

## Culture Clash in the Socialist Paradise: Soviet Patronage and African Students' Urbanity in the Soviet Union, 1960–1965

The (mis)recognition of the Other plays a vital role in cultural diplomacy and international relations. Although many of us assume cultural exchange promotes understanding, encounters with the Other often reinforce preexisting assumptions. These presuppositions frequently structure relations between nations.<sup>1</sup> The dialog between self and Other greatly influenced African–Soviet relations during the Cold War. Maxim Matusевич has noted the “exercise in mutual misunderstanding and frustrations” in Soviet–Nigerian relations that contributed to Nigerians’ reticence to form strong ties with the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> But as Matusевич’s work implies, these misunderstandings went beyond the level of diplomacy and informed the everyday interactions between Africans and Russians.

The everyday encounters between Soviet citizens and African students studying in the Soviet Union in the sixties are the most prominent examples. The meeting of two culturally disparate peoples inevitably generated problems of acclimation, social and political conflict, and racial strife.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I illuminate a different aspect of the exchange through the ways the cultural clash affirmed Russians’ and Africans’ sense of cultural superiority.

Encounters between African students and Soviet citizens allow us to evaluate the place of youth in the Cold War. African nations and the Soviet Union invested in youth because they symbolized the future. African governments hoped young professionals educated abroad would facilitate the modernization of their countries. Many youth justified studying in the Soviet Union in these terms. African students went to Russia because as one alumnus put it, “one should be prepared to

1. Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: “The East” in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis, 1999), 20–37.

2. Maxim Matusевич, “Visions of Grandeur . . . Interrupted: The Soviet Union Through Nigerian Eyes,” in *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters*, ed. Maxim Matusевич (Trenton, 2007), 366; Maxim Matusевич, *No Easy Row for a Russian Hoe: Ideology and Pragmatism in Nigerian-Soviet Relations, 1960–1991* (Trenton, 2003), 6.

3. Julie Hessler, “Death of an African Student in Moscow,” *Cahiers du Monde russe* 47, nos. 1–2 (2006), 33–64; Matusевич, *No Easy Row for a Russian Hoe: Ideology and Pragmatism in Nigerian-Soviet Relations, 1960–1991*, 80–85; Sergey Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo, 1956–1964* (Stanford, 2010), 231–41.

get education *even under the ocean*.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, Soviet politicians targeted African youth to expand its influence in Africa. By educating African youths, Soviet officials strived to cultivate “sincere friends.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately African students had the rare opportunity to live extensive periods behind the Iron Curtain and thus power as unique observers of life in socialist societies. Unlike diplomats and journalists, they inhabited Soviet institutions, were subjected to their inner workings and ideological memes, and fraternized with Soviet peers and university officials. Through these interactions, African students contributed to the production of Cold War narratives that the world consumed about Soviet society.

These encounters often affirmed Russian and African self-identity. The African presence in Russia reminded Soviet citizens of their altruism in rearing the “backward” and “oppressed” into cultured and scientifically endowed people. Soviet patronage during the Cold War continued postrevolutionary internationalist precepts in an altered form.<sup>6</sup> However, the reflexive aspect of Soviet patronage also produced resentment, especially when Russians believed their “younger siblings of the socialist brotherhood” failed to appreciate their charity.<sup>7</sup> Either way, patronage of African students certified Soviet cultural superiority and its self-ascribed role as a positive and progressive global power.

Similarly, African encounters with Soviet daily life reaffirmed their identity as culturally superior to Russians. For students, culturedness meant respect for privacy and individuality, geniality, hygiene, and fashionable presentation. Because African students saw these as aspects of the individual, they directly conflicted with Soviet notions of collectivism that promoted mutual responsibility and surveillance. The conflict over culturedness had direct ramifications on where one stood in the Cold War. After all, the Cold War was not just an ideological and economic faceoff, but, in the words of George H. W. Bush, a struggle “for the soul of mankind” and “for a way of life.”<sup>8</sup> The nexus that bound elements of African and Soviet identity was vital terrain in that struggle.

