the new Communist rule with its attendant vociferous anti-racist and anti-colonial propaganda campaigns enhanced the earlier perceptions of Russia as a society relatively free of racial bias, a place of multiethnic coexistence. As a result dozens of black, mostly Afro-Caribbean and African-American, travellers flocked to the “Red Mecca” during the first two decades of its existence. Some of those arrivals were driven by the ideology; however, the majority of them were simply searching for a place of racial equality, free of Western racism. To an extent their euphoric expectations would be realized as the black visitors to Soviet Russia were usually accorded a warm welcome and granted the opportunities for professional and personal fulfillment that were manifestly absent in their countries of origin. The second wave of black migration to the Soviet Union was quantitatively and qualitatively different from the early pre-war arrivals. It also took place in the context of the new geopolitical reality of the Cold War. After the 1957 Youth Festival in Moscow, the Soviet Union under Khrushchev opened its doors to hundreds, and eventually to thousands, of students from the Third World, many of them from Africa. By extending generous educational scholarships to young Africans, the Soviet Union sought to reaffirm its internationalist credentials and also curry favor with the newly independent African states. The members of this new diasporic community hailed predominantly from the African continent. If the Soviets had hoped for a major propaganda coup, their hopes were not entirely realised. As a propaganda weapon African students tended to jam and even to backfire. Instead of becoming the symbols of Soviet internationalist effort, they came to symbolise Westernization and “foreign influences.”

Keywords

African Americans and students from Africa in the Soviet Union, Cold War, Lumumba University, Soviet popular culture, xenophobia in Russia, Comintern

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Voyages d'espoir: la diaspora africaine et la société soviétique,

Résumé

La présence africaine en Russie a précédé la prise de pouvoir bolchévique en 1917. L'arrivée du nouveau pouvoir communiste, avec son aile antiraciste active et ses campagnes de propagande anticoloniale, ont mis en valeur les premières perceptions de la Russie comme une société relativement libre de parti pris racial, un lieu de coexistence multiethnique. En conséquence, des douzaines de Noirs, principalement des Afro-Caribéens et des Afro-Américains, se sont rassemblés à la « Mecque Rouge » durant les deux premières décennies de son existence. Quelques-unes de ces arrivées étaient motivées par l'idéologie; cependant, la majorité d'entre eux étaient simplement à la recherche d'un lieu d'égalité raciale, libéré du racisme occidental. Leurs attentes euphoriques allaient en partie être satisfaites étant donné que les visiteurs noirs en Russie soviétique avaient droit à un accueil chaleureux et se voyaient offrir des opportunités d'épanouissement professionnel et personnel manifestement absentes dans leurs pays d'origine. La deuxième vague de migration noire vers l'Union soviétique était quantitativement et qualitativement différente des premières arrivées d'avant guerre. Elle se produisait aussi dans le contexte de la nouvelle réalité géopolitique de la Guerre froide. Après le Festival de la Jeunesse en 1957 à Moscou, l'Union soviétique sous Khrushchev ouvrit ses portes à des centaines, puis finalement à des milliers, d'étudiants du Tiers-Monde, beaucoup venant d'Afrique. En accordant de généreuses bourses d'études à des jeunes Africains, l'Union soviétique voulait réaffirmer ses références internationalistes et cherchait aussi les faveurs des Etats africains nouvellement indépendants. Les membres de cette nouvelle diaspora venaient principalement du continent africain. Si les Soviétiques avaient espéré un coup de propagande majeur, leurs espoirs ne furent pas totalement réalisés. Les étudiants africains eurent tendance à bloquer et à se retourner contre cette arme de propagande. Au lieu de devenir les symboles de l'effort internationaliste soviétique, ils vinrent symboliser l'occidentalisation et les « influences étrangères ».

Mots-clés

afro-américains et étudiants africains dans l'union soviétique, guerre froide, université Lumumba, culture populaire en soviét union, xénophobie en russie, comintern

Introduction

Within the growing field of African diasporic studies it has become customary to pay special attention to the black experience in those geographical areas that have an immediate and clear connection to the history of the Atlantic – North, Central and Latin America, the Caribbean, and Western Europe. The opposite shores of the ocean, for example, provide both spatial and discursive frameworks for Paul Gilroy's effort to rethink the nature of modernity 'via the history of the black Atlantic and the African diaspora into the Western hemisphere.' (Gilroy 1993: 17). This focus is understandable in view of the prominence of the above locations in the story of Africa's forcible integration into the Atlantic-centered system of global exchanges. Yet the intense attention paid by

scholars to the traditional locales of African diaspora can also obfuscate its true dimensions. I would suggest that Gilroy's sound thesis could be strengthened by expanding the geographical and historical boundaries of black Europe to include the spaces beyond the former 'iron curtain.' The African-Russian and African-Soviet connection, especially as manifested through African diasporic presence in the Soviet Union, figured prominently and positively in the construction of Soviet identity. Black travellers to and residents in the USSR forged a durable cultural link between the 'Red Mecca' and the larger world of African diaspora. Their arrival in the country – as political operatives, ideological allies of the regime, students, or adventurers and opportunists – seemed to lend credence to Soviet internationalist posturing. A black person walking down the street in Moscow or Leningrad immediately assumed political and cultural significance far beyond their otherwise quite modest station in life. In fact, to other Soviet citizens, as to foreign observers, blacks residing in the USSR were symbolic of Soviet claims to colorblind internationalism, one of the cornerstones of new Soviet identity. Yet Africans in the Soviet Union not only reaffirmed the fundamentals of Soviet identity, they also challenged them. Just like their fellow diasporans in Western Europe, Africans in the USSR functioned as agents of social change. In the insulated socialist society they often served as conduits to the outside world and in this capacity played an ideologically ambiguous and clearly modernising role.

To a significant extent African diaspora in post-Soviet Russia owes its existence to two distinctly different migratory waves. The first one reached Soviet Russia during the heady post-revolutionary decades, prior to the Second World War. It was quite limited in scope and consisted overwhelmingly of refugees from Western racism – African-American and Afro-Caribbean travellers lured to Russia by the promise of racial equality. Even though a few of them entertained pro-Communist sympathies or even actively engaged in the Comintern² activities, there were scores of others who flocked to the Soviet Union in search of new opportunities in the land allegedly free of racism.

The second wave differed drastically from the early pre-war arrivals. A by-product of the post-World War II decolonization and cold war politicking, it featured prominently young Africans from the continent who, eventually in their thousands, accepted Soviet scholarships to study in the USSR. These African students, many of them passionately devoted to the newly independent nations from which they hailed, harbored fewer sentimental attachments to the host country. In most cases theirs was a pragmatic mission; contrary to

² The Communist International (or Comintern) was founded in 1919 to direct the efforts by the young Soviet state to spread its communist ideology worldwide.

their predecessors from the 1920s and 1930s, they sought not a redemption but an education, caring little for the Soviet dogma and thus presenting a special challenge to the regime and the Soviet society at large.

Gilroy has identified the modernising and globalising roles of African diasporas in Western Europe (Gilroy 1993). But even though it represents a unique chapter in the history of African dispersion African presence in Russia and in the ex-Soviet regions can be viewed as akin to a broader black experience in Europe; in other words, members of the black diaspora in the Soviet Union functioned on occasion as the harbingers of modernisation within their host society. The fact that this phenomenon has not attracted sufficient scholarly attention can be attributed to Russia's relative exclusion from the standard narratives of Western imperialism and later, under the Communist rule, to the country's isolationism and thus its imperviousness to the cultural wars and academic discourses raging in the West. The end of the Soviet rule and the attendant opening of Soviet archival collections allowed Russian and foreign scholars to begin researching topics previously ignored or deemed too politically sensitive. The result has been an emergence of new scholarship on various facets of African-Russian/Soviet encounters, including a number of interdisciplinary examinations of the impact of such encounters on Soviet society.³ Yet glaring gaps persist in the study of the genesis of African diaspora in the Soviet

³ It is no coincidence that the appearance of the first significant academic publications on the history of African presence in Russia/Soviet Union coincided with the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the eventual demise of the USSR. The most notable of such efforts was Allison Blakely's *Russia and the Negro* published in 1986. An anthropological examination of the same issue is undertaken by Keshia Fikes and Alaina Lemon in their 2002 article "African Presence in Former Soviet Spaces." The opening of the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (formerly the Party Archive) provided researchers with access to the voluminous Comintern collection, documenting the lives and political activities of dozens of black radicals and Soviet sympathizers who trekked to Moscow in the 1920s and 1930s. See, for example, Woodford McClellan's piece "Africans and Black Americans in the Comintern Schools, 1925-1934." (1993) In the past few years, a group of Russian scholars led by the indefatigable Apollon Davidson has put out several volumes of primary sources related to the history of Russian/Soviet-African encounters – *Rossiiia i Afrika: Dokumenty i Materialy, XVIII v. – 1960 g.* [Russia and Africa: Documents and Materials, 18th Century – 1960] Findings in Russian archives have also informed a number of recent articles that explore the complex relationship between African students and Soviet society. I would particularly recommend S.V. Mazov's "Afrikanские Студенты в Москве в Год Африки" [African Students in Moscow in the Year of Africa] and Julie Hessler's "Death of an African Student in Moscow." Most recently a compilation of interdisciplinary articles on topics ranging from Africans' place in the culture of imperial Russia to the predicament of African students in the late-Soviet Union appeared in a comprehensive volume, edited by Maxim Matusevich, *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters*.

