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Black in the USSR: African diasporan pilgrims, expatriates and students in Russia, from the 1920s to the first decade of the twenty-first century

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From the 1920s through the collapse of the USSR, Blacks have found the Soviet Experiment fascinating. The Soviets' solidarity against oppression, and rapid industrialization programs of the 1920s and 1930s attracted a core of highly skilled Blacks, many of whom contributed their talents to helping build the new 'Soviet' Russia. Others took models home to wage struggles in their homeland. After World War II, the Soviets offered training to students from Africa, Latin America and Asia, and, for decades, generations went to study at Soviet universities. There were overwhelmingly positive public sentiments and a sense of common struggle in the post-War euphoria around the independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, relations began to sour as the student numbers rose into the hundreds. By the 1980s with numbers in the thousands, racist acts had risen from the occasional to the dramatic. This paper explores the changing socio-political dynamics.

Keywords: Blacks; Russia/USSR; expatriates

In 1923, the Jamaican-American Poet Claude McKay (1999) wrote:

Stepping upon Russian soil I forthwith became a notorious character. And strangely enough there was nothing unpleasant about my being swept into the surge of revolutionary Russia ... I was caught, tossed up into the air, and passed along by dozens of stalwart youths (280–281).

In 1949, the African-American artist and activist Paul Robeson (1978) said:

I have heard some honest and sincere people say to me, 'Yes, Paul, we agree with you on everything you say about Jim Crow and persecution ... But what has Russia ever done for us Negroes?' ... 'Russia', I say, 'the Soviet Union's very existence, its example before the world of abolishing all discrimination based on color or nationality, its fight in every arena of world conflict for genuine democracy and for peace, this has given us Negroes the chance of achieving our complete liberation [and] within this generation' (240).

In 2006, Professor Gabriel Kotchofa said in an interview:

'One thing democracy brought [to post-Soviet] Russia was the freedom to insult and attack people and be sure of not being punished', and, as reporter Patrick John observed from the rest of the interview ... When [Prof. G. Kotchofa (originally from Benin)] arrived a quarter of a century ago, no Soviet citizen, he recalls, would have dared raise their hand against a foreigner,

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and the USSR bore all the costs of its student 'guests' from the developing world (Jackson 2006).

What happened to the Soviet Experiment lauded by Black visitors, like Claude McKay in the early 1920s and Paul Robeson in the late 1940s, such that Gabriel Kotchofa, who had been living in the USSR/Russia for 25 years, would paint such a dismal picture in 2006? How is it that McKay, seeing similar crowds meeting him at the train in the USA in 1922 – where this could well be a prelude to lynching – could instead describe the Russian crowds with such delight? Or, that Robeson, after observing developments in the USSR for nearly 15 years – including the travail of family and disappearance of friends (Duberman 1989, 353–354) – would continue to point to its example as a catalyst to provoke positive changes for Blacks elsewhere in the world? Or, that Kotchofa, after having arrived in 1981 buoyed by the example of previous African students, would be compelled to join with other internationals in organizing themselves for their safety in 1996?

A window into international student life

Kotchofa's early attitudes had paralleled those of thousands of other ambitious young people looking to the Soviets for opportunities not found elsewhere. As he noted, through the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s when he arrived as a student, 'an education in the Soviet Bloc was a vital chance for poor students [from French-speaking countries] without the connections to net a French grant' (Jackson 2006). Kotchofa successfully completed his advanced degrees at the Gubkin State Oil and Gas University in Moscow, and, in 1996, became a member of the faculty there. Dr Kotchofa was also the first African to become a professor at a Russian University (Thomas 2012), and, he is now the Ambassador from the Republic of Benin to the Russian Federation (Union Africaine 2013).

In 1949, the Guyanese writer, Jan Carew, was the first student from South America to receive a scholarship to study at an Eastern Bloc university. The fact that this would be in Czechoslovakia, and that his courses would be in Czech or German, were not deterrents. Having already attended Howard and Western Reserve universities in the USA, where racism and insufficient funds were constant challenges, once he discovered the possibility of getting a full scholarship to study in Prague, he assiduously set about applying. He was sponsored by his home government, British Guiana and vouched for by the African-American artist and activist Robeson. He accepted a scholarship which included not only his fees, but also housing. He spent 2 years in Czechoslovakia at the famed Charles University, before going on to the Sorbonne University in France (Carew, *Forthcoming*, 'Episodes').