The Soviet government reestablished its foreign student exchange programs in 1956 after a two decade suspension. Along with renewing cultural exchanges with the West and the hosting of the Sixth World Youth Festival in 1957, the foreign student exchange programs were an element in the Soviet Union’s effort to fight the Cold War on the cultural front. The opening of the People’s Friendship

4. Quoted in Matusевич, *No Easy Row for a Russian Hoe: Ideology and Pragmatism in Nigerian-Soviet Relations, 1960-1991*, 82. Emphasis in original.

5. Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo, 1956-1964*, 232-33; Roger E. Kanet, “African Youth: The Target of Soviet African Policy,” *Russian Review* 27, no. 2 (1968), 161-175.

6. Meredith L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937* (Lincoln, 2012).

7. Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo, 1956-1964*, 235.

8. Quoted in Melvyn P Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York, 2007), 3.

University (UND) in Moscow in 1960 for students from Asia, Africa, and Latin America was pivotal in this endeavor. The number of African countries with students in Russia rapidly increased from ten in 1958 to forty-six in 1968. The 1959–60 school year had a mere seventy-two students from sub-Saharan Africa, increasing to 500 in 1961, and then to 4,000 by the end of the decade. Of the 17,400 foreign students in the Soviet Union in 1970, 20 percent originated from Africa.<sup>9</sup>

Soviet officials articulated their policy toward the Third World in paternalist language that essentialized all African nations to an identical stage of backwardness. As Nikita Khrushchev reiterated in a speech to the Council of Ministers in November 1960: “[Lenin] saw the historical mission of our country to help the hundreds of millions of people of downtrodden countries . . . to liquidate economic and cultural backwardness.” The Soviet’s own historical trajectory furnished the template. Having to quickly industrialize in the thirties, the Soviet Union, Khrushchev emphasized, “was familiar and understood” the needs of postcolonial states. Therefore, Khrushchev insisted that the Soviet leadership designed the People’s Friendship University “only for one thing: to help other countries to prepare highly qualified personnel.” After all, the Soviet people, he said, were “like brothers” to foreigners and endeavored to help them “learn better.”<sup>10</sup> The idea that Soviet citizens were “like brothers” to Africans was a staple of Soviet ideology propaganda, which often portrayed whites as “class enemies and oppressors” or simply “bourgeois” and regarded dark-skinned people, and Africans in particular, as “our foreigners.”<sup>11</sup>

To entice youth from developing countries, the Soviet government offered free transportation from their home countries, education, healthcare, and a monthly stipend. The stipend was four times higher than those of Soviet students and included a onetime lump-sum of 300–400 rubles for winter clothing and other supplies.<sup>12</sup> Prospective students applied for scholarships through Soviet embassies or Soviet-friendly organizations. Students from countries without student exchange agreements could apply directly to a Soviet university.<sup>13</sup>

Applying the Soviet principle of “affirmative action,” foreign students were admitted based on social class and country of origin.<sup>14</sup> Previous education

9. Hessler, “Death of an African Student in Moscow,” 35; *Narodnoe obrazovanie, nauka, i kul'tura v SSSR: Statisticheskii sbornik*, (Moscow, 1971), 217; L. Ia. Cherkasskii, *Sotrudnichestvo SSSR so stranami Arabskogo Vostoka i Afriki* (Moscow, 1973), 287.

10. Ministerstvo inostrannykh del SSSR, *SSSR i strany Afriki, 1946–1962*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1963), 82.

11. S. V. Mazov, ““Rasizm po-russkii”? Afrikanские студенты в СССР в 1960 г.,” in *Afrotsentrizm i Evrotsentrizm nakamune XXI veka: afrikanistka v mirovom kontekste*, ed. A. S. Balezin (Moscow, 2000), 105.

12. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii, RGASPI hereafter, 1M, op. 46, d. 339, l. 9.