Union and post-Soviet Russia. In fact, many Russians exhibit an astonishing ignorance of the very presence of such diasporic community in their midst or of the plight of Africans and black Russians who have had to face the reality of racially-motivated violence and humiliation (Oleinikov 2007: 16-17). Considering the atmosphere of racial intolerance and xenophobia that has unfortunately accompanied the transition to the post-Soviet society in Russia, scholars have a special responsibility to promote an academic study and public understanding of the lives and travails of the people of African descent in the new Russia. Such research and the dissemination of its findings could go a long way in stemming the tide of racist sentiments in a country where the history of black experience was far less traumatic than in Western Europe and the Americas.

Journeys of Hope I: 'Race Travellers' in Stalin's Soviet Union

'The working men have no country.' Ever since this famous dictum found its way into the pages of *The Communist Manifesto* the rejection of ethnic and national divisions for the sake of supranational class unity became one of the staples of Marxist thought. The fact that in October 1917 'the working men' did ostensibly get their own country in Russia did not initially dispel the key Communist belief in the colourblind international solidarity of the toiling masses. When the newly victorious Bolshevik rulers surveyed the world they saw 'neither Greek nor Jew' but the multitudes of workers of all races suffering under the capitalist yoke. Their skin color mattered only so far as it marked them out for an even greater degree of oppression and mistreatment. Indeed, in 1917, during the heyday of European colonialism in Africa and at the time when black Americans were severely restricted in their civil rights under the Jim Crow law one didn't have to be a Russian Bolshevik to see the clear connection between race and class in the regions dominated by Western capitalism. Throughout the colonial world and in the United States nonwhite populations found themselves routinely relegated to the lowest ranks of the societies they inhabited. It was only 'natural' for the Communists to embrace these easily identifiable victims of imperialism and capitalist exploitation.

The Soviets believed in the special significance of their political experiment for the earth's wretched, among whom both continental and diasporic Africans were so disproportionately represented. Consequently, Soviet Russia would reserve much of its propaganda firepower to launch vociferous attacks on racism and colonialism. Many of the intended beneficiaries of Soviet

antiracist and anticolonial campaigns possessed only a scarce understanding of Marxism (not a single black American, for example, was involved in the founding of the Communist Party of the United States of America [CPUSA] in 1919); yet they could appreciate the general message of anti-racism and anti-colonialism emanating from Petrograd and Moscow. In particular, this message found willing ears among those diasporic Africans whose everyday experiences and communal histories had been rooted in societies based on racial hierarchy, segregation, and persecution. One NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) official correctly observed at the time that ‘the greatest pro-Communist influence among Negroes in the United States is the lyncher, the Ku Klux Klan member, the Black Shirt, the Caucasian Crusader and others who indulge in lynching, disfranchisement, segregation and denial of economic and industrial opportunity [to black people].’⁴ In other words, Soviet Russia came to enjoy a degree of popularity among black Americans due in large part to the dismal state of race relations *in* the United States.

Indeed, American racism was thrown into ever sharper contrast when the first accounts of racial equality practiced by the new Bolshevik rulers of the former Russian empire began to reach black America. Among the bearers of this good news was an assortment of African-American and Afro-Caribbean radicals and intellectuals who traveled to and resided in Soviet Russia during the first two decades of its existence. Their experiences, related through newspaper reportages, letters, memoirs, and travelogues, informed some of the key perceptions of Russia and the Soviet Union held by many African-Americans for years. Inversely, their Russian sojourns and their engagement with an early Soviet society were often instrumental in educating the Soviets about the world outside their borders and forging, in the process, a new Soviet identity based on the ideals of colourblind internationalism.

Claude McKay, the Jamaican-born celebrated bard of Harlem Renaissance, became an early ambassador of ‘race’ to Soviet Russia when, in 1922, he embarked on what he would later call ‘my magic pilgrimage’ to the land of the Bolsheviks as part of the American delegation to the Fourth Comintern Congress (McKay 1937: 151). The warmth of the reception overwhelmed this former railroad porter. Just two years earlier a white American Communist John Reed (author of *Ten Days That Shook the World* – the famous eye-witness account of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution) had delivered a stirring report on the sorry state of race relations in America to the Second Congress of the

⁴ “Lynchings Food for Soviets,” *The Chicago Defender* (4 October 1930).

Comintern. McKay thus arrived in Russia as a symbol of the kind of racial oppression that the Bolsheviks had set out to vanquish (Baldwin 2002).

By all accounts the Soviets accorded McKay a royal treatment that made him dizzy with success. During the 5th anniversary of the October Revolution he stood on the grandstand in the centre of the wind-swept Red Square shoulder-to-shoulder with the *crème* of the Bolshevik Party, observing the military parade by the victorious Red Army and cheering Soviet Russia's most arresting speaker Leon Trotsky (Recht 1923: 48). Inducted into the Moscow Soviet as its honorary member, McKay found himself hobnobbing with such Communist luminaries as Grigorii Zinoviev, at the time the Chairman of the Communist International (Comintern), and Karl Radek. But it was the mixture of official adulation with genuine warm acceptance by the common Russians in the streets on Moscow and Petrograd that added a 'magic' touch to McKay's journey, turning it into a true 'individual triumph' that he clearly saw as a coup for his race:

Never in my life did I feel prouder of being an African, a black, and no mistake about it. . . .
I was like a black icon (McKay 1937: 168).

McKay's enthusiasm proved to be contagious. In the aftermath of his memorable visit other black Americans began to include the 'Red Mecca' in their itineraries. W.E.B. Du Bois, traveling in Soviet Russia in 1926, was the most prominent among a few friendly observers who became positively impressed with the Russians' racial attitudes and who perceived a likeness between the Soviet and African-American condition. Still decades away from his latter-day Communist conversion, he stood 'in astonishment and wonder at the revelation of Russia,' declaring a sort of emotional attachment to Bolshevism as a token of appreciation for Soviet achievement (Du Bois 1926: 8).

The numbers of travellers couldn't have been particularly large but were obviously deemed significant enough to start worrying American officials, who tended to suspect visiting African-Americans of communist sympathies. The records of the American legation in Riga, Latvia are revealing in this regard. In the absence (until 1933) of diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, the consulate in Riga oversaw the movement of American visitors to and from the USSR. African-Americans were routinely singled out for extensive interviews with legation officials. The transcripts of these interviews probably reveal more about the state of race relations *in* America than about any specific experiences of black Americans in the USSR. 'Being a negress [sic] and having resided in Soviet Russia since December 11, 1927, she was carefully questioned by myself and Mr. Kirley, the passport

clerk of this office,' that's how one consular bureaucrat justified his decision to submit an African-American woman Mae White, on her return voyage from the USSR, to a lengthy questioning at the legation.⁵ The race of another passport applicant, Norval Harrison Allen, interviewed by the legation just a few weeks earlier, also raised 'red flags' in the minds of diligent consular bureaucrats. The title of the special dispatch to the Secretary of State, containing the transcript of the questioning session, inadvertently reveals the depth of racial divide in the United States. For the reporting officer, the racial categorisation of his fellow American Norval Allen, to whom he refers as 'a negro and [sic] an American' and 'an American negro suspected of being a Communist,' eclipses Allen's national identity.⁶

How justified were the consular officials in suspecting their black compatriots of Communist leanings? The Soviet Union projected an aura of racial equality that was clearly attractive to black Americans but did not necessarily turn them *en masse* into Communists. Relatively few African-Americans ever joined the Communist Party, even during its heyday in Harlem in the 1930s. Of the several hundred African-Americans who sojourned in the USSR during the inter-war period less than a hundred travelled there for distinctly ideological reasons (McClellan 1993: 371-390, 2006: 61-84; Solomon 1998; Naison 1985). Of these most arrived in Moscow to enroll in a peculiar educational institution – the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (commonly known by its Russian acronym KUTV). In 1924, the Comintern allocated \$1,282 to cover the expenses of 'ten Negro students to the Eastern University in Moscow' (Klehr *et al.* 1998: 201). And in 1925 KUTV opened its doors to the first contingent of five black American students.