Decades later, in the 1960s, after hearing accounts of a cousin who was studying in the USSR, he decided to investigate his cousin's life and the lives of other Third World scholarship beneficiaries. Carew had visited the USSR earlier as a guest of the Soviet Writers' Union following the extremely popular translation of his breakout novel, *Black Midas*. As he noted of that first visit:

I knew that the V.I.P. treatment I was receiving was not only because of my novel, but because my Soviet hosts were out to win my political support. It is good to remember that these Soviet invitations and visits, plus my relations with Soviet writers and artists, were taking place against a backdrop of political relations with my country, Guyana, then known as British Guiana. That is, relations with our Left-wing government and the Peoples Progressive Party (PPP), which openly declared its allegiance to the communist cause. Both sides in the Cold War

were aware of the fact that British Guiana, situated as it was on the northern coast of South America, had a symbolical, geo-political, and strategic importance – in spite of its relatively small size and its population of under a million (Episodes).

Now, Carew was making a second visit, again as a guest of the Soviet Writers' Union, and also, to interview students with his cousin as his interpreter. The result was his 1964 documentary novel, *Moscow Is Not My Mecca*, in which he discussed the difficulties faced by the students and called upon the Soviets to address concerns of racism (Carew 1964). Ironically, one of the largest student protests against racism came in the winter of 1963, several months after Carew's visit. A Ghanaian medical student had died under suspicious circumstances. The Soviets blamed it on the cold weather and alcohol, but the students contended he was murdered, and that this was just another example of the violence perpetrated against them and the authorities' indifference (Matusevich 2009, 23).

From the perspective of the students and the countries sponsoring them, there was a great need to take advantage of the opportunity to do advanced studies in the USSR. On the other, though, the students had to adjust to the difficult weather, unfamiliar foods, and customs, and the Russians. Many expressed a resigned pragmatism. As Carew reports, one student said, 'I don't even think they really care if we become communists or not; but they do want us to return home convinced that the sun only rises in Holy Russia'. Another student observed:

So, we arrive ... with expectations heightened by decades of propaganda for Russia. Those who returned from Youth Congresses ... had glowing tales to tell of prodigal hospitality and an absence of racial discrimination ... [Now] we are here ... We see some of the good and the bad, the glittering and the tawdry ... [But, in] backward countries like mine ... our need for large numbers of educated people is greatest of all. Our need is so great that if the devil in hell offered us a chance for an education we would take it (Carew 1964, 111–112, 130).

These contradictions underlay much of the relationships between the Soviets and students of color from developing societies – particularly during the heightened anti-colonial ferment of the 1950s and 1960s. They appreciated the Soviets' help in supporting the anti-colonial movement and knew that the Soviets wanted to build allies. And here were legions of young people, anxious to contribute to the building of their new societies. In face of the limited opportunities coming from the West – and aversion to returning to their colonial masters – they were accepting scholarships to study in the USSR and other Eastern Bloc countries, which were touted as being non-racial as well. This idealism led Carew to seek the scholarship to study in Czechoslovakia in the late 1940s, and for Robeson to happily support him. What started as a trickle in the early 1960s, turned into a flood, and by the end of the 1980s, tens of thousands of students from newly independent and developing nations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia had found their way into these multi-year programs in the USSR.

Learning the language was first, and in the USSR, for example, the students were enrolled in a 2-year intensive immersion in Russian language and culture. This preparatory program might also include the equivalent of high school-level work. They were then enrolled into 4- to 8-year professional training programs at universities across the USSR, depending upon their area of their specialization. The Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University in Moscow, now known as the Russian People's Friendship University (PFUR), was founded in 1960 and served as a major gateway for African and other Third World students to study in the USSR. Its graduates include many world leaders

and heads of major institutions in their home countries, and, according to the university's website, between 1960 and 2013, some 97,000 graduates have spread around the world and the former USSR (Russian Peoples' Friendship 2013).

Early ties

A number of prominent Blacks were attracted to the Soviet Experiment in its early days. W.E.B. Du Bois, for one, made decennial visits from the mid-1920s onwards. Popular figures, like Robeson, who traveled back and forth frequently between 1934 and the early 1960s and was often in the media, also did much to encourage positive impressions.