13. Tsentral'nyi arkhiv goroda Moskvy, TsAGM hereafter, f. 3061, op. 1, d. 7, l. 64.

14. For Soviet affirmative action programs in education in the thirties, see Shelia Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921–1934* (Cambridge, 1979).

mattered little. Rather, Soviet administrators followed national quotas to balance out national representation and prioritized students with worker and peasant backgrounds. In the first years, the “overwhelming majority” came from the poor, working class, and lower bureaucratic layers of African society. Of the incoming students for the 1961–62 year, for example, 25 percent had not completed secondary education and over half were from “poverty stricken families.”<sup>15</sup> But ultimately class played little role in admissions, as most applicants were rejected simply for lack of space. UND pro-Rector P. D. Erzin reported that by the middle of 1960 the university had received 16,200 applications, or thirty for each available place.<sup>16</sup> The class nature of foreign students began to change later in the decade, however, as wealthier Africans started applying. This influx of “landowning and merchant classes” prompted B. S. Nikoiforov, the head of Moscow State University’s international office, to complain that many students had been “corrupted by bourgeois morals.” These included individualism, concern with personal aesthetics and consumerism, and affinity toward Western liberalism. Moreover, many had first studied in Western Europe and the United States and still maintained contact with their embassies. Nikoiforov considered them possible “enemy agents” and “class aliens” in black skin.<sup>17</sup>

The culture clash between the Soviets and African students manifested as soon as the latter arrived in Russia. Keeping with the tradition of controlling their guests’ narrative about Soviet society, university officials flaunted Soviet culturedness to their African guests, representing the Soviet system as a more humane, refined, and prosperous alternative to the capitalist West.<sup>18</sup> William Anti-Taylor, a student from Ghana, who was recruited to study in Moscow in 1960, noted that this effort was evident the moment he landed. He recalled his Soviet handlers’ “ecstatic” welcome and “ever-solicitous” concern for his welfare as they greeted him with “all the pomp and ceremony due to VIPs.” A banquet organized for the Ghanaians’ arrival was also an impressive show. Housed in a former Tsarist mansion, with newly plastered walls and coated with fresh paint, the banquet was furnished with “hideously high” piles of food and an attentive serving staff to display Soviet hospitality and abundance.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, to Anti-Taylor the transparently contrived overabundance reaffirmed his identity as a man of culture against the provincial coarseness of the Soviet people. For all the paternalistic lenses through which his Soviet hosts essentialized him, Anti-Taylor applied a similar essentialism to the Soviet other. Indeed, Anti-Taylor’s first glimpses of Moscow from his taxi impressed him to “emphasize the difference” between Moscow and the European capitals of London and

15. RGASPI f. 1M, op. 46, d. 294, l. 108.

16. TsAGM f. 3061, op. 1, d. 7, l. 64.

17. Mazov, ““Rasizm po-russkii”?: Afrikanские студенты в СССР в 1960 г.,” 108–109.

18. Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (New York, 2011), 7–12, 98–141.

19. William Anti-Taylor, *Moscow Diary* (London, 1967), 30–33.

Rome. The contrast in climate was an obvious starting point. London, let alone Rome, knew nothing of Russia's "cruel" cold or the piles of snow lining Moscow's thoroughfares. He also found Soviet gender relations just as cruel. Although accustomed to black women performing physical labor, he was taken aback at the sight of white women performing "heavy manual work." More a sign of Russian backwardness than the Soviet ethos of sexual equality, it was as if the racial and gendered division of labor of colonial Ghana still framed his worldview. A white woman using an acetylene welding apparatus, another shoveling snow, and still more resurfacing asphalt caught his eye as his cab sped along. "Truth to tell," he wrote, "we pitied them and felt a little sad."<sup>20</sup>

Anti-Taylor's identity as cultured was challenged at the banquet. As he filled his plate with food, the "devastating, hopeless feeling of being a stranger in a strange land" struck him. Indeed, the term "strange" peppered his recollection. The soup his hosts served was "strange [and] transparent," which "delighted the Russians" but made him and his fellow Ghanaians "queasy." This was followed by "equally strange tasting bread" and tall mounds of raw fish and chopped onions. Anti-Taylor appealed to his identity as "a man of the world" to convince himself that he in fact felt "happy in these strange surroundings." Still, even mental reassurance could not prevent Anti-Taylor from wanting to "vomit" when he ventured to try the raw fish. But his culturedness ultimately prevailed. Unable to bring himself to swallow it, he politely put down his plate and hurried to the nearest restroom so he could "rid [himself] of the revolting mouthful when nobody was looking."<sup>21</sup>