Established as an educational arm of the Comintern to train international revolutionary cadres, KUTV aspired to fashion a community of likeminded political activists, well versed in the ABC of Communism and faithful to the general political line set in Moscow. Lovett Fort-Whiteman, a Comintern activist and one of the first radical black Americans to have claimed Moscow as his home, facilitated the recruitment and arrival of the first batch of African-Americans in the Soviet Union. In the following years the African-American cohort at KUTV (which eventually allowed for the creation of a

⁵ National Archives II (NA II), "Passport Application of Miss Maude May White," *RG 84: Records of Foreign Service Posts: Correspondence of American Consulate, Riga, Latvia*, vol. 104/3, file nos. 630-886.7 (5 August 1930).

⁶ NA II, "Strictly Confidential Dispatch to the Secretary of State," *RG 84: Records of Foreign Service Posts: Correspondence of American Consulate, Riga, Latvia*, vol. 108, dispatch no. 7096, enclosure no. 1 (10 July 1930).

special *Negro Section*) and the more prestigious Lenin School began to include such prominent black American communists and fellow-travelers as Otto Hall and his brother Harry Haywood, George Padmore, Oliver Golden, William L. Patterson and his future wife Louise Thompson, Maude White, and others (McClellan 1993; Haywood 1978; Patterson 1971). It is through their experiences, as well as through the experiences of a smaller number of pro-Soviet African-American celebrities (such as Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson) and of more 'opportunistic' arrivals (such as a postal worker-turned-journalist Homer Smith or an engineer Robert Robinson, both of whom later became disillusioned with the Soviets) that black America got a chance to relive vicariously the reality of Stalin's Soviet Union (Smith 1964; Robinson 1988). In the words of Mark Solomon, this experience was 'a compound of bewilderment, culture shock, pain, and exhilarating empowerment' (Solomon 1998: 90). Whatever later disillusionments, for a time the latter sentiment overwhelmingly predominated.

In their memoir literature former black American travellers and residents in the USSR often cast their entrance into Soviet society in terms reminiscent of a religious awakening. Du Bois expressed more than just a personal opinion when he spoke so eloquently about the 'revelation of Russia.' Langston Hughes, for example, years later remembered an emotionally charged border crossing by a group of young African-Americans, who, in 1932, traveled to the USSR to work on a (failed) film project *Black and White* (Hughes 1994: 73). Homer Smith, a twenty-two year old African-American journalist from Minneapolis, traveled to Moscow to find dignity that was denied him in his native land. His was also a quest for freedom and complete equality:

I yearned to stand taller than I had ever stood [,] to breathe total freedom in exhilarating gulps, to avoid all the hurts that were increasingly becoming the lot of men (and women) of color in the United States. The solution seemed simple to me: Russia was the only place where I could go and escape color discrimination entirely. Moscow seemed the answer (Smith 1964: VII).

The allure of the Soviet Union for its black visitors emanated from the rhetoric and practices of racial egalitarianism. Even though there was an undeniably prominent propaganda element in Soviet condemnations of racism one should not dismiss them as empty slogans. As Terry Martin recently demonstrated in his study of ethnic policies in the pre-war Soviet Union, the Soviets practiced what they preached and even promulgated an affirmative action empire of sorts (Martin 2001). One testimony after another indicates that black travellers yearning for a place free of racism had largely found what they were

looking for upon their arrival in the USSR. Soviet citizens in their majority exhibited a genuine commitment to racial equality and a spontaneous rejection of 'bourgeois racism.' Homer Smith (writing under the pen-name of Chatwood Hall) witnessed on numerous occasions Russian mothers educating their little kids in racial tolerance, explaining to them that it was impolite to ogle at black people, who were 'our brothers, our friends' (Hall 1935).

African-Americans journeying to Soviet Russia in the 1930s could look forward to a welcome respite from housing segregation. And many of them were quick to notice the difference (Hall 1938a, 1938b). A believer in racial segregation of *any* kind would have obtained little understanding and plenty of a hard time from the Soviets. In the famous 1933 children's poem *Mister Twister* by Samuil Marshak, a racist American capitalist (Mister Twister) arrives in Leningrad only to discover that there are black guests staying in his hotel. Shaken by this discovery the capitalist bigot fails to procure 'all-white' hotel accommodation. Humiliated and ridiculed by the hotel staff Mr. Twister spends the night sleeping out in the hall (Marshak 1970). The message of the poem, read by generations of Soviet children, couldn't be clearer – there was no place for bigotry and prejudice in the socialist Soviet Union. Firsthand accounts by black travelers in the Soviet Union at the time suggest that the kind of misfortune that befell the fictional Mr. Twister could have easily happened in reality. Homer Smith reported a Twister-like experience while on a train from Moscow to Leningrad. His neighbor in the compartment, a proper-looking British lady, was so overcome by terror at the proximity of a black man that she requested a separate accommodation from the train's conductor. Needless to say, her whimsical request was denied and the hapless racist spent what had to be an extremely uncomfortable night sitting on her suitcase in the corridor (Smith 1964: 56-57; Hall 1936a). Robert Robinson remembered the annoyance with which his white compatriots viewed the Soviets' refusal to segregate them from their black colleagues. Their attempts to resist Soviet integrationist practices soundly failed. A physical assault on Robinson by a couple of white American 'specialists' would lead to the latter's prosecution and expulsion from the USSR. Following the incident the workers at the Stalingrad Tractor Plant, where the attack took place, issued a strong-worded resolution, containing a warning to other white Americans employed in the USSR: 'We will not allow the ways of bourgeois America in the USSR. The Negro worker is our brother' (Duranty 1930; Robinson 1988: 65-73).

Reading such and similar accounts (and there are quite a few of them available) one gets a distinct impression that the anti-racist rhetoric of the

government, the lofty internationalism of the Comintern did in fact penetrate the fabric of Soviet society. Not only the majority of Soviet citizens appeared to their black visitors to be immune to Western-style racism, but they also apparently set out to shame and educate by example an occasional American or European racist wading into their midst. Nowhere is this moral corrective function performed by Soviet citizens presented with more flair than in the 1936 cinematic mega-hit *Circus*. In the film's most celebrated scene a multi-ethnic audience of Soviet circus-goers saves a little black boy and his white American mother from the clutches of their racist capitalist manager (Matusevich 2008: 65).

One need not doubt the sense of satisfaction at experiencing full racial equality repeatedly expressed by black travellers in Soviet Russia. Many of them, even those of dubious Marxist credentials, were elated at being part of the Soviet experiment. Not only did the Soviets accept their guests but they also (and most importantly) made them feel 'needed.' This was certainly the experience of Oliver Golden, a Harlem communist, who, in the early 1930s, led a group of African-American agricultural experts to work in the cotton industry of Soviet Uzbekistan (Blakely 2006: 47-49). Golden and his young colleagues (most of them graduates of such historically black colleges as Hampton and Tuskegee) had to be favorably impressed with the importance assigned to their work by Soviet officials. John Sutton, for example, reportedly commanded a team of Russian technicians and had a special department at Moscow's New Fibers Institute put at his disposal. When queried by a correspondent about the sources of his quite spectacular professional success in the USSR, Sutton responded modestly and to the point: 'I consider the success of my work not so much a matter of personal capability, but as a result of unlimited opportunities which have been given to me in the Soviet Union' (Smith 1934).

