

Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics, and the Cold War

Author(s): Julie Hessler

Source: *Cahiers du Monde russe*, Vol. 47, No. 1/2, Repenser le Dégel: Versions du socialisme, influences internationales et société soviétique (Jan. - Jun., 2006), pp. 33-63

Published by: EHESS

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20174990>

Accessed: 03-01-2019 07:12 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

EHESS is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cahiers du Monde russe*

JULIE HESSLER

## DEATH OF AN AFRICAN STUDENT IN MOSCOW

### Race, politics, and the Cold War

On December 19, 1963, newspapers around the world carried a story about an unusual political demonstration that had taken place the day before. The number of participants, estimated at 500-700, was not large by international standards, but this was the first recorded political protest in Moscow's Red Square since the late 1920s, and as such, automatically newsworthy. It was also an incident with international ramifications. Demonstrators comprised African students enrolled in Soviet universities and institutes, and if this fact disallowed an interpretation of the protest as evidence of any "awakening" of Soviet "civil society," it did provide an embarrassing commentary on the Soviet courtship of the Third World. Student protesters carried placards with such inflammatory slogans as "Moscow — center of discrimination," "Stop killing Africans!" and "Moscow, a second Alabama," all the while shouting protests in English, Russian, and French.<sup>1</sup>

What had incited the students' outrage? Most immediately, the protest was triggered by the death of a Ghanaian medical student, Edmund Assare-Addo, whose corpse was discovered in a stretch of wasteland along a country road leading to the Moscow outer ring highway. The unlikelihood of a student venturing into

---

The author wishes to thank Alex Dracoby for reading and commenting on this article in manuscript form. More particularly, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Jenny Smith, who saw some files that she thought might interest me at the U.S. National Archives, contacted me, photocopied them, and sent them to me. Her generosity provided the main source for a whole section of the present work.

1. "500 Africans Fight Police in Moscow in Race Protest," *The New York Times* (December 19, 1963); "Commotion in Red Square," *The Times* (London, December 19, 1963); "Africans Ask Reds to Assure Safety," *The Washington Post* (December 29, 1963); "Ghanaian Student Killed in Russia — 700 Africans Protest," *The Daily Times* (Lagos, Nigeria, December 19, 1963); "Le Rouge et le Noir," *The Economist* (December 21, 1963):1247-1248.

*Cahiers du Monde russe*, 47/1-2, Janvier-juin 2006, p. 33-64.

that remote spot of his own accord led Ghanaians and other African students to interpret Assare-Addo's death as a racially-motivated hate crime. The topicality of this theme, in light of the concurrent civil rights struggle in the United States and the dismantling of European colonies in Africa, insured that it would be taken up with interest by the foreign press.

Soviet authorities also found several aspects of the Assare-Addo case mysterious, but the cause of his death was not one of them. An autopsy, performed by Soviet doctors with two advanced medical students from Ghana as observers, explained the death as "an effect of cold in a state of alcohol-induced stupor." In other words, Assare-Addo had passed out from alcohol on a wintry December day, and had frozen to death. There were no signs of physical trauma, with the possible exception of a small scar on the neck.<sup>2</sup> Soviet authorities thus dismissed out of hand the allegations of murder, and focussed on what were to them more troubling questions. Why was a student from the city of Kalinin in Moscow anyhow? Why did so many Ghanaian students from other cities — over two hundred, by some estimates — converge on Moscow at the same time? How did foreign reporters learn so quickly of the episode and of the students' response? In sum, which hostile power had orchestrated the incident?<sup>3</sup> There were too many fishy coincidences, in the view of government officials, for the demonstration to have been conceived spontaneously by the African students themselves.

This article uses the Assare-Addo affair and the African students' protest as entrypoints into some largely forgotten aspects of the Soviet 1960s. As many Western political scientists and journalists recognized at the time, the influx of students from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East was one of the most tangible effects of the Cold War on daily life in the USSR. Cultural misunderstandings were surely inevitable under the circumstances: the students came from diverse cultures and backgrounds, while Soviet citizens had little or no prior exposure to non-European ways of life. Particularly for Africans, the focus of the present study, racial difference compounded these problems. Soviet education administrators hoped for a seamless integration of African students into the accepted fabric of student life, but found themselves constantly having to counter separatist tendencies. The shifting political orientations of newly independent countries, the acquaintance of many African students with major cities and lifestyles of the West, and the politicization of the foreign and Soviet press all complicated the relationship of the students with their host country. The article explores these various sources of tension — racism and cultural difference, student

---

2. Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 9606, Ministerstvo vysshego i srednego spetsial'nogo obrazovaniia SSSR, op. 2, d. 83, l. 358; and see also the interview in the Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University newspaper *Druzhba* on the results of the autopsy, January 4, 1964.

3. "Ob odnoi zlonamerennoi shumikhe v burzhuznoi presse," *Pravda*, (December 21, 1963). Also in *Izvestiia*, (December 21, 1963), and, in translation, in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 15, 51 (January 15, 1964): 17. See also GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 83, l. 340.

politics, and foreign media coverage — as they played out in the early 1960s, and then returns to discuss the course and consequences of the student protest itself.

### **African students in the Soviet Union, 1960-1963: integration and conflict**

The Ghanaians and other African students involved in the December, 1963, demonstration were convinced, in the words of a protester, that “It’s a matter of white against black!”<sup>4</sup> This view — that Africans in the Soviet Union were vulnerable to racial harassment and hate crimes — had crystallized through a series of conflicts over the previous few years. The early 1960s brought the first major influx of Africans into the USSR for study; following a Central Committee secret decree of January, 1960, which called for expanded cultural ties to sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>5</sup> and the announcement of plans to open a new university specifically for students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America the following month, the number of scholarships reserved for African students was increased, and the size of the African contingent in Soviet higher education began to mount. From merely 72 at the beginning of the 1959-1960 academic year, the number of foreign students from sub-Saharan Africa climbed rapidly to over 500 by 1961 and some 4,000 by the end of the decade.<sup>6</sup> As early as 1961, educators were predicting that the developing countries would soon overtake the socialist bloc as a source of foreign students; communist Eastern Europe and China, at least, had virtually ceased sending undergraduates for study in the USSR.<sup>7</sup>

Along with the Chinese Maoists, though for different reasons, the Africans proved more difficult to assimilate than most of the other foreign student contingents. Many conflicts centered on what was believed by the students to be the crux of the Assare-Addo affair: romantic relations between black African men and Russian women. This was partly a consequence of the demographic imbalance; throughout the 1960s, male students outnumbered female students from Third

---

4. “500 Africans Fight Police...”