Shortly after their arrival, students took a mandatory exam assessing their general educational level. Consistent with their paternalism and class-based affirmative action, Soviet officials purposely relegated placement exams to "simple questions," expecting students to have little preparatory education. At a UND council meeting in 1960, V. S. Bondarenko, the dean of the preparatory department, reported that foreign students' knowledge level on average was equivalent to the Soviet seventh grade, particularly in math. One student, Bondarenko noted, exclaimed "Praise Allah!" after discovering his major did not require math courses. Many students only possessed religious education and knew a bit of their country's history but had little knowledge of math, physics, or geography.<sup>22</sup>

Unaware of Soviet affirmative action, students expressed offense and considered the exams patronizing. Anti-Taylor was "appalled" when he was only asked to locate his native Ghana on a map, name the colonial power that formally dominated it, and solve "two simple algebra problems."<sup>23</sup> William Appleton, an engineering student from Liberia, recalled with dismay: "During my two days'

20. Ibid., 33. Africans' concern for Russian women doing manual labor was a common trope in their accounts of life in Russia. Matusevich, "Visions of Grandeur... Interrupted: The Soviet Union Through Nigerian Eyes," 362-63.

21. Anti-Taylor, *Moscow Diary*, 33.

22. TsAGM f. 3061, op. 1, d. 8, l. 170.

23. Anti-Taylor, *Moscow Diary*, 35.

wait I have been screwing myself up for a stiff exam, especially since I had no [secondary school] certificate. And then one man asks me a few elementary questions any child could answer!"<sup>24</sup>

Antagonism to communist indoctrination was another widespread complaint, especially among students hostile to Marxist ideology. Courses in Marxist ideology, political economy, or dialectical materialism were not required. Still, students expected Soviet higher education to be devoid of all Marxist ideology. However, much to the consternation of unsympathetic students, Marxist ideology inevitably bled into many courses. William Appleton too complained that his compulsory history course "was nothing less than the indoctrination in Marxist ideology. So in order to get your training as a doctor, an engineer or a scientist... you have to submit to indoctrination in their political attitudes."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, a Komsomol report on foreign students noted, "students from capitalist countries" were open to classes on domestic and foreign policy of the Soviet state but "refuse to take courses on the history of the KPSS, philosophy and political economy."<sup>26</sup>

Students and university officials also clashed over their understanding of culture when speaking of the quality and aesthetics of clothes. Foreign students saw fashion as a statement of identity, and the clothes they could afford in Russia simply did not do. University officials, on the other hand, saw clothes in utilitarian terms. "It's very difficult to clothe them," explained a certain Yakovich, "We can dress fourteen girls every day, but it's very hard when they bring us a group of forty people." The sweaters offended the students' idea that style was a form of individual self-expression. Yet, while Soviet officials acknowledged the shortages, they nonetheless refused to accept responsibility and blamed the Africans for their dandyism. "The Africans are very difficult to dress because they are very picky," Yakovich said.<sup>27</sup> M. A. Prokofev, a university instructor, voiced what many in the room were merely implying. Foreign students were ungrateful for Soviet charity, and their complaints were direct criticisms of the Soviet society that fed and dressed them. "We don't demand any kind of compensation for these expenditures," adding in a paternalist tone, "Our stance is very humanitarian. We are fulfilling our duty." Moreover, he continued, foreign students made "a lot of noise," though "[they] study and eat our bread at our expense. Of course this is offensive."<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, Prokofev was correct in equating foreign complaints about clothes to criticism of Soviet society. Foreigners equated shortages of stylish clothing with a lack of self-respect. Nicholas Nyangira noted with some surprise the lack of dress

24. William Nimle Appleton, *Friendship University Moscow: The Student Trap* (Stuttgart, 1965), 12.

25. Appleton, *Friendship University Moscow: The Student Trap*, 6; Anti-Taylor, *Moscow Diary*, 76; Everest Mulekezi, "I Was a Student at Moscow State," *The Readers Digest* 79, no. 471 (1961), 99–104.