Indeed, as the Great Depression tightened its grip on America, the Soviet Union offered African-Americans some dizzying opportunities for gainful employment and social advancement. By the late 1920s Soviet front organizations in the United States began extending lucrative job offers to American technical experts and even common workers. While catering to the needs of Soviet industrial development the initiative had unmistakable propaganda value, especially when directed towards the African-American community where the unemployment rates were staggering. In 1930, young Robert Robinson was making \$140 a month, working as a toolmaker at a Ford plant in Detroit. A Soviet head hunter stunned him by offering a \$250 a month salary, rent free living quarters, a maid, thirty days paid vacation a year, a car,

and a free passage to and from Russia. Robinson was duly impressed and signed the contract on the spot (Robinson 1988: 29).

Homer Smith, an unemployed youth from Minneapolis, was hired by the largest post office in the Soviet Union, which offered this 22-year old journalism major the position of a consultant at a salary higher than he could have hoped to obtain in his own country (Smith 1964: 2). Within a year, Smith (aka Chatwood Hall) was reputed to hold the 'highest government post than any other foreigner in the Soviet Union' – busy at work on reorganizing the postal system in the USSR (Edwards 1934). The twenty-one young African-Americans, who arrived in the Soviet Union in 1932 to participate in the filming of an ill-fated project *Black and White*, were probably just as pleased with their 400 rubles a month contracts. They also received free meals and reimbursements for their transatlantic passage. Langston Hughes, the leader of the group and the projected writer of the scenario, was given a much higher salary – 'about a hundred times a week as much as I had ever made anywhere else.' Once the film project fell through Langston Hughes opted to delay his departure. The poet toured the country for several months, during which time he had plenty of opportunity to practice his literary craft, making 'more from writing in Moscow in terms of buying power than I have ever earned within the same period anywhere else' (El-Hai 1991: 75).

Just as in the early 1920s Claude McKay had been transformed upon his arrival in Russia from an obscure Harlem poet to a national celebrity, later black arrivals saw their social status magnified, often beyond their wildest expectations. Some African-American students at KUTV, for example, gained entrance to the highest echelons of the Soviet political establishment. Otto Hall, one of the first black Americans at KUTV, soon after his arrival in Moscow found himself riding in Stalin's personal automobile to an audience with the general secretary (Draper 1960: 333f). Harry Haywood, Otto's brother and fellow KUTV student, and the Communist lawyer of Scottsboro fame William Patterson similarly worked in intimate proximity to the center of Soviet power and were on familiar terms with many Bolshevik luminaries (Haywood 1978; Patterson 1971). As was the flamboyant Chicagoan Lovett Fort-Whiteman, also known under his Comintern nom de guerre James Jackson. Fort-Whiteman had been in Russia since the early 1920s – actively involved in the formulating of Comintern policies and championing a number of internationalist causes, including the Comintern-sponsored 'Hands Off China' movement. Close to such Bolshevik 'old guards' as Bukharin, Rykov, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, Fort-Whiteman would pay dearly for these friendly

connections during the purges of the late 1930s.⁷ George Padmore, an incredibly prolific would be pan-Africanist, fared much better but only because of his timely escape from Moscow and an early break with the Comintern. Yet while in Moscow Padmore enjoyed the high status accorded to a rising Comintern star. He headed the Profintern's Negro Bureau and produced numerous pamphlets and articles for the Soviet press. His expertise was sought on issues ranging from delivering funds to the Comintern affiliates abroad to mediating factional disputes among Chinese communists. In the early 1930s Padmore was elected to the Moscow City Soviet, an elevated position which would often land him on top of Lenin's Mausoleum, right next to Stalin and other Soviet dignitaries, during political demonstrations and military parades in the Red Square (Solomon 1998: 177-183; Padmore 1956). This high honour, however, was not reserved exclusively to the high-flying black revolutionaries. The apolitical Robert Robinson, a fine toolmaker but hardly a politician, also ended up atop Lenin's tomb as an elected member of the Moscow Soviet (Robinson 1988: 95-105).

The allure of the Soviet Union proved to be irresistible for those African-American celebrities who found fame and fortune in the land of socialism. Following in Claude McKay's footsteps, first, poet Langston Hughes and then actor and singer Paul Robeson traveled to the USSR where they promptly fell in love with the country and its people. Of all the black travellers to the Soviet Union there was none who had established a more intimate and emotional connection with that country than the great New Jerseyan Paul Robeson. From the time of his first visit in 1935 until his death, Robeson never wavered in his affection and support for the Soviet Union. His son, Paul Robeson, Jr., attended a high school in Moscow in the late 1930s, and in 1952 Robeson became the recipient of the Stalin Peace Prize. At the height of the Red Scare he famously declared that black Americans would never fight the Soviets, a bold statement that landed him in hot water with the

⁷ Homer Smith has a chapter in his memoir devoted to the tragic fate of Lovett Fort-Whiteman. See Homer Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia*, pp. 77-83. Also, see "Situation of Negroes in the United States of North America," *Izvestia* (24 June 1924). The American legation in Riga recognized Fort-Whiteman's political clout by regularly reporting on his activities in Russia. See NA II, "Soviet Communist Agitation Against the Western Powers, with Respect to the Civil War in China," *RG 84: Records of Foreign Service Posts: Correspondence of American Consulate, Riga, Latvia*, vol. 043, American Foreign Service Report no. 449 (2 October 1924). Also, see enclosure no. 2 to the same report.

McCarthyites and strained his relations with the more conservative segment of the African-American community (Alan 1951: 569-573). Robeson's genuine popularity among the Soviet people will remain unsurpassed and the singer more than returned the sentiment (Lee 1991). At the height of the Cold War he still insisted (somewhat anachronistically) that the Soviet Union provided the best hope for the colonial and African diasporic populations:

All the anger of the reactionaries directed against the Soviet Union is also directed in other forms against the colonial peoples. The latter have learned, thanks to these reactionaries, that there is a natural alliance between the country of socialism and the oppressed people the world over (Robeson 1950: 8).

While Robeson's love affair with the Soviets would last a lifetime others did not necessarily follow suit. By the mid-1930s there were some indications that the romance between Red Russia and Black America had begun to wane. This change of heart was reflective of the changes in the economic and social landscapes in the United States that accompanied the introduction of Roosevelt's New Deal. The African-American response to FDR's policies proved to be overwhelmingly positive and in that it contrasted sharply with the hostility towards Roosevelt exhibited by the Communists. In accordance with the official party line formulated in Moscow, American communists subjected Roosevelt's 'fascist' plan to a devastating critique – a tactic that did little to improve their standing with African-Americans, many of whom felt that they were benefiting from the New Deal (Haywood 1991: 125-145; Nolan 1951: 100). At the same time the Soviet Union's image abroad was also undergoing substantive modifications. As Stalin had consolidated his grip on power the Soviet state began to shed the fiery internationalist rhetoric of its early days. Increasingly its actions in the international arena were those of an opportunistic nation-state in pursuit of its national interests. There is little doubt that the persistent allegations of the Soviets shipping oil and other strategic supplies to Italy during Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia further tarnished the image of the Soviet Union among African-Americans (Solomon 1998: 271; Blakely 1986: 113). Then came the 'Great Betrayal' of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939. Considering the Nazis' well-publicized views on race the Soviet apologists among African-American communists were hard pressed to rationalize the Soviet foreign policy about-face to their fellow black Americans. Largely to no avail. According to one source, in 1939 'over fifteen hundred Negroes' left the Communist party in the state of New York (Record 1951: 62; Blakely 1986: 112). A bitter editorial in *The Crisis* conveys a sense of profound disillusionment with a once noble cause:

These September actions have unmasked the Soviets. The Kremlin has staged the *great betrayal* [sic]... Needless to say, the followers of the Soviet in foreign countries have been left high and dry by the turn of events. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, have been disillusioned. Minority groups, such as the Negro in America who had been looking to Soviet Russia to furnish the example by which minority problems might be worked out equitably are likewise in confusion...⁸

By abandoning any pretence that its foreign policy reflected interests other than its own the Soviet Union lost much of its clout with Black America. By the end of the decade the flow of African-American visitors to the Soviet Union had slowed down to a trickle. The majority of the early arrivals had left the Soviet Union by 1939, the departure expedited in some cases by a Soviet bureaucratic innovation that made their stay in the country conditional on them renouncing their American citizenship. Faced with this thorny dilemma most opted to leave. There is some evidence that Stalin's purges of the late-1930s terrified even some of the most sympathetic observers among the African-Americans residing in the USSR. At least one African-American communist, Lovett Fort-Whiteman, perished in the GULAG (Klehr *et al.* 1998: 225). Only a few stayed behind permanently, among them agricultural engineers Oliver Golden and George Tynes, journalist Homer Smith (until his escape in 1946), engineer Robert Robinson (until his emigration in the 1970s), designer Lloyd Patterson, actor Wayland Rudd, and a handful of others.⁹ Most of these men had Russian families. Their children constituted the first generation of black Russians – a small but culturally significant group within the multiethnic fabric of the Soviet Union (Golden 2003; Khanga 1994).