5. On the Central Committee secret decree, “O rasshirenii kul’turnykh i obshchestvennykh svyazei s negritianskimi narodami Afriki i usilenii vliianiia Sovetskogo Soiuza na eti narody” of January 20, 1960, see S. V. Mazov, “Afrikanские студенты в Москве в год Африки (по архивным материалам),” *Vostok*, 3 (1999): 89-103.

6. GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 49, l. 45-49; Jane B. Webbink, “African Students at Soviet Universities,” *Harvard University pamphlet* (April 1964); O. M. Gorbatoev and L. Ia. Cherkasskii, *Sotrudnichestvo SSSR so stranami Arabskogo Vostoka i Afriki* (M.: Nauka, 1973), 287; *Narodnoe obrazovanie, nauka, i kul’tura v SSSR: Statisticheskii sbornik* (M.: Statistika, 1971), 217. These last sources give data only for Africa as a whole, including North Africa. Gorbatoev and Cherkasskii indicate that the increase occurred very quickly in the middle part of the decade, citing “over four thousand” African students in the USSR in 1964-1965 and “over five thousand” in 1967. If these estimates are correct, the number subsequently declined. The statistical handbook lists just 3,620 African students at Soviet universities and institutes, plus 696 in specialized technical schools, as of January 1, 1970.

7. Rossiiskii gosudartsvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), f. 5, Tsentral’nyi Komitet KPSS, op. 35, Otdel nauki i vysshikh uchebnykh zavedenii, d. 202, l. 4.

World countries by a factor of eight or nine to one, and scattered evidence indicates that there were no African women for at least several years.<sup>8</sup> According to one of the demonstrators who attended a meeting with the Minister of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education (henceforth Minvuz), V. P. Eliutin, Assare-Addo had been planning to marry his Russian girlfriend the following Saturday. Although there was no concrete evidence of violence, the possibility that Russians wanted to prevent an interracial marriage seemed a plausible explanation for the Ghanaian's death.<sup>9</sup>

Again, this was not the first time that interracial romance had aggravated race relations between Russians and Africans. S. V. Mazov has shown that such conflicts surfaced within months of the first major influx of African students into the USSR.<sup>10</sup> In March, 1960, just two months after the secret decree on cultural ties with sub-Saharan Africa, the leaders of the self-styled Union of Black African Students in the USSR sent Khrushchev a letter in English asking for energetic measures to be taken against racial harassment. Their first example was an incident at a Moscow State University (MGU) party, when four Russian students allegedly assaulted a Somalian student for trying to dance with a Russian girl. The case, like many subsequent incidents, was ambiguous; when party, KGB, and Minvuz officials investigated what happened, they exonerated the Soviet students of racism, and emphasized the rude behavior of the Somali. Here is their version: the student, Abdulhamid Mohammed Hussein, invited a girl to dance with him, but she refused, and started dancing with an acquaintance of hers instead. After the dance, Hussein went up to her and spit in her face. She then slapped him. Other students intervened and advised the girl to leave, which she did; but one of the men present, "B," was so offended by Hussein's behavior that he demanded an explanation and apology. Hussein grabbed "B" by the jacket and hit him — and thus began the fight. Endorsing the Soviet students' side of the altercation, the investigatory report allowed "B" to make his case in his own words: "He could not quietly stand by while a foreigner behaved insultingly toward a Soviet girl."<sup>11</sup>

An African's "lack of culture" or Soviet racism? The authorities, in this instance, had valid reasons for adopting the first explanation. Hussein had been a

---

8. GARF, f. 9606, op. 1, d. 1373, l. 19 (1963); Webbink, "African Students at Soviet Universities..." 11.

9. GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 83, l. 345.

10. Mazov, "Afrikanskie studenty..." 89-90.

11. *Ibid.*, 90-91; and the same account was given in *Komsomol'skaia pravda* (August 6, 1960). Note: the name of the student appears in different forms in different places. I have used the name as it appears in a petition by a group of Somalian students (GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 49, l. 2), but *Komsomol'skaia pravda* listed his last name as Hasen, while Mazov's sources omitted the Hussein altogether. More generally, it is often difficult to distinguish between first and last names in Soviet documents on foreign students, since a common but not consistently-followed Soviet practice was to invert the order in writing. Soviet officials themselves often seemed uncertain which was which. In this article, I have taken the view that familiar English or French given names probably really were the given names, even if the document presented them the other way around.

troublemaker ever since his arrival in Moscow in fall, 1959; his six months of study were punctuated by brawls and drinking bouts, at least one police citation for the violation of public order, and expulsion from the MGU dormitory for rowdy behavior and noisy scenes.<sup>12</sup> Yet the Africans also had a case when they charged Soviet students of closing ranks around their own or university administrators of listening only to the Soviet and especially Komsomol (deemed “responsible”) version of events.<sup>13</sup> The very nature of these accusations means that they are impossible to substantiate, but similar charges figured in every disputed incident of the next several years. The effect was cumulative: whatever the actual circumstances of that evening, for example, the beating of the Somali by “Russian racists” entered into African students’ collective consciousness, to be brought out as part of a litany of grievances whenever a new conflict occurred.

Grievances about race relations were, in fact, commonplace. Students typically complained to their country’s embassy, to their university or institute, and, where relevant, to the public organization that had sponsored their scholarship. In 1962-1963 the Ghanaian Embassy received so many complaints about “unprovoked assaults by Soviet citizens” that it requested a formal investigation.<sup>14</sup> The resulting report, signed by all the top officials at Minvuz and approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, shrugged off many alleged racist incidents as unverifiable. Some of these merely involved intimidation and harassment, such as an alleged episode on the Moscow subway in which students were accosted by a couple of drunken Russians, who demanded that they give up their seats: “In your own country you aren’t even allowed to be in the same subway car as whites, whereas here you are sitting down while white people stand.”<sup>15</sup> Many others, though, involved physical assaults, usually by two or more young Russian men, and at least a few of these incidents had left a paper trail. The report was accompanied by the draft of a letter to the Ghanaian Embassy, pending Central Committee approval; the letter fell short of a full apology, since roughly half was devoted to instances of bad behavior on the part of Ghanaian students, but the authors had to concede that Ghanaians and other

---

12. Mazov, “Afrikanskije studenty...,” 91. Interestingly, the director of Moscow Auto-Road Institute, which enrolled many foreigners from the Third World throughout the 1960s, described Somalis as the worst contingent (“I would call them simply a hooliganizing element”) in a summer, 1960, report. As in the case described above, the episodes that he cited involved Somalis getting into fights over relations with women and dormitory rules. GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 7, l. 1-2.