But, people were also encouraged by personal letters and sporadic visits of those who were working in the USSR. Agricultural specialist John Sutton regularly corresponded with his mentor, George Washington Carver at the Tuskegee Institute, as the two consulted on Sutton's research. Going in 1931, Sutton renewed his 3-year contract twice before returning to the USA in the late 1930s. In 1932, a year into his stay in Soviet Central Asia, Sutton wrote his mentor:

I have been lately appointed manager of a newly organized laboratory of Technology in the Soviet Rice Institute. My main function is to discover some methods of utilizing to better advantage the rice plant ... I firmly believe that I can and will make world famous discoveries They are giving me the opportunity here and I shall do my best to justify their belief in me. It is a rare, rare thing that a Negro gets such an opportunity (Sutton to Carver 1932).

In 1933, Technical Specialist Robert Robinson, visiting his mother in New York after nearly 3 years in the USSR, was swamped by people eager to find ways to make their own sojourn:

They bombarded me with questions about life in the Soviet Union ... I told everyone about the Soviet system of employment, under which workers do not receive a fixed salary but rather are paid by the piecework system, earning according to their output. When some heard of the absence of Jim Crow and unemployment, they were eager to journey to the USSR as I had.

Robinson (1988) was sorry to leave his mother again, but he was glad to leave the destitution, 'Strolling down 125th street in Harlem left me with a chill ... There was the face of the depression ... the level of poverty and suffering I was seeing now was so much greater' (75, 82).

Fifteen years earlier, Blacks who had served in the armed forces during World War I, and others who had moved into Northern industrial centers in the period before and during the War, had been exposed to the possibility of new interracial dynamics. Abroad, following their liberation, the French had been demonstrably grateful for American Blacks' help during the War, despite the fact the US military leadership tried its best to minimize fraternization (Haywood 1978, 54–55). In the USA, Black workers in Northern factories had encountered European immigrants who, having been exposed to socialism, were stressing solidarity across racial lines in favor of better working and living conditions. Noted fellow traveler Harry Haywood (1978), who served in the US armed forces in France and was one of the first Blacks offered political training in Moscow in the mid-1920s, 'Chicago in the early twenties was an ideal place and time for the education of a black

radical ... It was a major point of contact for these masses with the white labor movement and its advanced radical sector' (30).

Many were asking, if this nation was fighting to free people in Europe, why were Black people still being held in thralldom? Articles in the African Blood Brotherhood's *The Crusader*, Max Eastman's *The Liberator*, A. Phillip Randolph's *The Messenger* and W.E.B. Du Bois's *Crisis* were discussing the relative merits of socialism and subsequently, the Russian revolution, to help Blacks reshape their destinies (Carew 2010, 17, 50).

McKay's publication of his poem 'If we must die' in the *Liberator* in 1919 spoke to the nascent realization that the time had come for blacks to fight back, and it also brought him to the attention of the Soviets. White servicemen returning to the urban centers were striking out against the Blacks who had taken their jobs and moved into their neighborhoods. McKay had written:

If we must die /Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot / While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs.../Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave/And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!... Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack/ Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back (McKay, Poetry Foundation 2013).

The American journalist, John Reed, confidant to Vladimir Illych Lenin, had been directed to speak about America's Blacks at the Comintern (the Communist International) meeting in Moscow. In anticipation of the 1920 session, Lenin had written the 'Draft Theses on a National and Colonial Questions to be discussed at the Second Congress of The Communist International', in which he called for supporting struggling peoples elsewhere in the world, 'the Soviet system is capable of ensuring genuine equality of nations ... [and the Comintern] should render direct aid to the revolutionary movements among dependent and underprivileged nations (for example Ireland and the American Negroes)[parenthesis his]' (Haywood 1978, 223).

Though Reed spoke about the black plight at that Comintern, he knew that a black person would be more effective than a white man. Thus, he extended the invitation to McKay to address the Fourth International Comintern in Moscow in 1921. McKay was flattered, but also a little intimidated by the responsibilities of being the spokesperson for the Black plight at such a gathering. So, he delayed the trip a year, and instead went to London to work with the Socialist leader Sylvia Pankhurst and her publication the *Workers' Dreadnought* (Cooper 1996, 107).

Feeling more self-assured, McKay (1999) made what he termed his 'magical pilgrimage' in 1922, and stayed 6 months. In 'Soviet Russia and the Negro', published in the *Crisis* in two parts – December 1923 and January 1924 – he wrote:

The label of propaganda will be affixed to what I say here. I shall not mind; propaganda has now come into its respectable rights ... I met with this spirit of sympathetic appreciation and response prevailing in all circles in Moscow and Petrograd ... And there was nothing unpleasant about being swept into the surge of revolutionary Russia ... No one but a soulless body can live there without being stirred (276, 280).