Journeys of Hope II: 'Education Under the Ocean' – African Students and the Soviets

The second wave of black arrivals in the Soviet Union differed dramatically from the pre-war 'race travelers.' While the black travellers of the 1920s and 1930s were overwhelmingly African-American and Afro-Caribbean and relatively few in numbers the post-war travellers usually came from the newly independent African states. Over the years their numbers reached into thousands. African-American travellers of Claude McKay or Langston Hughes'

⁸ "Editorial: The Great Betrayal," *The Crisis*, vol. 46, no. 10 (October 1939).

⁹ "Negro's Illusions Left in the Soviet," *The New York Times* (11 May 1958). Also, see "Ex-American Negro Likes His Life in Russia," *Los Angeles Times* (16 December 1974).

generation, if not openly pro-Communist, often responded emotionally to the appeal of Soviet values. A significant number of them trekked to the USSR in search of an ideological fulfillment, and most of them – in pursuit of racial equality not to be found at home. Postcolonial Africans, however, exhibited an entirely different set of sensibilities and motivations for travel. Since most of them were citizens of independent or soon-to-be-independent black states, the attainment of racial equality concerned them less than the educational opportunities offered to them by the Soviets. Towards the end of the 1950s, in an attempt to cultivate relations with independent African nations and to score a major propaganda coup in the cold war contest with the West, the Soviet Union began extending generous educational scholarships to young Africans (Kanet 1968). In the next three decades the USSR and its East European satellites would emerge as an alternative destination for the African youth in search of affordable education. From the very beginning the arrangement was a pragmatic one. The Soviets needed Africans to enhance their standing and popularity in the Third World, while Africans hungered for access to free education and, as one former African student put it, were prepared to receive it ‘even under the ocean’ (Akaan n.d.).

To be sure, black travellers of the 1960s-1980s found themselves in a country that little resembled the Soviet Russia of its heady post-revolutionary days. Much of the early revolutionary fervor had been spent and, under Stalin’s reign of terror, the Soviet Union acquired some unmistakable characteristics of conservative statism; i.e., the pragmatic interests of the Soviet state, and not necessarily communist ideology, defined its international behavior. Soviet antiracist and anticolonial propaganda went on unabated, but it had grown ossified and streamlined to represent the official Soviet line in ongoing cold war bickering with the West; and in this capacity it hardly expressed genuine feelings shared by the general population. In a similar vein, the Soviets continued to pay lip service to the ideals of multiethnic coexistence and ethnic and racial equality that had so impressed the pre-war black ‘pilgrims’; yet the war experience had deepened Russian nationalism and made Soviet officialdom ever more apprehensive of ethnic particularisms (Estonian, Ukrainian, Chechen, Jewish, etc.), a trend that would extend into the post-Stalin period (Brudny 2000). It is no coincidence that during the last ten years of his life Stalin launched a series of ethnic purges (some of them genocidal in nature) against such Soviet minority groups as the Chechens, the Ingush, the Crimean Tartars, and eventually the Jews. The internationalist ideals of the 1920s increasingly lost their lustre as Stalin turned his ire against ‘rootless cosmopolites,’ many of them bearing suspiciously non-Russian sounding surnames

(Kostyrchenko 1995; Brent and Naumov 2004). Stalin's last years were marked by intense official chauvinism and xenophobia and, as a result, the country's deepening isolation from the outside world. The tyrant's death in 1953, followed by the rise of Nikita Khrushchev and his subsequent denunciation of Stalinism at the 20th Party Congress in 1956 softened the rigidity of Soviet society. In the aftermath of Khrushchev's revelations the country entered a relatively short period of the so-called 'thaw,' which, in contrast with the years of Stalinism, was a time of cultural and political awakening and comparative openness (Taubman 2003). It was under these transformed circumstances that Soviet citizens were treated to a remarkable spectacle – the appearance amidst Moscow's drabness of a colorful cast of exotic characters, the international delegates of the 1957 Youth Festival.

Almost fifty years after the fact, Apollon Davidson, the doyen of Soviet African Studies, still remembered the cultural and emotional shock of the festival. Davidson, like other Soviet students of Africa, had never been to the continent and had limited contact with foreigners. And now, over 30,000 foreign youngsters had poured into Moscow and for the first time in decades Soviet citizens found themselves face-to-face with the representatives of the world ordinarily closed to them (Frankel 1957a: 7). For Davidson and his fellow Muscovites the experience of this new openness bordered on 'surreal, fantastic' (Davidson and Ivanova 2003: 7-25). By many accounts, African delegates enjoyed wide (and wild) popularity during the festival. The hotel reserved for African delegations quickly turned into a vibrant social spot, 'the liveliest place' in town, with Soviet youngsters (especially girls) crowding its entrance in the hope of getting acquainted with the exotic newcomers (Davidson and Ivanova 2003: 7-9; Frankel 1957b: 6). 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 the lifestyles, mannerisms, aesthetics, cultural expressions, and political debates that contrasted most sharply with the Soviet everyday life. The festival itself lasted for only about two weeks but its effects would linger on for decades; it became a gateway for modernity, an opening through which Western ideas and art forms began to seep into Soviet society (Richmond 2003). Africans, so visible during the festival, would soon begin to arrive in the country in large numbers. They came to study but, in an ironic role reversal, they would also function as inadvertent educators, bringing new cultural sensibilities and, importantly, an alternative political discourse into the very midst of the insular Soviet society.

That in the aftermath of the Youth Festival Soviet officialdom undertook several institutional initiatives to enhance the study of Africa in the USSR and to open up its institutions of higher learning to Africans could be attributed to the overriding imperatives of the Cold War. During the run-up to African independence the Soviets engaged in an intense competition with the West for the 'soul of the Third World,' positioning themselves once again as the 'natural allies' of the oppressed. After the decades of Stalinist isolationism the Soviet Union looked for friends in the developing world where the nations emerging from colonial dependency seemed perfect candidates for just such a friendship. This was the point emphasized by W.E.B. Du Bois during his 1958 conversation with Nikita Khrushchev, when Du Bois argued for the creation within the Soviet Academy of Sciences of 'an institute for the study of Pan-African history, sociology, ethnography, anthropology and all cognate studies' (Du Bois 2007: 18-19). Russian historian Sergey Mazov has recently found archival evidence in support of Du Bois' claim. Within months after the meeting the Central Committee of the CPSU adopted, in July 1959, a special resolution provisioning the creation of a research institute of African studies (later to become known as Africa Institute). And less than a year later another party resolution of 5 February 1960 stipulated the founding of a new university to train 'the national cadres for the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.' The Friendship University, also known as Lumumba University, would emerge as the flagship institution of higher learning, catering to the needs of third world students (as well as to the needs of Soviet foreign policy) (Mazov 1998: 80-88, Mazov 1999: 89-103).

Even before these institutional foundations had been completely laid down African students began to trickle into the USSR. Between 1959 and 1961 the number of African students in the USSR increased almost ten-fold, from 72 to over 500, eventually reaching some 5,000 by the end of the decade (Gorbatov and Cherkassky 1973; Hessler 2006: 35). By 1990, on the eve of Soviet collapse, the number of Africans in the country would rise to 30,000 or about 24% of the total body of foreign students (UNESCO 1990: 3.301-3.403; Griбанова and Zherlitsyna 2008). Their entrance into Soviet society proceeded under circumstances vastly different from those that accompanied the arrival of the black pilgrims of the 1920s-1930s. They saw in the Soviet Union less of a 'promised land' of racial equality and more of an educational opportunity of choice. Few of these students harboured deep Marxist convictions. In fact, there is some evidence that even those of them who arrived with the backing of foreign Communist parties or their front organizations often lacked the right ideological credentials or at least failed to put them to good use once in the USSR (Mazov 1999: 91-93). As a result, and in stark contrast

to the black travelers of the pre-war decades, African students of the 1960s and 1970s were less inclined to give the Soviets the benefit of the doubt. Where the African-Americans of the 1920s-1930s, on a tour away from Jim Crow America, put much faith in Soviet rhetoric and rationalised the many Soviet deficiencies as a necessary corollary to the 'newness' of the socialist experiment, the new arrivals proved to be far less sanguine about the Soviets. Many of them also arrived from places steeped in political activism, charged with the energy released by the process of decolonization. They brought into the midst of Soviet society the very revolutionary fervor and liberation ethos that had marked Soviet Russia's entry into the world some forty years earlier.