13. For a well-documented example, see GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 132, l. 56-62.

14. This was, at least, what the embassy claimed, but another factor may have triggered the request. According to U.S. State Department sources, John Noi Quist, the president of the Ghanaian students’ association, used an illness as an occasion to return to Ghana in early May, 1963. There he reportedly met with President Kwame Nkrumah, setting out a list of complaints about the students’ treatment in the Soviet Union, and asking for Nkrumah’s intervention. Given the fact that the Ghanaian ambassador, John Elliot, requested the investigation that very month, it seems likely that Nkrumah followed up on Quist’s request. U.S. National Archives, Record Group 59, Box 5, Folder 24.3.1 (Foreign Students in the Bloc). Again, many thanks to Jenny Smith for sharing this source with me.

15. GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 83, l. 136-141, here at 137.

Africans had occasionally fallen victim to racist attacks. Affirming the “feelings of sincere sympathy and friendship” towards Africans cherished by the “Soviet people,” to whom “feelings of any kind of racial inequality or disrespect” were “alien,” the letter acknowledged that “unfortunately, even in our socialist society one still encounters isolated unconscious or hooligan elements, through whom hostile attacks on our foreign friends may occur.”<sup>16</sup> This line would become standard in the Soviet handling of racial questions: it avoided an outright denial of the problem, but minimized its significance by presenting racism as purely incidental, a product of criminal, pre-socialist attitudes and behavior.

Along with altercations arising from interracial dating and unprovoked racist attacks, a third set of grievances concerned the police. African students frequently complained about racial profiling, which ranged from being stopped on the street for no apparent reason to unwarranted searches of their persons or domiciles. One incident that Soviet investigators corroborated involved a student from Sierra Leone who was visiting his Russian girlfriend’s apartment; tipped off by neighbors, policemen demanded entry into the apartment for the sole purpose of subjecting the student to a rude and demeaning interrogation. This was glossed in the resulting report as an instance of “individual police officers permitt[ing] incorrect actions and behav[ing] tactlessly towards the students.”<sup>17</sup> More seriously, policemen sometimes simply turned a blind eye to racist attacks, as in an episode of serious assault and battery that left a student from Mali unconscious and in need of hospitalization. In this instance, and apparently in several others, policemen were in the area, but “failed to take measures to detain the hooligans” and refused to initiate an investigation.<sup>18</sup> While Soviet officials could point to a few cases where assailants were arrested and given prison terms, incidents such as these gave African students a jaundiced view of the Soviet criminal justice system

The Africans, then, had tangible reasons for the suspicions that surfaced during the Assare-Addo affair. Racism was enough of a problem in the early 1960s to affect African students on the level of their physical security. While most instances of racial harassment were comparatively minor, actions that qualify as hate crimes did take place. These were passed from student to student by word-of-mouth, and though in some cases they may have been magnified in the process, Soviet authorities’ failure to address the episodes openly was as much of a contributing factor as the students’ sensitivity to perceived racial slights. It should be

---

16. *Ibid.*, 1. 144-146.

17. *Ibidem*, 1. 137. A similar case, involving the Kenyan student Benjamin Omburo, figured prominently in publications by and about African students who left the Soviet Union for the West, as did the issue of racial profiling more generally. For examples, see the “open letter to African governments” by Theophilus Okonkwo, Andrew Richard Amar, and Michel Ayih, published in its entirety in the *African Daily News* (Oct. 4, 5, and 6, 1960), among other places, and the various interviews by Stanley Okullo, e.g. “An African’s Experience in Moscow,” *Ashanti Pioneer* (Kumasi, Ghana, Aug. 9, 1960), or “A Negro’s Life in Russia — Beatings, Insults, Segregation,” *US News & World Report*, (Aug. 1, 1960), p. 59-60. For a discussion of publications of this ilk, see below.

18. GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 83, 1. 136-137.

remembered, too, that the subjective experience of racism is not simply a product of specific threats or hostile behaviors, but also of a more generalized climate of disrespect. While this would emerge even more clearly after the student protest, which momentarily cast a spotlight on the African students' grievances, anecdotes suggest that the students encountered disrespect on many levels in the preceding years. Some students found themselves shunned at cafeterias and university social events because, in the words of a Soviet student in Tbilisi, "it is disgusting to sit with them at one table."<sup>19</sup> Racist slurs, most commonly comparing Africans to chimpanzees, shaded into ignorant questions that took as their starting point an image of Africans dancing naked around bonfires, oblivious of science, literature, and modern life.<sup>20</sup> The explicit disrespect accorded religious belief, and hence believers, in Soviet society was another element in the overall climate, as was the envy of anyone who appeared well-to-do.<sup>21</sup> As will be seen more clearly below, the Soviet Union's ideological self-confidence and its tendency to treat shortcomings as anomalies limited its institutions' capacity to react constructively to social problems. Racism, in this respect, was no different from alcoholism, domestic violence, homelessness, or mental illness — with the exception that the African students forced the issue into official consciousness, while the foreign policy linkage brought it to the attention of the international press.

\*

If African students' perception of racism was a major source of tension during their stays in the USSR, Soviet political pressures had an ambiguous effect. In the early 1960s, a "hot" phase of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was competing with the United States, China, Israel, France, Britain, and the two Germanies for influence over Africa's newly independent states. Soviet foreign policy toward Africa combined a strong rhetorical stance in support of "national liberation" from the "imperialist yoke" with the practical aim of installing socialist, or at least friendly, regimes at a relatively low cost. As in the Stalin era, the ideological component of Soviet foreign policy went through different channels, centered on revolutionary parties and military training camps, than the pragmatic component, which utilized bilateral friendship treaties with particular countries and regional or interregional groupings of "non-aligned" states. The Cairo-based Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, for example, received substantial assistance from the USSR, even though it did not always accept subordination to Soviet aims. The long-term trend, documented by many scholars of Soviet foreign relations, was to reduce formal

---

19. RGANI, f. 5, op. 35, d. 202, l. 48-51.

20. GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 49, l. 5; Webbink, "African Students at Soviet Universities....," 11, 17; Tsentr Khraneniia Dokumentov Molodezhnykh Organizatsii (TsKhDMO), f. 1, op. 46, d. 357, l. 33.