The Soviets, too, were pleased with McKay's representation of the Black plight for Russian audiences. This was memorialized in the famous photo showing McKay at the Comintern meetings standing next to the podium in the Throne Room of the Kremlin (McKay, *American Modern Poetry* 1999). His speech was given in English, but was shortly

thereafter translated into Russian for the Russian people. The Soviets arranged for McKay to speak and especially, to be photographed in a wide range of venues:

the photograph of my black face was everywhere among the most highest of Soviet rulers, in the principal streets, adorning the walls of the city ... I was photographed with the popular leaders of international Communism ...; with officers of the Soviet fleet, the army and the air forces, with the Red Cadets and the rank and file (McKay 1999, 170–171).

McKay's dark skin was perfect for the many photo-ops exhibited to show the non-racial society being constructed under the Soviet Experiment. There was another Black man in Moscow at the time – the Dutch Guianese – American Otto Huiswood. But, he was light-skinned and photos with him would not be so visibly dramatic (Baldwin 2002, 50). Instead, he was kept busy behind the scenes and did not appear in the main propaganda pictures. Huiswood would, however, return several times over the next decade, and play an important role in formulating the Soviet's Negro Question policies (Carew 2010, 25).

McKay's article also added more fuel to Du Bois' intentions to sample the Soviet Experiment himself. When the opportunity presented itself in 1926, Du Bois headed off on his own pilgrimage. Adding to McKay's enthusiastic remarks of 3 years back, Du Bois' biographer, David Levering Lewis, summarized Du Bois' reactions:

In language reminiscent of a Protestant Reformation devine, Du Bois, told of standing 'in astonishment and wonder at the revelation of Russia' [and that] 'he might be partially deceived and half-informed', but if what he had seen and heard with his eyes and ears in Russia was Bolshevism, [he wrote] 'I am a Bolshevik' (Lewis 2001, 203).

Du Bois would make three more journeys before his death: in the early 1960s, in 1936, 1949, and a longer stay in 1959.

For many of these Black visitors, the enthusiasm stemmed from a combination of the experience of non-racial solidarity and the observance of the energetic ways the Soviets were changing the lives of the ordinary people in Russia. The non-racial society was signaled by the Russian celebration of Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin, the great grandson of an African, and naming him 'the father of Russian literature'. Many also saw a parallel between the oppression of Russia's serfs under Tsarist rule and the slaves in the USA. And, they found the dramatic modernization of life for the Uzbeks and other peoples of color in the USSR as models for social change elsewhere.

Robeson, watching earlier visitors, made his first of many journeys in 1934. In fact, both of Robeson's two brothers-in-law were so impressed with the possibilities of greater opportunity in the USSR, that they went there before him. One, Frank Goode, decided that he would never return to denigration in the USA. He settled permanently in the country, married, and raised his family (Carew 2010, 167).

Hundreds of Blacks made their way to the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s, but McKay and Du Bois and later Robeson and Langston Hughes, who stayed a year, would have a particularly powerful affect upon others. As writers and broadcasters, what they wrote and said was distributed widely by the Black and progressive media. Even stories in the *New York Times*, such as that about the trial, against the perpetrators of racist attacks on the technical specialist Robert Robinson in 1931, drew interest (Carew 2010, 231, note 42).

Though McKay recanted his support of the Soviet Experiment with his growing dismay over Stalinism in the mid-1940s (Cooper 1996, 352), the genie had been let out of the bottle. The same applied for Hughes, who back-pedaled in the early 1950s in an

attempt to save his career (Rampersad 2001, 216–217). Hughes had spent a year traversing vast parts of the country. From 1932 through the 1940s, he had been contrasting the positive experiences of the USSR's peoples of color and with the lack of opportunity for Blacks in the USA. He also highlighted the Soviets' solidarity with American Blacks and call for the release of the Scottsboro Boys in the USA (DeSantos 1995, 5). Though Hughes caved under duress during the McCarthyite tribunals of the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities, like McKay, he had already excited the curiosity of hundreds of thousands of readers.