26. RGASPI f. 1M, op. 46, d. 247, l. 5.

27. TsAGM f. 3061, op. 1, d. 8, l. 205.

28. RGASPI f. 1M, op. 46, d. 339, l. 8.

code for the dining hall where students ate “in night garments or in overcoats.”<sup>29</sup> In an effort to untangle the underlying causes of the cultural gap, William Appleton concluded it was rooted in climate: “Now anyone who lives in an African or Arab country will change his shirt once or twice a day. . . . But with only two shirts, to keep up one’s self-respect one would need to wash each shirt once every day!”<sup>30</sup>

Anti-Taylor was far less forgiving. He recounted one poignant scene when he was buying soap at a pharmacy. A woman walked up to him and said, “Yes, you’d better buy some soap. If you washed more often you would not be so black.”<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Anti-Taylor responded less to the women’s racist overtones than to her affront to his personal pride. “We kept our bodies clean and our hair tidy,” he declared, adding that he and his fellow Africans went through “immense trouble” to keep their clothes laundered and pressed even at the risk of coming across as effeminate dandies. He contrasted his dandyism with “the majority of Russians” who were “too dirty for our liking” and a “stinking lot.” He concluded, “So to be told by a Russian, especially a Russian woman, that you should wash more often was to be truly affronted and to be treated with contempt.”<sup>32</sup>

African students considered clothes a statement of culturedness, self-respect, and hygiene. Anti-Taylor repeatedly linked Russians’ slovenly dress with their supposed lack of personal pride and politeness, both of which he, in contrast, was “so conscious.” Inverting the Soviet sense that Africans were children, Anti-Taylor explained Russians’ impolite and unhygienic practices as a result of poor upbringing. Moreover, he found Russian cultural norms infectious and felt they threatened the urbanity of his fellow countrymen. He wondered if overexposure to Russian culture would strip his fellow Africans of their genteelism. He remembered one of his classmates suggested that those Africans who had gone native “should pick up some politeness and some good suits in London. Otherwise, if they go home dressed like Russians and behaving like Russians their mothers won’t recognize them.”<sup>33</sup>

In the end, foreign students found their aesthetic tastes more akin to London than Moscow. As Maxim Matsuevich observed, “The foreign student in the Soviet Union projected a “Western” aura, and alternative existence far different from the dull routines of the Soviet citizen.”<sup>34</sup> Anti-Taylor criticized Russian girls for going to parties in the “same frocks” and lacking “the inclination” to dress well and make themselves pretty. “This would never happen in Accra,” he asserted. To be sure, Anti-Taylor’s criticism was not a matter of personal taste. He recalled that he and

29. Nicholas Nyangira, “Africans Don’t Go to Russia to Be Brainwashed: Africans in Russia,” *New York Times*, May 16, 1965.

30. Appleton, *Friendship University Moscow: The Student Trap*, 16.

31. Anti-Taylor, *Moscow Diary*, 110.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, 160–61.

34. Matusevich, “Visions of Grandeur . . . Interrupted: The Soviet Union Through Nigerian Eyes,” 364.

his fellow students would tell new arrivals to Russia: "Put on a good suit and a clean shirt and take a walk in any Moscow park and you will find all the girls will want to talk to you." Russian girls recognized foreigners' superior culturedness and found Anti-Taylor and his fellow Africans attractive for their "more obviously Western" dress and their chivalrous treatment of women. Driving the point home, Anti-Taylor recalled spending a few days window shopping in London before arriving in Moscow. He was "impressed, though not surprised." Shops in Accra were "equally fascinating" and London was "nothing new under the sun." After two years in Moscow, however, the "light, color, and luxuriance" of these same shops "overwhelmed" him, suggesting that in the hierarchy of cultures, Accra was closer to the glitz of London and far from the drabness of Moscow. "Perhaps," Anti-Taylor admitted, "this was the old, long suspected bourgeois coming out in me."<sup>35</sup> But Taylor was not alone in this evaluation. One Nigerian alumnus of Moscow State University complained that Russia had "not a trace . . . of the *civilized pleasures of Paris—or even Dakar*."<sup>36</sup>