21. On religion, see GARF, f. 9606, op. 1, d. 1022, l. 65; op. 2, d. 49, ll. 3-7. On anti-bourgeois prejudice against African students, see TsKhDMO, f. 1, Tsentral'nyi Komitet VLKSM, op. 46, d. 357, l. 33-4.



commitments to the revolutionary, socialist aspect of the foreign policy mission, and to concentrate on consolidating a power bloc.<sup>22</sup>

In the early 1960s, these conflicting agendas and channels of influence affected the Soviet response to foreign students' political activism. Government-to-government scholarship programs were typically premised on Soviet political neutrality — the USSR's putatively disinterested commitment to helping train "national cadres" in useful professions — but many of the first African students to arrive were supported by Soviet "public" organizations, such as the Soviet Committee for Afro-Asian Solidarity (SKSSAA), an affiliate of the Cairo group; the Committee of Youth Organizations (KMO); the Committee of Soviet Women (KSZh); or the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS).<sup>23</sup> Ostensibly unofficial bodies (in practice, their leading officials were chosen by the Communist Party Central Committee apparatus), these organizations openly applied political criteria in awarding stipends, and relied on known "progressive" parties and youth movements in Africa to vet candidates on their behalf.<sup>24</sup> This could occasionally create embarrassing situations for the Soviet foreign policy establishment, as it did in 1964 when Cameroon's Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested detailed information on Cameroonian students in the USSR. Virtually all 87 of them had arrived illegally in 1960-1962, with passports from the radical African states of Guinea, Mali, and Ghana; and naturally all had been recommended for, and received stipends from, Soviet "public" organizations on the basis of their political activism. Adherents of the banned political party *Union des Populations du Cameroun*, all of the students opposed the current government of Cameroon, and most were enthusiastic participants in communist youth organizations in the USSR. Given the fact that the Soviet Union did not yet have diplomatic relations with

---

22. For example, the commitment to "national liberation" and racial equality proved compatible with continuing economic relations with South Africa, notwithstanding the pleas of South African opposition leaders. On the shift away from revolutionary communism as the basis of Soviet foreign policy in Africa towards "positive neutrality" and governmental cooperation, see David Morison, *The U.S.S.R. and Africa, 1945-1963* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 31; Alexander Dallin, "The Soviet Union: Political Activity," in Zbigniew Brzezinski, ed., *Africa and the Communist World*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 11, 17, 30-33; Jerry F. Hough, *The Struggle for the Third World: Soviet Debates and American Options* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1986), 142-184 *passim*; Robert Legvold, *Soviet Policy in West Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970). More generally, a really outstanding monograph that has informed my understanding of many intra-African issues, as well as external relations, is W. Scott Thompson, *Ghana's Foreign Policy, 1957-1966: Diplomacy, Ideology, and the New State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

23. The Central Committee *postanovlenie* of January 20, 1960, committed public organizations to reserve 300 scholarships for sub-Saharan African students. Already by 1965, these organizations were lobbying to reallocate at least some of their stipends to Latin America, on the grounds that bilateral treaties had created an additional 1000 stipends for sub-Saharan Africa. See RGANI, f. 5, op. 35, d. 221, l. 23.

24. For a list of the parties that the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee and KMO sponsored in 1961, see GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 49, l. 42-43, 55-57.

Cameroon, Soviet authorities felt justified in protecting the students and ignoring the request.<sup>25</sup>

Their position was less sure, however, on requests from countries with which the USSR had established formal relations. Guinea, arguably the Soviet Union's closest African client state in the early 1960s, succeeded in forcing Moscow to repatriate forty Guinean students for agitating against their government, but only after threatening to withdraw all Guinean students from the USSR and to sever cultural ties.<sup>26</sup> Few other countries had the same kind of leverage. A striking case from 1964 involved Morocco, with which the Soviet Union had both diplomatic relations and military and economic ties. Angered by a political trial in Rabat, a group of fifty Moroccan students forced their way into their country's embassy in Moscow and occupied a wing of the building. To Morocco's chagrin, the embassy eventually had to ask the Soviet government to put aside extraterritoriality, storm the building, and remove the students by force. Soviet authorities complied with this request, albeit somewhat reluctantly, but when the Moroccan ambassador later asked that the students lose their stipends and be expelled from the USSR, the Soviet government merely quietly shifted all the stipends to public organizations' accounts, and replied that alas, it had no jurisdiction over these organizations' scholarships.<sup>27</sup> The two-pronged system could thus give the Kremlin a valuable degree of flexibility, even while incidents such as these provided ammunition to those Western critics who identified Soviet higher education for foreigners with the training of "revolutionaries and spies."<sup>28</sup>

---

25. GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 49, l. 131-132; 134-135; 245-246. For thumbnail sketches of Soviet relations with the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC) in the early 1960s, see Dallin, "Soviet Union: Political Activity..." 38-9, and Morison, *The U.S.S.R. and Africa...*, 81.

26. This incident clearly indicated Guinean President Sékou Touré's desire to distance himself from his Soviet patron in fall, 1961. Several known communists in Guinea were arrested for "economic espionage" that fall, as were five teachers who signed a memorandum criticizing the government. The trial and sentencing of the teachers (they received prison terms for subversion of five to ten years) triggered a wave of demonstrations and disturbances in Guinea, in which students were particularly active (indeed, the government's reaction to the unrest was to shut down all schools). The Moscow Guineans were thus following in the footsteps of students at home. See Dallin, "The Soviet Union: Political Activity..." 34.

27. GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 110, l. 58-9; d. 127, l. 267. Amazingly, a similar argument was made by rector S. V. Rumiantsev vis-à-vis Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University (UDN), which was officially founded by three public organizations (SKSSAA, SSOD, VTsSPS). In late summer, 1965, Rumiantsev wrote to the Central Committee arguing that the Soviet Union should use the justification that "UDN is not a state university" to resist an Algerian demand to expel and extradite four radical Algerian students. See RGANI, f. 5, op. 35, d. 221, l. 70-71, 131. For background on Soviet relations with Morocco, see Morison, *The U.S.S.R. and Africa...*, 101-102.

28. This charge was most often levelled at the new Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University, the institution established specifically for training students from the Third World. At this point, I do not know to what extent Soviet intelligence tried to recruit foreign students. That Soviet authorities more generally wanted alumni to serve as spokesmen for a pro-Soviet orientation in their homelands is evident (see below).