The Soviet authorities were pleased to have these important Black visitors touting the Soviet Experiment because this helped highlight the positive image of the USSR to peoples of color elsewhere. It also helped with the domestic outreach to the Russian people and other nationalities coming under the new Soviet Union. Having assumed the former colonial properties of Tsarist Russia, they needed to build solidarity among the USSR's own peoples of color in the Caucasus and Soviet Central Asia. Here was an opportunity to represent Soviet modernity and to have these advanced people of color training other people of color (Sharani 1994, 57, 61). The strategic importance was not lost on the agricultural team leader, Oliver Golden. As Golden wrote Carver:

Fifty of America's largest industrial concerns have sent 2,000 of their representatives to Soviet Russia to help develop the Russian industry. Yet so far we have not on record any Negro specialists in Russia ... It is necessary to get these men stationed in leading positions, so when other groups come, whether white or black, they will work under the supervision of these specialists ... (Golden 2002, 203)

And, posted to Uzbekistan, there was a double pleasure in recognizing their place as role models. As noted by his granddaughter, 'It would mean more to an Uzbek, he thought, to see an educated, skilled black American [and] would show what was possible when people pulled themselves out of oppression' (Khanga 1992, 77). Ironically, Golden and his group had to leave the USA in order to be able to apply their skills.

Black pilgrims and expatriates

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Blacks, like Haywood and Golden, were recruited for political training which they would make use of back in their home countries. Some of these trainees returned at various times to work on a range of Comintern projects and some chose to settle permanently in the USSR (Blakely 1986, 101). However, in the early 1930s, Blacks found themselves recruited for other reasons as well. The Soviets needed skills to help meet the demands of their Five-Year Plans, and progressive Blacks wanted to open new opportunities to other Blacks. There were large numbers of people looking for good jobs, not only for themselves, but also to bring in funds so that they could support other family members. As a particularly inventive inducement, the Soviets allowed these contract workers to open an account in a New York bank and offered to pay a portion of their salaries there (Robinson 1988, 29). These offers were quite appealing during the Depression: a country that was directly recruiting Blacks as well as whites; offering well-paid jobs and some of that money would be immediately available to family in the USA; and no less importantly offering free housing, medical and childcare, and paid vacations.

Agricultural specialists were recruited by Golden with Dr Carver's help; industrial and technical specialists were recruited from the Ford motor company; technical specialists and engineers were recruited from the Black colleges; and artists and intellectuals, including Hughes, were recruited for anti-racist propaganda projects. Three members of the propaganda film 'Black and White' group, Wayland Rudd, Lloyd Patterson, and Homer Smith, and two agricultural specialists, Golden and George Tynes, chose to remain. All of them had good jobs, some had married and some were starting families. Others, while not remaining for the rest of their lives, found ways to extend their stay several months, or renew their contracts, to delay their return to the USA (Carew 2010, 158, 132, 110).

Ultimately, for those going back to the USA after several years in the USSR, the decision to leave in the late 1930s was provoked by the Stalinist government's requirement that they take up Soviet citizenship or leave. They could not continue as foreign specialists on 1- to 3-year contracts. Reluctant to give up their US passports, they returned to the USA that was not particularly hospitable. These returnees went from a subsidized life in the USSR, to being Black and now 'Red' in the USA. Many of them had trouble finding work. For example, when Joseph Roane, one of the agricultural specialists, finally landed a teaching job, he was paid 'at ninety dollars a month [down from \$600 dollars a month in the USSR]', and had to live without the free housing, food, medical care, childcare, and vacations he had enjoyed in the Soviet Union (Blakely 1986, 98). And, he re-discovered second class citizenship. As he recalled in an interview several decades later, 'in just a few years [in the USSR], you'd be surprised – you could forget what segregation was like' (Khanga 1992, 79).

These agronomists, research chemists, or engineers had not only found jobs in their chosen fields, but they were also free of the terrors of Jim Crow. They were also given the prestige of being there to train the Russians and other people working on the same projects, or in the plants. Noted Golden's granddaughter:

There's no doubt that certain Party hacks did want to display blacks as propaganda trophies ... but any well-informed Soviet agricultural official certainly understood how well-trained these men were by any standard and how rare their skills would be in a primitive economy. The Soviets needed cotton breeders and irrigation specialists, of whatever color, as badly as they needed engineers and auto workers in other parts of the country (Khanga 1992, 77).

Black specialists brought in innovations, ranging from stronger strains of cotton (Khanga 1992, 84) and better irrigation, to technical innovations, and to efficiencies in the Postal Services (Carew 2010, 76, 81).