Yet another cultural clash accrued around the dorm rooms. Students also expressed their displeasure of crowded dorms, poorly furnished rooms, inadequate bathing and laundry facilities, and deficient quality of cafeteria food.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, internal university reports detail rooms without hot water or heating where "students had to sleep in their coats." Nicholas Nyangira reported that the desks "were worse than anything I sat on in my own 'underdeveloped country.'"<sup>38</sup> Although university officials noted the deficiencies and promised to improve them, they also blamed students for the conditions. Thus, when Zukher Khaffaf, a student representative at UND, reported students' complaints, university officials' blamed the students for the condition of their dorms and disparaged their complaints as petty and childish. Students, they affirmed, should be able to keep their own rooms clean with or without bookshelves and closets. African students' inability to keep their rooms clean served as further proof of their backwardness.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, reflecting Soviet society at large, Soviet dorms utilized committees to monitor individual rooms and reprimanded students who had failed to keep their rooms clean. Tapping into the widespread belief that the KGB was spying on them, African students refused to allow committee members to inspect their rooms, stressing their individual right for privacy.<sup>40</sup> Soviet administrators were confused by Africans' opposition to dorm committees' inspections. One university official, Ivanshchenko, could not understand why the Africans refused

35. Anti-Taylor, *Moscow diary*, 161–62.

36. Quoted in Matusевич, *No Easy Row for a Russian Hoe: Ideology and Pragmatism in Nigerian-Soviet Relations, 1960-1991*, 84. Emphasis in original.

37. Maxim Matusевич, "Probing the Limits of Internationalism: African Students Confront Soviet Ritual," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27, no. 2 (2009): 22–23.

38. Nyangira, "Africans Don't Go to Russia To Be Brainwashed: Africans In Russia."

39. TsAGM f. 3061, op. 1, d. 18, l. 148.

40. Audience Research and Evaluation Department, *Moscow University in 1960, A Campus Report: Recollections of a Western Exchange Student* (Munich, 1960), 2.



to participate in dorm committees. “What motivates their refusal? Why don’t the African students want students to inspect their rooms. . . . I don’t understand why African students are against this.” Finally, Romanov reasoned, based on his conversations with students, that they simply rejected one of the tenets of Soviet life: mutual responsibility and surveillance. “They say,” Romanov explained, “that they are against the reprimands their comrades give them because they are not used to hearing peers’ [reprimands], and want them done by the school administration. Other students agreed.” Romanov understood this as indicative of the difference between Soviet and African culture: “We consider it completely normal when students reprimand each other.”<sup>41</sup>

Ultimately, African psychology was cast as an anathema to Soviet notions of mature behavior. Their reactions to mutual responsibility proved them “emotional and short tempered” and “extremely egotistic.”<sup>42</sup> University officials contrasted African petulance with Soviet youth. African students, officials reasoned, found adjusting to Soviet society difficult because they did not understand “that Soviet youth prefer the harsh romance of Siberian virgin lands to the refined conditions of Moscow and that our young person can work voluntarily for society in his personal and leisure time.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, while foreign students were weak, officials imagined that their Soviet counterparts were rugged, athletic, self-sacrificing, and self-controlled.

In the eyes of university officials, therefore, foreign wariness of peer observation spoke to their immature and emotional character the Soviets ascribed to backward nations. University officials felt everyday encounters with African students further affirmed this belief. In 1965, a Komsomol report on Africans’ sensitivity stated: “It must be said that some ideas have completely different meanings for us and Africans.” The report offered the example of a student who had quit his studies and returned to his home country because of a teacher’s comment. Interrupted by the student’s loud call to his friend in the corridor during a lesson, the teacher asked, “Why are you yelling so loudly? You aren’t in a forest.” The Komsomol’s report discovered that the student was quick to associate references to a forest with the racism he had endured in his home country.<sup>44</sup> Students from postcolonial countries, the report argued, carried with them a memory of colonial racism and transferred it to their Soviet counterparts.