The Soviet government found the Moroccan incident a headache, and most certainly did not encourage others of the same ilk. Nonetheless, its long-term hope of influencing political developments in the Third World meant that it had an interest in cultivating both socialist ideals and sympathy for the USSR. Avowed leftists and apolitical or non-socialist students presented very different challenges to the achievement of this desideratum. With respect to the leftists, the challenge was to curb what the Soviet Communist Party viewed as Maoist “extremism,” and at the same time to keep their revolutionary aspirations directed outwards, toward their own homelands. As an administrator of Patrice Lumumba People’s Friendship University, the new showcase university for students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, observed at a conference on foreign students, all too many “arrive with extremely romantic attitudes, idealizing our society, imagining that in a communist society everyone is a saint... When [these students] come up against the vestigial problems in our society — drunkenness, hooliganism — and against our material difficulties, they careen to the opposite extreme.”<sup>29</sup> Students who were exceptionally idealistic and politically committed leftists, in other words, sometimes wanted to change the Soviet Union instead of conserving their energies for a revolutionary transformation of their own countries after graduation.

With respect to the non-socialists, the challenge was to integrate them into the organizational structures and ideological norms of Soviet student life. Coursework was one major vehicle for inculcating socialist, pro-Soviet ideas. Others included excursions designed to expose foreign students to a sanitized version of “Soviet reality,” and contact with specially selected, “ideologically mature,” Soviet students in study groups and residence halls.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps more effective, though, was the policy of using left-leaning members of each national contingent to exert influence over their more conservative conationals. Students were encouraged to form associations, called *zemliachestva*, along national lines at each institute and university. Each *zemliachestvo* was obliged to petition for recognition from the university administration, which involved writing up a charter according to a standard formula. The officers were elected democratically, but while this inevitably meant that some *zemliachestva* had non-socialist leaders, university officials exhorted “progressives” to play an active role. They were, after all, the students best suited to carrying out the functions administrators deemed essential: organizing social events and tutoring underachievers, to be sure, but also acculturating new students and mediating between the national contingent and the administration.<sup>31</sup>

University-level *zemliachestva* were usually linked to a larger, umbrella organization of all students of the given nationality in the Soviet Union, often

---

29. GARF, f. 9606, op. 1, d. 1022, l. 58-59 (Feb. 2, 1962).

30. For the duties of Soviet students selected to room with foreign students, see TsDKhMO, f. 1, op. 46, d. 368, l. 38.

31. The *zemliachestva* were monitored by the Komsomol and figure prominently in its archives. For examples, see *ibid.*, d. 342, 343, 344, 369, 370 (whole files).

coordinated through the country's embassy, but they also had the right to form transnational groupings on a continental basis.<sup>32</sup> The cachet of pan-Africanism in this period virtually ensured that Africans would want to take advantage of this opportunity, which also appealed to students' dreams of having an impact on the great political struggles of the day. African students in the USSR could look to their counterparts in Britain and France, where the West African Students Union (WASU) and the Fédération des Étudiants d'Afrique Noire en France (FEANF) had arguably contributed to the anticolonial movement in their homelands and to the protection of minority rights.<sup>33</sup> Soviet educators necessarily viewed these associations as progressive in the Western context, but were loath to accept such freewheeling organizations in the USSR. Some African students, "under the influence of student traditions in capitalist countries," reportedly viewed *zemlichestva* and pan-African associations as "organs for fighting the university administration," or more generally as vehicles for "defending their rights."<sup>34</sup> Considering these conceptions harmful and politically immature in the socialist context, Soviet authorities not surprisingly disbanded the first pan-African student organization for its confrontational stance.<sup>35</sup>

The organization that finally met Soviet criteria for recognition, the Federation of African Students in the Soviet Union (FASSS, est. March, 1962), had a charter emphasizing the struggle against colonialism and neocolonialism, African unity, and international friendship — themes central to Soviet ideological efforts in Africa.<sup>36</sup> According to the charter, FASSS was to be financed by members' dues,

---

32. This right, elaborated in the January 7, 1964, *Polozhenie ob inostrannykh grazhdanakh, obuchaiushchikhsia v vysshykh i srednikh spetsial'nykh uchebnykh zavedeniakh SSSR*, was conditional on Soviet governmental authorization. See *ibid.*, d. 394, l. 61.

33. See Hakim Adi, "West African Students in Britain, 1900-1960: The Politics of Exile," *Immigrants and Minorities*, 12, 3 (1993): 107-128; Ahmad Aminu Yusuf, "The West African Students Union and its Contribution to the Anti-Colonial Struggle," *Africa Quarterly*, 38, 4 (1998): 101-124; Fabienne Guimont, *Les Étudiants Africains en France, 1950-1965* (Paris-Montréal: L'Harmattan, 1997). Politically engaged African students in the Soviet Union had contact with these organizations both through travel (many went to Western Europe during the summer vacation) and through participation in biennial conferences of African students in Europe.

34. TsKhDMO, f. 1, op. 46, d. 340, l. 168-169; GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 127, l. 137.

35. This was the above-cited Black African Students' Union, also referred to as the African Students' Union. For details about its suppression, see below. There may have been other early, unofficial organizations, the details of which remain murky. Archives mention the Association of African Students, cited in GARF, f. 9606, op. 1, d. 1022, l. 71 and op. 2, d. 49, l. 4, and a League of African Students, cited in *ibid.*, d. 7, l. 24-27. These may, however, have been other names for the same African Students' Union.