Contrary to the prevailing climate of complacency, Africans protested vociferously against: poor living conditions, racist incidents, restrictions on travel within the USSR, restrictions on dating Russian girls, restrictions on forming independent national and ethnic student associations (or *zemlyachestva*).¹⁰ As early as March 1960, African students in Moscow petitioned the Soviet government to clamp down on the instances of 'racial discrimination' directed against them (Mazov 1999). Later that year four African students (Theophilus Okonkwo of Nigeria, Andrew Richard Amar and Stanley Omar Okullo of Uganda, and Michel Ayieh of Togo) were expelled from Moscow State University for defying an administrative ban on the Black African Students' Union. Their expulsion and subsequent departure from the country generated plenty of negative publicity for the Soviets. The students seem to have been particularly irked by the heavy-handedness displayed by Soviet officials through the suppression of the Union but also in the severe restrictions imposed on the circulation of 'books and jazz records.' Okonkwo, Amar, and Ayieh challenged the Soviet authorities in a biting 'open letter':

For the Soviet leaders to pose before the world as champions of oppressed Africa while they oppress millions in their own country and their satellites is hypocrisy at its worst.¹¹

¹⁰ Accounts by African students in the late-Soviet Union are replete with complaints about drab lifestyles, everyday regimentation, substandard dorm accommodation, spying (real or imagined) by Soviet fellow students, etc. (Ajala 1963; Okullo 1963; Amar 1965; Nyangira 1965; Anti-Taylor 1967; Lee 1981). Upon his arrival in Moscow in 1959, an East African student Everest Mulekezi was quick to discover that he had to share his 14' by 16' dorm room with 3 other students, two of whom were "hand-picked" Russians. His hopes for a hot bath after a long and arduous journey were also dashed: hot water was only available once a week – on Wednesdays, from five to eleven o'clock in the evening (Mulekezi 1961).

¹¹ "Africans Did Russians In By Rioting," *The Chicago Defender* (28 December 1963); also see "Africans Embarrass Reds," *The Christian Science Monitor* (18 February 1964) and "The Plight of Our Students in the USSR", *West African Pilot* (3 February 1964).

The death of a Ghanaian student in Moscow, in December 1963, which other African students suspected was a homicide, occasioned an exceptionally angry reaction among African students in the USSR. They staged a protest march on the Kremlin demanding a 'Bill of Rights' for African students in the country (the first unauthorized demonstration in the Soviet Union since the fall of Trotsky in 1927 (!)).¹² The incident received wide media coverage on the continent. '... Why did our students... protest in Moscow recently?' exclaimed a particularly incensed African observer. 'Was it not because... our boys had been insulted and attacked on trams, on the streets, in restaurants, in most public places? Could it be that our students have grown tired of the hypocrisy of Communism and the Soviet system?'¹³ More trouble brewed in 1964 and 1965, with African students in the USSR frequently reporting racist attacks, fights with Soviet youngsters, and even feeling compelled to 'carry knives for protection.'¹⁴ In May 1965, the Soviet authorities tacitly linked the African student community in the country with the idea of political subversion when they expelled a black American diplomat, Norris D. Garnett, for 'conducting anti-Soviet work among students from African countries.'¹⁵ Garnett's departure from the scene hardly had the desired long-term effect. Just a few years later, 800 African students went on a week-long strike, this time in Kiev, in protest against the expulsion of a 23-year old Czechoslovakian girl for marrying a Nigerian fellow-student. That same year a Nigerian student sleeping in his dorm room in the city of Lvov was attacked by 'a drunken Russian with a chisel.' The attacker was reportedly incensed by the Nigerian's successes with Russian and Ukrainian girls. The incident escalated into a major fight involving other Nigerian students who had come to the rescue of their compatriot, and as a result three of them were expelled 'for attacking and beating up a Soviet citizen.'¹⁶

¹² "Students Demand 'Bill of Rights'," *West African Pilot* (30 December 1963).

¹³ Sunny Odulana, "Our Students in Moscow," *West African Pilot* (2 January 1964).

¹⁴ See "Red Race Relations," *The Washington Post* (5 January 1964); "Africans Carry Knives for Protection in USSR," *Chicago Daily Defender* (11 May 1964); "Soviet-African Student Fighting Reaches Kremlin," *The Washington Post* (28 January 1965); "African Students Trying Anew to Leave Russia," *The Washington Post* (4 April 1965); "Kenya Students Tell Why They Left USSR," *Chicago Daily Defender* (8 April 1965).

¹⁵ See "U.S. Diplomat Ordered to Leave Soviet Union," *Chicago Daily Defender* (12 May 1965); "Soviet Ousts U.S. Cultural Aide as Inciter of African Students," *The New York Times* (12 May 1965); also "Expelled Negro Diplomat Calls Soviet Charges Ridiculous," *The Washington Post* (17 June 1965).

¹⁶ "Africans Studying in Russia Allege Discrimination," *The Christian Science Monitor* (11 November 1975); also see "Kiev Strike Settled," *Africa Diary*, vol. 15, no. 49 (3-9 December 1975), pp. 7703-7704.

African students had difficulty adapting to Soviet everyday life, often lamenting ‘the sole fact of their living in a communist country.’ Once in the Soviet Union, they had to reconcile ‘the obvious discrepancies between what is said and what actually exists.’ And what actually existed in the land of ‘developed socialism’ were ‘the crowded living conditions, lack of privacy, monotonous diet, inadequate sanitary facilities, and the overall drabness of life.’¹⁷ A former African student at the Moscow State University recalled Africans being particularly affected by the drabness of life in the USSR:

No cars, no cafés, no good clothes or good food, nothing to buy or inspect in the stores, no splash of color to relieve Moscow’s damp gray. Nothing but shortages and restrictions. No opportunity to let go normally, breathe easily, and enjoy some harmless student fun... (Feifer 1964: 27).

Africans didn’t hesitate to express their displeasure with the deficiencies of the Soviet system through acts of defiance previously unheard of in the strictly regimented Soviet Union. Infused with postcolonial idealism and employing the rhetoric of postcolonial liberation in their confrontations with Soviet authorities they questioned the willingness of their Soviet peers to sheepishly accept the *diktat* of the state. Furthermore, through their ‘foreign’ lifestyles and cosmopolitan aesthetics some African students became the *de facto* conduits of dissent. They had more freedom of expression and travel (and quite often more money) than their hosts and many of them arrived from postcolonial settings reverberating with spirited political debates (Amar 1965: 19). Everest Mulekezi remembered intense political discussions he used to hold in his dorm room with some of his Russian friends who were absolutely flabbergasted by the openness and nonchalance with which Everest and his fellow Africans discussed politically sensitive matters. From a Soviet perspective, Everest, by encouraging his Russian friends to question the authorities and read Western press, clearly acted as an agent of political subversion. African students in the Moscow of 1970s articulate ideas manifestly out-of-sync with Soviet sensibilities in the pages of Andrea Lee’s perceptive memoir *Russian Journal*. Lee records, for example, an encounter with a stern-looking Eritrean student, who exhibited an apologetic hostility towards his host country: ‘In my five years in Russia, I’ve come to hate everything about the Soviet system. Life here is a misery of repression – you yourselves know it... The Soviet Union has educated me, though not in a way it intended’ (Lee 1981: 152).

¹⁷ “The Plight Of Our Students In The USSR,” *West African Pilot* (3 February 1964).