Indeed, the main complaint by African students was of overt and sometimes violent racism.<sup>45</sup> But even here, university and Komsomol officials tended to dismiss complaints of endemic racism, arguing instead that racial sensitivity was an aspect of African psychology. “It’s necessary to clearly understand the psychology of Africans, who were under colonial oppression for a long time and through their

41. TsAGM f. 3061, op. 1, d. 18, l. 154.

42. RGASPI f. 1M, op. 46, d. 403, l. 102

43. RGASPI f. 1M, op. 39, d. 127, l. 9.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Hessler, “Death of an African Student in Moscow.”

mother's milk imbibed hatred and distrust for whites."<sup>46</sup> Teachers were, therefore, warned to keep a measure of personal distance so as to not offend them. At the same time, they were expected to actively accept students by helping them settle in their dormitories, secure them winter clothing and shoes, and organize winter and summer leisure activities. Keeping African sensitivities in mind, teachers were advised to treat them like children and use "praise and encouragement" to illicit positive performance.<sup>47</sup>

Part of the problem was that university and Komsomol officials essentialized African students' sensitivities with class and political terms. This was particularly true for students from "capitalist" nations. One report, therefore, spoke of a "special category" of students from "capitalist, colonial and independent countries" that was reflected in class backgrounds. Students from families of large landowners, factory owners, bankers, and businessmen "emphasized that they were apolitical" and "only interested in studying." The Soviet authorities took "apolitical" as a political stance against the Soviet system and disinterest in participating in Soviet social and political organizations and events. "As a rule, they are notable for criticism and have an extreme interest in the deficiencies in our society and spend their time at dances and parties and going to restaurants."<sup>48</sup> Statements that colored foreign students as uninterested or only concerned with their own personal achievement were code for the individualism indicative of bourgeois culture.

Students often complained of the Soviet inclination to categorize people according to political affinities. Shadat Muhammad expressed disdain at this practice at a Komsomol meeting in 1964. "Many Soviet comrades judge foreign students as progressive, meaning communist, and not progressive, meaning capitalist. This is not fair. A capitalist can be a good person. The Soviet Union has many relations with countries that at the present moment fight not for socialism, but for equal rights and for independence."<sup>49</sup> Muhammad's ethical persuasion that a person should be judged according to his individual merit was entirely divorced from Soviet ethics. The idea that a capitalist, an exploiter, could be a good person was outside the realism of Soviet comprehension. Thus, while Muhammad was asserting his ethical stance, his Soviet audience was most likely judging him for bourgeois individualism.

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Soviet officials and African students understood each other differently, and ultimately reaffirmed their own sense of cultural superiority. Soviet officials saw themselves as patrons and believed they were helping "[Africans] obtain a correct view of things." After all, they reasoned, African students did not just come to Russia to

46. RGASPI f. 1M, op. 46, d. 337, l. 63.

47. RGASPI f. 3M, op. 3, d. 264, l. 47; RGASPI 1M, op. 46, d. 403, l. 103.

48. RGASPI f. 1M, op. 46, d. 247, l. 4.

49. RGASPI f. 1M, op. 46, d. 355, l. 5.

study, but to “observe our life,” to learn how “to live and work in the Soviet way,” and become “better people than those studying in the West.”<sup>50</sup> Africans’ embrace of the “Soviet way” only reaffirmed the Soviet sense of their global and historical importance.

African students had different aspirations and thought the Soviets “could be of little help” in fulfilling them. “Our intentions were to make [an] Africa . . . we could be proud [of]. [The Russians] did not seem to realize that . . . we did not want to emulate any other country. We wanted to emulate only what we felt was worth following in any country, no matter what its ideology.”<sup>51</sup> One way to be proud Africans was to emphasize the difference between their values and those of Soviet Russia.

The result of this comparison spoke directly to the Cold War as a contest between ways of life. Young Africans’ evaluation of Soviet life had broad consequences. Their national and international media widely reported their narratives as authentic depictions of Soviet life. While Africans were distrustful of the West as much as they were the Russians, in the binaried atmosphere of the Cold War their emphasis on privacy and individualism was an implicit gesture in favor of the West.

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<sup>50</sup> RGASPI f. 3M, op. 3, d. 264, l. 43.

<sup>51</sup> Anti-Taylor, *Moscow Diary*, 26.