36. As a caveat, Soviet policymakers supported African unity only insofar as a unified Africa could be expected to tilt towards the USSR. Unfortunately for them, the unity initiatives with the broadest backing (the Brazzaville group, the Monrovia and Lagos conferences, and the Organization of African Unity) were much more oriented toward economic cooperation with the West, and even the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, which did lean towards the left, discussed curtailing Soviet participation on the grounds that Russians — as opposed to their rivals the Chinese — were white. See Thompson, *Ghana's Foreign Policy...*, esp. 209-248, 336-356; Dallin, "The Soviet Union: Political Activity..." 35-36, 43-44.

but it also petitioned for financial backing from the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries (SSOD), and the sheer scale of its activities suggests that it received such support.<sup>37</sup> In its first eight months of existence, it sent delegates to conferences of African students in Oslo and Belgrade, to the eighth World Festival of Youth in Helsinki and to the seventh Congress of the International Union of Students in Leningrad.<sup>38</sup> It held its first congress in Moscow in spring, 1963, and hosted the biennial meeting of African students in Europe, an event that drew 147 delegates from thirteen European countries, in March, 1964.<sup>39</sup>

Reports on these events suggest that FASSS was beset by the factional squabbling so typical of emigré political groups. Divorced from practical politics, the students became bitterly divided over ideological questions; fissures were also recorded between anglophone and francophone students, between followers of one or another would-be leader of the organization, and between adherents of different national policies.<sup>40</sup> FASSS served Soviet purposes fairly well at international conferences, where its delegates tended to refute the dominant Maoist line, but throughout the first half of the 1960s Soviet officials nonetheless contemplated shutting the organization down. Alongside more general concerns about its political reliability, officials worried that the unification of so many African students under one aegis was facilitating Western infiltration. Capitalist countries had reportedly increased their solicitation of African students, hosting dance parties and cultural events for them at their embassies and relying on the Federation to put out the word.<sup>41</sup> These concerns were voiced only in closed meetings, however; in the public arena, the more common critique of FASSS came from non-communist students, who were outnumbered by radicals in the organization and unable to shape its agenda.<sup>42</sup>

By the time of the Assare-Addo affair, then, a network of associations existed to integrate African students into Soviet life. These associations catered to student desires for national or pan-African separatism at the same time that they institutionalized contacts between African students or their delegates and other, Soviet and international, “progressive” student groups. As evidenced by the

---

37. For the text of the charter, see GARF, f. 9576 (SSOD), op. 14, d. 50, l. 175-181. A French translation appears in GARF, f. 9540 (SKSSAA), op. 1, d. 128, l. 2-11.

38. TsKhDMO, f. 1, op. 46, d. 340, l. 169. *Note:* The International Union of Students was one of two competing international student associations in the 1960s. Based in Prague, it was oriented toward student associations in the socialist bloc, and attracted only leftist organizations from the West. When FEANF, the African students’ association in France, chose to affiliate with the IUS as against the pro-Western COSEC, it was making an overt political choice. Guimont, *Les Étudiants africains en France...*, 120.

39. For a report on the latter meeting (the Third Conference of the Union of African Students in Europe), see GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 132, l. 160-69. Participants came from Britain, Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, both Germanies, Italy, Poland, France, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia, as well as the USSR.

40. *Ibid.*; and see GARF, f. 9606, op. 1, d. 1022, l. 68, and op. 2, d. 135, l. 48-50.

41. TsKhDMO, f. 1, op. 46, d. 340, l. 169; GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 127, l. 36-7.

42. For examples, see below.

forcible dissolution of unsanctioned organizations, the forms of democracy that the *zemliachestva* and FASSS vaunted were compatible with externally-imposed constraints. What was critical for their success as integrative mechanisms was that the constraints operate imperceptibly. With the help of the Soviet public organizations' stipends, the Soviet Union was able to achieve a numerical preponderance of politically reliable students. Through the mid-1960s, though, Soviet behavioral and ideological norms met with challenges both from the left — as in the case of the Moroccan student revolutionaries — and from what, in the Soviet context, was inevitably viewed as the reactionary right. When faced with dissent from a non-communist African student, Soviet authorities immediately suspected cooptation. These suspicions were fed both by the activities of foreign embassies and consulates and by a stream of news stories in the Western and African press.

\*

African students had begun to trickle into the Soviet Union only at the very end of the 1950s, but by summer, 1960, there were already a few defectors. Sharply critical of Soviet society as overbearing and racist, politically alienated from left-leaning student organizations, frustrated with their education, and at the same time physically uncomfortable in Russia's harsh northern climate, these students were prepared to take their dissatisfaction to a wider public. Foreign newspapers became an alternative mouthpiece for students ready to burn their bridges with the Soviet bloc. The plight of African students in the Soviet Union and other communist countries thus gained publicity throughout the West, and also in Western-oriented Asian and African countries. A file of newspaper clippings kept by the U.S. State Department in 1960 and 1961 included 81 articles in seven languages on this theme, the vast majority of which were devoted to conditions in the Soviet Union, while in the USSR itself, both Minvuz and the Department of Science and Higher Education of the Communist Party's Central Committee monitored foreign periodicals for similar reports.<sup>43</sup> The media coverage of African students who left the Soviet Union for the West in the early 1960s strongly colored both Soviet and Western perceptions of the 1963 demonstration. Equally importantly, it shaped the perceptions and actions of the African students themselves, since the articles validated the most suspicious interpretation of Soviet intentions while articulating grievances that many students shared.

A perusal of the clippings in the State Department file shows the extent to which a handful of cases dominated media coverage. Two Ugandans, Stanley Omar

---

43. U.S. National Archives, Record Group 59, Box 5, Folder 24.3.4, Press Reports on Students in Bloc and Friendship University (*note*: most of the following citations to articles are taken from this source. The major exception is articles drawn from the Nigerian paper *The Daily Times*, which I perused on my own). Soviet monitoring of foreign news articles on African students in the USSR appears to have been much more haphazard, given the fact that clippings are scattered in various archival locations. See GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 7, l. 24-27; d. 49, l. 11-25; d. 132, l. 88-89; RGANI, f. 5, op. 35, d. 180, l. 133-136.

Okullo and Andrew Richard Amar, a Nigerian, Theophilus U. Chukwuemeka Okonkwo and a student from Togo, Michel Ayih, generated two thirds of the reports with seven Somalis who authored a collective statement and reports on the founding of Lumumba People's Friendship University constituting the vast majority of the rest. Okullo wrote an "open letter" to Nikita Khrushchev and started giving interviews in London in July, 1960, after being expelled from Moscow State University; Amar and Ayih issued a joint press conference in Frankfurt the next month and joined with Okonkwo in signing an "open letter" to the heads of African governments, also from Frankfurt, in September; and the Somalis addressed a petition to their country's government and gave interviews in Rome the following November. These students became celebrities for a few months, basking in media attention as they granted "exclusive interviews" to one after another Western or African publication.