The Black expatriates and their descendants were also able to fulfill other ambitions that would have been nearly impossible in the USA in the 1920s to early 1960s period (Smith 1964, 64–65). Smith, who left after 14 years, contended that he could not have built a career as a journalist, had he stayed in the USA. But, he was in the USSR through the 1930s and World War II and sending dispatches back to the USA, '[I was] the only Negro journalist ever stationed in Russia. I was also the only Negro war correspondent on the Russian-German front [and] first Negro to be accredited a war correspondent'. When he finally left the Soviet Union for Ethiopia with his Russian wife in 1946, he admitted a certain ambivalence. While he was troubled at seeing the actions of the Secret Police, he also had other feelings:

I, too, had become very fond of and well-disposed toward Russia and the likeable Russian people. It could hardly have been otherwise; non-discrimination and non-segregation could not possibly generate anything other than satisfaction, good will and gratefulness. The harshness of the regime, of course, could not be overlooked; but this did not affect me or other Negroes directly (Smith 1964, 172, 207).

Tynes, who had arrived in 1931, found his expertise in raising poultry to be key to the War effort (Golden 2002, 44). The Soviet Ministry of Agriculture later recognized him by setting up a new experimental Fish and Duck farm for him outside Moscow after the War. He and his family lived there until he retired in the 1970s and they moved into an apartment subsidized by the Soviet government (Carew interviews, [Forthcoming](#)).

Interviews with many of the descendants, or reading the few memoirs have indicated that while many Black expatriate families suffered hardships, these were no worse than those faced by the ordinary Russian. Also, as Khanga noted, at various times, they benefited from the special arrangements being made for foreign specialists (Khanga 1992, 83). This continued through the especially difficult period of World War II (Smith 1964, 150). Only one of the 1920s and 1930s Black sojourner/expatriates – Lovett Fort-Whiteman, who died in 1939 – is known to have died in the Purges. Fort-Whiteman was one of the earliest Blacks to study in the political schools in Moscow in the mid-1920s, and had recruited a number of other fellow travelers. Noted Smith (1964):

[Fort-Whiteman] committed ... the greatest faux pas of all. He ... insisted that the group [of Blacks in Moscow and USSR] should maintain a high degree of consciousness of their color and always remember they were Negroes. But the complete absence of any racial prejudice or discrimination and the almost total lack of color consciousness in Russia made [this] advice extremely unpalatable [to the Comintern officials] ... As a matter of fact, a Negro in Russia had no reason at all to think of color. (81)

These Black expatriates and their descendants also found their status could help them ward off Secret Police investigations, or help them gain access to prized institutions. Noted, Khanga of her grandfather, after he confronted the Secret Police in Tashkent – he discovered that they had searched his apartment during his absence – ‘It’s ... possible ... that some official thought better of arresting a well-connected black American communist’ (Khanga 1992, 91). Black expatriate Robert Ross helped Lily Golden (2002) gain admission to the prestigious Moscow State University (42). She noted that while being Black for this select group of descendants was not a hindrance to obtaining prized entrances to universities in the 1950s and 1960s, they were more likely to have problems if they had Jewish ties, or ties to foreigners (Golden 2002, 40, 21). Many descendants attended university, some became professors and research scientists, another did Navy officer’s training, one was a member of the famed Bolshoi Ballet, and still others became actors and journalists (Golden 2002, 45, 46).

By the early 1960s, the Soviet outreach to newly independent nations in Africa and other parts of the developing world took two intertwined tacks. In contrast to the 1920s and 1930s when the Soviets needed the help, the Soviets were now offering their expertise to others. Teams of educators and technical experts were offered to help build the intellectual and physical infrastructures in-country. And, generous scholarships and stipends were offered for students to study at Soviet universities so as develop their country’s intellectual and professional capital. Many allied nations in the Eastern Bloc offered similar scholarships. The Soviet awards included not only scholarships for the

universities, but also free housing and stipends for other expenses, and a travel allowance that made it possible for these students to go to Europe twice a year (Matusevich 2009, 29, 30).

Several of the Black expatriates' daughters were either attending university or working there when the African and other Third World students began to arrive in the 1960s. They, like the Russian public, had already been primed for this cohort by the 1957 World Festival of Youth and Students and the 1958 conference of African and Asian Writers. And, Ghana's independence in 1957 and Guinea's in 1958 were seen as powerful signals of an exciting future. Observed Lily Golden (2002), 'Before our eyes, Africa was gaining freedom. We could never have guessed ... in 1960 ... more than 30 African colonies would be granted their independence' (77).