One shouldn't assume that all Africans in the Soviet Union turned into political dissidents set on a collision course with the regime. Probably few of them did. Yet any African in the Soviet Union was readily objectified as a foreigner and thus relegated to an exclusive social and cultural niche (Allina-Pisano and Allina-Pisano 2006). Thus being black automatically implied the person's fundamental alienation from the mainstream Soviet society. Also, importantly, for the Soviets blackness was often evocative of a number of political and cultural modern phenomena viewed by the Kremlin with suspicion. Even though the Soviet regime rarely failed to showcase its anti-racist and anti-colonial credentials it harbored ambivalent attitudes towards liberation movements whose direction it couldn't control and whose rhetoric evoked sentiments (i.e., strong religious undertones of the Civil Rights movement in the US) alien to the Soviets. It was easy to trumpet black liberation causes in the pages of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*. However, dealing with the agents and products of such liberation struggles, as witnessed by the clash between a number of African students and the Soviet system, was a different matter altogether. Besides, there existed yet another complication: much of the cultural production usually associated with black roots tended to contain anti-authoritarian messages. As I have already demonstrated elsewhere, the liberal wing of Soviet intelligentsia sometimes embraced the official liberation 'causes' for all the 'wrong' reasons – namely, because black people's history of oppression and restriction of civil rights evoked some all-too-obvious parallels with the Soviet condition (Matusevich 2008: 71-72). It is not a coincidence that African themes figure prominently in the literature of the post-Stalin 'thaw,' in the poems by its popular bards Andrei Voznesensky and Yevgenii Yevtushenko. The latter visited West Africa in the late 1950s to pen a series of emotionally-charged and ideologically ambiguous poems. Just as some of his fellow intellectuals in the West at the time Yevtushenko both idealised and exoticised Africa. But he also strikes a decidedly idiosyncratic artistic pose in detecting a certain commonality of fate between the savannah (Africa) and the taiga (Russia). His direct reference to freedom in the following verse could hardly be accidental:

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

Your sons desire for you
 Freedom eternal
 And towards them I'm filled with love
 Enormous like the pine trees of my land... (Yevtushenko 1962: 58-59)

The poet's empathy with Africa's aspirations was deeply rooted indeed for it was rooted in the unfree condition of his own land. Yevtushenko's ode to African freedom composed at a time when hopes were running high for a long-lasting post-Stalin liberalization of Soviet society can also be read as a hymn to freedom – African *and* Russian. It is peculiar then that one of the first public expressions of dissent in Brezhnev's Soviet Union was occasioned by African events. In 1968, Andrei Amal'rik, the dissident author of the visionary *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?*, breached a major taboo when he and his wife picketed the British embassy in Moscow carrying signs reading 'Gowon Kills Children' and 'Wilson, Don't Help Gowon' (Kamm 1970: XIII). This unsanctioned protest was an ingenious act of political defiance. It was the Soviet Union, not Britain, that since 1967 had been providing the crucial military aid to the federalist regime of General Gowon fighting a bloody civil war against secessionist Biafra (Matusevich 2003). By taking on the totalitarian state Soviet dissidents, most likely unbeknownst to them, would follow in the footsteps of African students who had been staging protests in the Soviet Union since the early 1960s.

Jazz and *Glasnost*: Issues of Counterculture and Soviet African Policies in Decline

One of the most visible aspects of Africa's subversive challenge to Soviet values could be observed in the countercultural prominence of the types of artistic expression originating in African/black cultural traditions. Due to their cosmopolitan nature and direct links to the world outside Soviet borders the African diasporic communities in Moscow and other Soviet cities became the natural points of entry through which foreign art forms flowed into larger Soviet society (Golden 2003). Living in Moscow in the early 1960s Andrew Amar noted the Russian students' fascination with jazz music as well as their awareness of its historical roots:

One of the things which often brought us together with the Russian students was listening to modern jazz music. Large numbers of them appreciated the better kind of jazz and also realized and acknowledged that it had developed from the folk music of the African people (Amar 1965: 63).

With its strong emphasis on improvisation and free spontaneous expression, jazz (just as rock music later) provided for a special kind of camaraderie between its listeners that knew no borders and/or ideological divides. Jazz as

an art form then was bound to run afoul of Soviet authorities, the fact duly noted by the observant Amar:

It was really the popularity that this type of music gained among Russian students, thus bringing them into close contact and friendship with American and African students, that really decided the Soviet authorities to condemn this kind of music (Amar 1965: 63).

While official Soviet commentators saw in jazz the worst manifestations of Western decadence Soviet counterculture lionized black jazz performers and their music (Starr 1994; Yevtushenko 1987).

It is clear then that within Soviet society Africans came to occupy a place of high ambiguity. While over the years the Soviet state and its ideologues exerted considerable effort in 'bringing Africa into the fold' the reality of African presence in the USSR was far more multi-layered and complex. As a propaganda weapon Africa often jammed and even backfired, and as the Soviet collapse loomed closer the idea of Africa, especially as represented by its primary purveyors – the African students residing in the USSR, was playing at least partially a subversive role to the Soviet status quo. By challenging the state and the norms of acceptable and 'politically-correct' social behavior African students in the USSR had demarcated for themselves a separate cultural and ideological space within the Soviet domain, an impressive achievement of free will, beyond the wildest dreams of most Soviet citizens. For many a Soviet citizen then Africa encapsulated the world outside Soviet ritual, differing from it in almost every respect. And for this very reason Africa and Africans became the early targets for the xenophobic propaganda campaigns of the late-Soviet period.

On the eve of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms something of an equilibrium had set in in the relations between independent Africa and the Soviet Union. The Soviets' credentials in supporting Africa's liberation struggles remained quite solid. The Soviet Union participated (with varying degrees of success) in a number of African development and industrial projects. African students became a common sight on most large Soviet campuses where many of them enjoyed a degree of popularity among the student body. Besides, a new generation of Soviet children of partial African ancestry ('festival kids' as they were sometimes jocularly called in an ironic reference to the 1957 Youth Festival) began to enter Soviet public life. Africa remained distant and strange for the majority of Soviets but it had found its limited but seemingly permanent space in the Soviet popular imagination and within the official cultural and political discourse. Perestroika would upset this status quo.

Perestroika exposed the structural deficiencies of the Soviet system and invited an increasingly open discussion and reevaluation of the special place the USSR had come to occupy within the international community (Gorbachev 1988). With the cold war on the wane, many of the country's economic shortcomings were now blamed on its external commitments. For too long, argued the avatars of Perestroika, the USSR had undermined its own economic base by channelling aid to Third World nations. Such argument had a fairly straightforward implication: the Third World had been "sponging" off the USSR and thus degrading the quality of life for its citizens (Zeev and Simonov 1990: 5-17). Even before the onset of reforms people in the streets had been grumbling about 'too much aid to Africans' or lamenting the privileges (foreigners received much higher stipends – 90 rubles per month vs. an average of 30 rubles allotted to Soviet students) bestowed upon African and other visitors at, presumably, their expense (Mulekezi 1961, Anti-Taylor 1963). Some of the popular images of Africa and African lifestyles long present in the Soviet cultural tradition fed this growing paranoia. It was exactly the frequent representation of Africa as a place of carefree existence, where people (and cute cartoonish animals) care little to none about 'tomorrow' that turned Africa into a ready scapegoat for popular discontent. Several generations of Soviet kids, for example, grew up to the lovely tune 'Chunga Changa' from a famous cartoon. In the cartoon, a racially diverse group of adorable and playful youngsters enjoy a problem-free life on a tropical (read: African) island, far away from the drudgery and cold of the north. In a lighthearted song they celebrate the obvious benefits of this easy way of life:

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

Oh, what a miracle island, miracle island
 It's so easy to live here
 It's so easy to live here, Chunga-Changa
 We are happy munching on coconuts and bananas
 Munching on coconuts and bananas, Chunga-Changa. (Entin 2008)

Such 'orientalist' representations of Africa and life in the tropics in general need not have been intentionally demeaning. Quite often they reflected generally benign views of noble southern savages (or *dikari*) – cute and gullible and... ultimately dependent on Soviet munificence. There was more than a tinge of condescension and paternalism in such popular and officially-sanctioned

attitudes. So long as the Soviet economy was humming along Soviet citizens worried but little about the 'third world loafers.' The deteriorating economic situation, however, brought to the surface the dormant (and entrenched within any kind of paternalism) animosity towards the dark-skinned "wards" of the Soviet state (Raheem 1990).

Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms of the late 1980s opened up the flood gates to the devastating internal critique of Soviet economic practices. A surge in anti-Third World sentiments accompanied the new revelations about the alleged 'sources' of Soviet underdevelopment. The Soviet Union, the public believed, couldn't afford supporting dependents in faraway exotic locations. And Africans, the most visible representatives of the developing world in Soviet public spaces, often bore the brunt of what became a spontaneous campaign of denunciation of Soviet assistance abroad. African residents in the Soviet Union at the time reported a rise in the number of racist incidents as well as mounting difficulties in maintaining government scholarships to continue their education in the country (Quist-Adade 2001). In a series of gloomy letters to *West Africa*, a Ghanaian student Charles Adade depicted the unhappy fate of the African in post-Soviet Russia. According to Adade, a sense of desperation and insecurity permeated the lives of Africans (mostly students) in the country of dying socialism. Prior to *perestroika*, he suggested, African students had been in a privileged class of their own. Their stipends were high, their lodgings were free, and what is more important, they were allowed to travel twice a year to Western Europe, a privilege effectively denied to their Soviet peers. An African bringing three pairs of jeans, a stereo, and a few t-shirts to Moscow from his European vacation could easily fetch himself sufficient rubles to live comfortably for a semester (Adade 1992: 482-483).

This neat arrangement was ended by a combination of skyrocketing inflation and new regulations that imposed heavy financial burdens on foreign students in the Soviet Union, but not before it had produced widespread envy, resentment and racial hatred amongst the general population. Adade argues that racism, while always present in Russia, had been energetically suppressed by the communist system. *Glasnost* (openness) allowed for a candid national debate, which, when addressing African issues, proved to be susceptible to racist overtones (Eribo 2001: 149). Many Africans blamed Gorbachev's 'revolution' for not feeling safe in the streets and public places of the Soviet cities. A Nigerian journalism student at Kazan University wrote to a Moscow newspaper: 'One day I decided to have my lunch in nearby café. As soon as I opened the door, I was met with jeers and cat-calls by young girls sitting around a table, laughing and cracking unfriendly jokes about me...' (Adade

1990a: 2056). Enterprising Nigerians soon learned to play curious psychological games to save their skin during the growing number of unfriendly encounters. One of them, for example, when approached by a group of hoodlums, pretended that he was an American black. This stimulated a milder treatment from the youngsters, who ‘immediately simulated keen interest and began to ask questions about Steve Wonder, Michael Jackson, etc.’ (Adade 1990a: 2056). The trick, however, was not 100 per cent fail proof and between May and August of 1990 at least four Nigerian students were severely beaten up and one allegedly killed in Moscow on grounds raging from ‘being a monkey’ to dating Russian girls (Adade 1990b: 2606).

The latter was significant since it reflected a growing public paranoia about AIDS. In 1989-91 a virtual ‘AIDS-phobia’ wave found its way into the Soviet public discourse. Virgin in its unawareness of the dreadful disease, the Russian public became suddenly exposed to a media barrage of materials on the AIDS epidemic in the country. Africans were seen by many as primary transmitters of the virus (the first victim to have died was reported by *Leningradskaya Pravda*, as having had her ‘first sexual contact with Africans 10 years ago’). Another newspaper ran a featured story about an infected Ukrainian baby whose mother had ‘had an affair with an African’ (Adade 1991: 8-9). Adade’s letters are distinct in their bitterness about the ‘unethical manner in which Soviet media, in collaboration with Soviet doctors and politicians are handling the anti-AIDS campaign.’ A fellow African student complained: ‘As a result of a deliberate racist campaign, we are now being called *SPID* (*SPID* is a Russian abbreviation for AIDS) on the streets by Soviet youngsters’. Soviet street folklore with its characteristic sexual undertone tied together the much professed (and mocked) ‘love’ of the Soviet officialdom for the developing world and the appearance of the disease in Russia. A popular joke provided ‘alternative’ transliterations of the original Russian *SPID* (AIDS) whereas the term was variously interpreted either as *Sotsialnoe Posledstvie Internatsionalnoj Druzby* (Social Consequence of International Friendship) or *Spetsialny Podarok Inostrannyh Druzej* (Special Gift from Foreign Friends). African observers and commentators on the Soviet Union appeared understandably distressed – the joke encapsulated the growing popular dissatisfaction with the regime, which ‘wasted precious resources’ on people who (in the words of one populist politician) ‘have just descended from the palm tree’ . . . Africans were rapidly becoming visible scapegoats for the Soviet medical, economic and political disasters (*NIIA-RIAS* 1997: 105). While the Soviet-style paternalism, that permeated the pre-*perestroika* publications on Africa, was being gradually toned down, so was the concern for the continent. Africans residing in Russia on the eve of the

Soviet collapse noted on many occasions that coverage of Africa was reduced to simplistic and highly stereotypical catalogues of its banes and woes. Even in these publications the very word 'Africa' was becoming more and more rare – usually substituted for *cherny kontinent* (black continent) (Quist-Adade 1993: 86-95). With the country undergoing a tumultuous period of transition and eventual disintegration, Africa largely slipped off the radar of public consciousness in the teetering-on-the-brink Soviet Union. As a result, Africans and African-Russians, numbering in the thousands yet increasingly 'invisible' in the country undergoing a profound social and economic transformation, were left to fend for themselves amidst a climate of ever increasing chauvinism and wide-spread racial bigotry.

Conclusion

During the seventy years of its existence the Soviet Union received two major waves of black migrants who challenged and engaged with Soviet society and left an indelible imprint on the country's political, social, and cultural landscapes. An overwhelming majority of contemporary African-Russians have descended from one of the two migratory waves explored in this article. African diasporic experience in the Soviet Union was reflective of Russia's ambiguous identity in relation to other "white" Western nations. It was also shaped by Soviet ideology. Even before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 Russian intelligentsia and even Russia's aristocratic classes, displayed on occasion a predilection for racial acceptance rarely encountered in 19th century Western Europe and North America (Hecht 1948: 265-269). The Soviet regime tapped into this tradition of tolerance to enhance its own antiracist and anticolonial image. Soviet rhetoric of colourblind Marxist internationalism reverberated throughout the colonial world and the world of Jim Crow America, inducing hundreds of 'black pilgrims' to embark upon a long journey to the land that ostensibly knew no racial categories and colour divides. African-American and Afro-Caribbean travelers constituted the bulk of these early arrivals. If not always openly Marxists, many of them found themselves quite sympathetic towards the Soviet dogma and their experiences in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s tended to bear out the veracity of Soviet promise to the non-European populations. Black sojourners entered a society hard at work forging its new identity, of which racial tolerance and opposition to 'capitalist racism' were the essential components. While it would be naïve to suggest that the Bolsheviks had succeeded in creating a genuinely colourblind society, there

is also plenty of evidence that those early black arrivals did indeed discover a land that as far as they were concerned could, at least at first glance, pass for 'promised.' The romance between Black America and Red Russia began to wane towards the late 1930s, when the Soviet Union moved closer to *realpolitik* in the conduct of its foreign policy.

The second wave of African diasporic migration into the Soviet Union came in the aftermath of the 1957 Youth Festival in Moscow and proceeded in the context of the cold war. Qualitatively and quantitatively it presented an entirely new phenomenon with most of these new migrants arriving in search of affordable education from the newly independent nations of Africa and eventually numbering many thousands. The society that they encountered bore little resemblance to the Red Russia of the post-revolutionary period. After years of Stalinist rule the country and its ideology had largely ossified. Soviet society had long since lost its revolutionary gravitas; it was now dominated by inflexible and profoundly conservative bureaucratic structures. While Soviet propaganda continued to exploit the regime's anticolonial and antiracist credentials, much of this effort had become closely linked to the overarching concerns of Soviet foreign policy. Even though the arrival of thousands of students from postcolonial nations held an important propaganda potential for the Soviets, the encounter with these young Africans proved to be of ambiguous political and ideological utility for the regime. Instead of acting as live advertisements for Soviet achievement, African students in the Soviet Union often metamorphosed into a 'fifth column' of sorts. They routinely defied Soviet rituals of complacency and in doing so challenged the fundamentals of the Soviet way of life. On occasion they became the conduits of dissent and Westernisation, the vessels of cultural and political subversion amidst the Soviet everyday, the agents of change, and a possible threat to the Soviet status quo. They also entered a society that was far less egalitarian, less idealistic, and more cynical than the one that had enchanted the pilgrims of the pre-war era. A disconnect between the officially sanctioned and publicly articulated Soviet values and Soviet everyday life widened considerably as the USSR moved closer to its eventual demise (Yurchak 2006). With economic and social crisis in the late Soviet Union deepening, African students and Russians of African descent would come to bear the brunt of nationalistic and economic resentments, viewed as the agents of subversion by the regime's die-hards and as the symbols of Soviet wasteful altruism in the Third World by its opponents.

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