Okonkwo can serve as an illustration of how this publicity unfolded. Son of a Christian minister, Okonkwo was typical of African students abroad by virtue of his roots in Africa's tiny educated middle class.<sup>44</sup> Before coming to the Soviet Union, he had studied at, and graduated from, the University of New Brunswick in Canada. Although Okonkwo abandoned his father's Christianity, he seems to have been an enthusiast and a believer by temperament. He embraced the Baha'i religion during his time as an undergraduate,<sup>45</sup> and, in his own words, "developed a burning faith" in Communism through self-study of Marxist-Leninist books and discussions with a member of a Soviet fisheries delegation. Undeterred by his father's opposition, which centered on Soviet atheism, or by an attempt at dissuasion by a Russian emigré professor, he sought and won a United Nations scholarship for specialized study in the USSR. Okonkwo appears to have arrived in Moscow in early 1958, part of the small original cohort of African students, most of whom were from Egypt, and to have matriculated first in the Russian-language preparatory program at MGU and later in the medical school.<sup>46</sup>

Okonkwo's personal grievances against the Soviet Union did not primarily concern racism. Rather, they centered on the repressive political climate he found in Moscow, as well as what he came to view as Soviet exploitation of himself and other African students for political ends. Within weeks of his arrival in Moscow,

---

44. This was tacitly accepted by the Soviet authorities; although their public rhetoric stressed the need to help students from poor families, the lack of free public education in Africa meant that high school graduates prepared to enroll in a university came overwhelmingly from middle-class backgrounds.

45. "A Brief History of the Baha'i Community in the Fredericton Area. Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada." <http://www.web.net/~wledgar.history.htm> (accessed July 15, 2005). This website identifies "the Nigerian student Theophilus Okonkwo" as the second in the area to convert to the Baha'i faith, in May or June, 1956. It is unclear whether Okonkwo was still a Baha'i in 1960, as his own religious beliefs do not figure in his writings or interviews about the Soviet Union.

46. Biographical information taken from Okonkwo's six-part article in *The Sunday Times* (Lagos, Oct. 16, Oct. 23, Oct. 31, Nov. 6, Nov. 13, and Nov. 20, 1960), and also from the interview with Okonkwo published in *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg, Sept. 27, 1960), "African unrest — in Moscow".

Okonkwo had been invited to speak at several public gatherings, so-called “friendship meetings,” organized by the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee — events at which he and the other students were fêted as African “freedom fighters,” who had “risked [their] lives to reach the Soviet Union,” and photographed for propaganda brochures. He was also hired by Moscow Radio to provide background information on African affairs from an anti-colonial point of view. Eventually, though, Okonkwo became disillusioned with the script that Soviet “friends of Africa” wanted him to act out, and chafed at the limits on freedom of speech. Like other dissenters, he inferred political discrimination when, for instance, Egyptian students who declined to make anti-Nasser broadcasts after the latter’s rift with Khrushchev were suddenly evicted from the well-appointed MGU dormitory. He was also incensed by the publication of a doctored photograph of himself in a periodical distributed abroad. Without his consent, someone had taken a picture of him exercising shirtless, in boxing gloves, at the gym, and a few weeks later, he learned that this photograph had appeared in the Soviet magazine *The New Times* to symbolize African liberation from the yoke of colonialism. Someone had stencilled in broken chains at his wrist and a white man with a whip in hand falling back in terror [see Figure 1]. Okonkwo understandably reacted to the full-page image as a violation of his personal dignity, emblematic of a larger tendency on the part of the Soviet government to sacrifice individual rights to political expediency.<sup>47</sup>

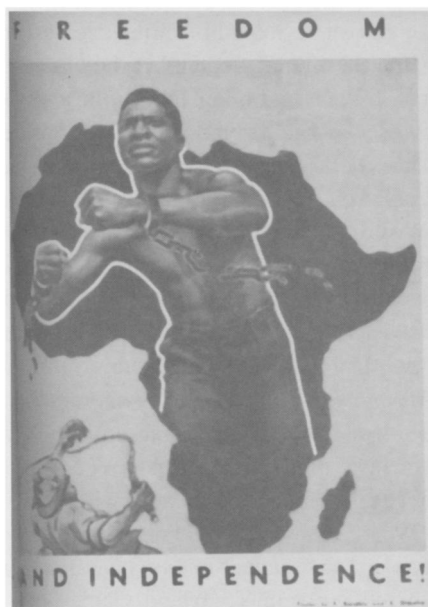


Figure 1

47. *Ibid.*, and for information on the photograph, see the interview with Okonkwo in *African Daily News* (Salisbury, Sothorn Rhodesia, Oct. 6, 1960), “African students receive threatening letters”. *The New Times* (*Novoe vremia*) was published in English, Russian, French, Spanish, Arabic, German, Polish, and Czech.



Collective rights were equally at issue. What finally led Okonkwo to quit the USSR was the September, 1960, suppression of the Black African Students' Union at MGU. Already encountered in these pages as the source of an "open letter" to Khrushchev alleging racial harassment, this organization had formed when the sub-Saharan Africans split with the North Africans and Arabs in the officially sponsored "Afro-Asian" League. Much more than the Arabs, who tended to be quiescent, the sub-Saharans were willing to risk opprobrium by demanding freedom of assembly without Komsomol supervision. Rebuffed, they resigned from the League in protest and founded the separate Black African Student Union. Okonkwo became the secretary of the executive committee and one of the new organization's leading spokesmen, and he spent several months trying to win official recognition. Although university officials sharply criticized the group for its "separatism" and "divisiveness," as exemplified by the allegations of racial harassment, what finally led them to enforce the ban on an unsanctioned organization was the Union's attempt to "meddle" in foreign affairs. Members of the group wanted to stage a demonstration protesting French nuclear testing in the Sahara — but Khrushchev was about to pay a state visit to France, and university officials took the cue to break up meetings, prohibit the demonstration, and threaten the executive committee with expulsion from the USSR. The "open letter" to African governments, which thematized race relations as well as political oppression in the Soviet Union, was the direct outcome of this incident.<sup>48</sup>

Okonkwo left with a British visa, but his immediate destination was the Federal Republic of Germany. On the 21st of September, he issued the "open letter" with fellow students Amar and Ayih, claiming that the last act of the Black African Students' Union in Moscow had been a vote of confidence in him and an authorization to publish the text abroad. The wire services picked up the story, and on the 22nd and 23rd, columns about the students' "open letter" were published in major newspapers in West Germany, many parts of Africa, and the United States. Additional stories emerged from interviews with the students. Okonkwo gave interviews to correspondents of the *Rand Daily Mail* and the *West African Pilot*, as well as the West German periodical *Welt der Arbeit*, at the end of September and beginning of October. In mid-October, a few English-language African newspapers — *The African Daily News*, *The Nigerian Defender*, *The Liberian Age* — serialized the students' "open letter" in its entirety. Okonkwo published his six-part personal statement in the Nigerian paper, *The Sunday Times*, in October and November. Ayih and Amar followed suit with a few months' delay; in February and March, 1961, Amar's personal statement came out serially in both *The East African Standard* and *The Sunday Guardian*, while Ayih was just beginning to talk with the press in Togo and Cameroon. Amar published his experiences in book form later that year with a London publisher, which reissued the book four years later under a different title, and also licensed a translation into

---

48. Again, see Okonkwo's story in *The Sunday Times*, esp. Nov. 6, and, on the planned protest against France, see "Moscow Disgusts African Students," *Rhodesia Herald* (Sept. 22, 1960).