Golden (2002) married a student from Zanzibar in 1961, but she was not alone:

The Black Soviet girls were marrying Africans in the conviction that, by going to the continent, they could be of some help to their husbands' peoples ... We believed that our education would enable us to contribute ... As men and women of African origin, we were feeling solidarity with our brethren (111).

This general idealism was not only a feature of Afro-Russians, but Russian students and professionals looked forward to going to African and other newly independent nations to teach and help build these societies there (Carew interviews, [Forthcoming](#)).

But, there was a clash between the romanticism and the reality:

One after another of my girlfriends of African [African America] origin were marrying Africans [and] all followed their husbands. [But] soon one by one, they began to reappear again in the Soviet Union [though] visas were not easily obtained. These young women had fought the Soviet bureaucracy for permission to go, and now, they had to fight the Soviet bureaucracy for permission to return, not to speak of fighting husbands and their families that tried to prevent them and their children from leaving (Golden 2002, 110–111).

One such account was that of Amelia Tynes-Mensah, the daughter of expatriate George Tynes, who had considerable difficulty getting permission to leave with her husband who had been a student in the USSR. But, later, after her Ghanaian marriage had fallen apart, had to spend considerable effort getting permission to return to the USSR (Carew 2010, 207; Carew interviews, [Forthcoming](#)).

Also, the romanticism of solidarity with Africa was increasingly tested by the demands of the growing numbers of students taking up residence in university centers. Toward the end of the 1980s, the Soviet Union fell apart. The fabric had been fraying for years, but was largely bolstered up by policies and procedures that provided 'patches' to any problems that might surface. And, generally, the Soviet authorities had made attempts match the solidarity rhetoric with action. Then, as now, though, incidents regarding the treatment of Blacks were not acknowledged to be 'racism', per se, but isolated signs of 'hooliganism' or tensions fueled by alcohol.

Facing intolerance in Post-Soviet Russia

But, as Maxim Matusevich (2009) points out, Perestroika brought not only a dramatic change to the socio-economic life of the Russian people, but also fueled attacks on Africans and other foreigners of color:

A surge in anti-Third World sentiments accompanied the new revelations about the alleged ‘sources’ of Soviet underdevelopment. The Soviet Union, the public was led to believe, could not afford supporting dependents in the faraway exotic locations. And Africans, the most visible representatives of the developing world in Soviet public spaces, now had to bear the brunt of what became a spontaneous campaign of denunciation of Soviet assistance abroad (30).

Additionally, noted Klomegah in 2006:

In the Soviet era, the causes of the country’s problems were always said to derive from an external enemy, such as imperialism or Zionism. But now they’re looking at a different kind of ‘-ism’, and it’s the enemy within, the immigrants and poor foreign students living Russia, who are getting the blame (Klomegah 2006).

While a survey of incident accounts on the Internet suggests that the worst years for attacks on foreign students of color were 1995 to 2006, there are still attacks on ‘blacks’ in Russia. Some are directed at foreign students, others are directed at the former USSR’s own ‘blacks’ – ethnic migrants from the southern and eastern provincial regions. These are peoples from the Caucasus mountain countries, such as Chechnya and Georgia, and Central Asia, such as Uzbekistan. Like the foreign students of color, their darker skin and/or Asiatic features stand out (Finn 2008). And, like the foreign students, they have been seen as supplicants, taking funds and jobs away from the Russians.

However, a convergence has arisen that could help ameliorate this climate of intolerance. Russia has been making fresh attempts to rebuild her relations with African nations and seems poised to re-enter global economics. Her membership in the ‘South-South’ BRICS coalition of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, is a case in point. According to Arkhangelskaya and Shubin (2013, 27), this five-nation grouping of emerging economies has a particular focus on ‘co-financing infrastructure projects in Africa’. Russia is also getting ready for the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi, and positioning herself for the 2018 World Cup. And, she cannot afford to have reports of attacks on foreign students, or other peoples of color in her midst, tarnish her global image (Reevell 2013).

Also, at the grassroots level, steps have been taken to help these students and their families contend with the challenges of being black in Russia. An ancillary effect of the African and other student of color presence in the country has been the increasing numbers of mixed-race children. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, not only were students facing racial incidents, but so were these children and their mothers. The Black expatriates of the 1920s and 1930s period, and their Afro-Russian children, had settled in a wide range of locales, depending upon the work their fathers or grandfathers were doing, and they were few in number. Conversely, the African and other students of color, arriving in the 1960s and onwards were concentrated in neighborhoods around the university campuses and their numbers were much larger. Increasing numbers of mixed-race children began appearing in these sectors as well, as young Russian and provincial women were attracted to these exotic foreigners. By 2006, these children had been estimated to be 4,000 (Fund ‘Metis’ 2013).

Some of the fathers had found jobs and stayed in Russia and the families remained intact. But more have had to return to their countries after finishing their studies, leaving these children to be raised by their Russian mothers alone, or by the State (Fund ‘Metis’ 2013). This was of great concern to several of the Afro-Russian descendants. From personal experience, they knew the challenges of crossing cultural boundaries, and decided to draw

on their various political and social supports to help these later generations who were floundering (Carew interviews, [Forthcoming](#)). Amelia Tynes-Mensah, for one, established the Fund 'Metis', an international children's charity, in 1997. Like Lily Golden, Tynes-Mensah had married an African student whom she met in Moscow in the 1960s. But, she later divorced her Ghanaian husband, and returned to the USSR to raise her Afro-Russian/Ghanaian children (Carew interviews, [Forthcoming](#)). Fund 'Metis' provides much-needed social services and, with the assistance of various African embassies, international agencies, and private funding, it also introduces these children to the cultures of their African fathers as a means to help them be more secure in themselves (Fund 'Metis' 2013).

Like the Association of Foreign Students created/established by Dr Kotchofa in 1996 to provide support to foreign students, Tynes-Mensah's Fund 'Metis' represents proactive attempts by Blacks established in Russia to strengthen the ability of these populations faced with the growing intolerance. Both organizations are registered with the appropriate Russian governmental agencies and are referenced as resources on various websites. But also, it is a testament to a need to 'give back' that Tynes-Mensa and Dr Kotchofa, who represent and the long-standing Black expatriate presence and the more recent the African student presence in Russia, respectively, are willing to draw on their various internal and external networks to help.

The fact of these grass-roots efforts to remedy some of the difficulties faced by Black students and their mixed-race dependents in Russia is both encouraging and troubling. It is encouraging because the founders of these organizations – an Afro-Russian descendent from a 1930s Black pilgrim and a former student from Benin and now professor at a Russian university – were beneficiaries of Black Soviet solidarity of an earlier period. As a result, they are in a position to tap into their various resources to help. It is troubling because these organizations are now needed to help current generations of Black students navigate the Russian system. Regrettably, and the stories of the current wave of xenophobia threaten to overshadow a history of positive Black-Soviet relations. Yet, looking at a span of 90 years, stretching from the 1920s through 2006, it is evident that the Soviets did offer numerous supports for the Black struggle in the early and mid-Soviet periods. Presenting itself as an alternative to Western capitalism, the Soviet Union and its programs offered developing nations, and others fighting repression, professional training, and development opportunities. This included the earliest days of building the industrial base of the new 'Soviet' Russia, when skilled and talented Blacks were welcomed to join the Soviet Experiment. It continued through the early decades of the scholarship programs for Third World students, and the euphoria of the independence movements. In this period, too, university-educated Soviet youth vied for the opportunity to be sent abroad to work on Soviet-sponsored projects; and Soviet development projects were seen across Africa and elsewhere in the developing world.

But, this solidarity, demonstrated from the highest levels and stretching through to the ordinary people, petered out with the rising pressures of socio-economic and political decay of the last decades of the Soviet-era. In searching for scapegoats, people now pointed to the enormous amount of funds that were being used to support the scholarships and other subsidies, at their expense. And African and other dark-skinned students were easy to recognize as 'outsiders'.

Despite this change in attitude, students from Africa and elsewhere continued to go, and are still going to study in Russia (Arkhangelskaya and Shubin 2013, 26), because the education is a good one; and for people with limited resources, the cost is very affordable. In more recent time, the costs have been further reduced, as the Russian government has

been able to restore some of the student scholarships. Government subsidies now cover about 80 percent of the cost. Even the past few years (2010–2012), the reports of violence against African and other dark-skinned students have gone down.

Further research is called for to assess the quality of education and life for African and other Third World students of color in Russia today. But, also, research is needed to look at the impact of the previous generations of scholarships on the development of the intellectual capital of the nations from which these students came. And, to see where they applied their skills, once they returned home. Many of these former students, recognizing the value of these scholarships to their professional development, have actively encouraged later generations of students to study in the USSR and, later, post-Soviet Russia. Also, for those, like Prof. Kotchofa, whose career stems from such an experience, but who also married and decided to remain in Russia, research is needed to look at the impact of these newer Black expatriate communities on Russia.

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