German, while the Soviet archives indicate that Ayih gave another interview in Rome at the end of 1963.<sup>49</sup> This was a story, in sum, that seemed to gather steam rather than dissipating, and if Okonkwo, at least, placed greater emphasis on Soviet political restrictions, the press highlighted the racial aspect of the students' critique.

Soviet propagandists were deeply frustrated by the spate of articles about Okonkwo and the other whistle-blowers. With some justification, they viewed it as disingenuous for, say, an American, South African, or Rhodesian newspaper to publicize racism in the USSR.<sup>50</sup> Their clumsy handling of public relations, however, did nothing to improve the credibility of the Soviet position. Whereas a more media-savvy government might have responded to the articles by publicly expressing regret over the students' bitter feelings, forming a commission to investigate their accusations, and reaffirming the Soviet Union's commitment to African students' education, Soviet officials simply denounced the critics. Okonkwo was the subject of a two-pronged campaign at the end of October and beginning of November, 1960, when the Soviet trade union daily *Trud* "unmasked" him as an American agent and alcoholic who had failed all of his exams, while TASS released a rebuttal of Okonkwo's criticisms by another Nigerian student.<sup>51</sup> The explanations these articles offered for Okonkwo's exposés — cooptation and academic failure — were repeated vis-a-vis other critics,<sup>52</sup> but their propaganda value

---

49. Andrew Richard Amar, *A Student in Moscow* (London: Ampersand, 1961); second edition published as *An African in Moscow* (1965); *idem*, *Als Student in Moskau* (Stuttgart, 1961). What later happened to Okonkwo and Ayih is unknown, but Amar eventually obtained a doctorate in biology from Bonn University. On Ayih's 1963 interview with *Il Messagero*, see GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 132, l. 88-89.

50. See "Tass Reports U.S. Attacks by 'Racists'," *Washington Post* (Nov. 17, 1960) (describes TASS's news release on discrimination against foreign students of color in the United States). Rhodesian and South African papers figure prominently in the file of clippings kept by the U.S. State Department, e.g. "Moscow Communists Beat up African for Dancing with Russian Girl," *Rhodesia Herald* (July 15, 1960); "African Students Flee from Russia: Unbearable Life in Moscow Forced Them to Quit Their Studies," *African Daily News* (Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, Aug. 30, 1960); Priscilla Johnson, "Apartheid in Moscow: Disillusioned African Students Fear Segregation by Reds," *Cape Argus* (Capetown, Sept. 6, 1960); "Moscow Disgusts African Students," *Rhodesia Herald* (Sept. 22, 1960); "Red Colonialists Threatened U.S.," *Chronicle* (Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia, Sept. 22, 1960); "Africans Reveal 'Dangerous Red Colonialism'" and "African Unrest — in Moscow," both in *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg, Sept. 27, 1960); "African Students don't Like Russia," *contact: South Africa's Non-Racial Fortnightly* (Oct. 8, 1960); "Studente na V.S.A. Pleks van Rusland," *Die Burger* (Capetown, Oct. 14, 1960) (translation provided in file: "Students fleeing Russia for the U.S.A."); "Kommunisme in Praktyk vir Nigeriër Verskriklik," *ibid.*, Oct. 21, 1960 (translation: "Communism in Practice Horrible for Nigerian"); "African students claim they were beaten by Reds," *Rhodesia Herald* (Nov. 19, 1960).

51. *Trud* (Oct. 29, 1960) and see also the description of this article in "Moscow Accuses Nigerian Student," *The New York Times* (October 30, 1960). For Nigerian student Afolabi Afilaka's refutation of Okonkwo, see "'No Discrimination in Russia' — Nigerian Student," *The Daily Times* (Lagos, November 1, 1960) (based on TASS press release). Okonkwo discussed the Soviet use of foreign students to refute criticisms in an untitled column in *The Sunday Times* (Lagos, Nov. 6, 1960).

52. Okullo received virtually identical treatment as the subject of two "unmaskings" in *Pravda*, one by an education official and one by fellow students, on August 6 and August 7. In addition, Communist Party functionaries viewed the Nigerian Anthony Golden Okocha, who published

was limited. The evident bias of the Soviet press agency and the virtual absence of investigative reporting by Soviet journalists made it impossible for foreign papers or readers to take their “revelations” seriously. This was equally true of the positive testimonies by hand-picked, pro-Soviet students, even if their assertions of Soviet “solidarity” with Africa, as evidenced by the generous level of stipends and the USSR’s rhetorical commitment to international education, had some basis in fact.

Media coverage of African students’ discontent in the Soviet Union gradually faded in 1961-62, in all likelihood in part because conditions improved. The expansion of the African contingent made individual students feel less like curiosities; the new People’s Friendship University turned out not to seem like “apartheid,” as the first cohort of Africans had feared;<sup>53</sup> and in early 1962, as detailed above, a pan-African student association, FASSS, finally obtained recognition. Still, the 1960 publicity demarcated competing lines of interpretation of African students’ experiences in the USSR. The first was that of the Soviet establishment, which laid emphasis on the systematic collusion of “imperialist powers” and the “bourgeois press,” but treated the substantive complaints as anomalous. From this point of view, student dissatisfaction reflected the ingratitude and turpitude of a few “bad apples,” just as racism represented “lack of consciousness” on the part of vestigial “hooligan elements.” The second interpretation, favored by much of the Western and Western-leaning African press, gave credence to the student critics and saw political indoctrination, manipulation, and surveillance as the core of Soviet international education. Moreover, African student protests in Prague, Sofia, and Beijing in 1961, 1962, and early 1963 over race relations predisposed some Western observers to identify racism with communism itself.<sup>54</sup> African students never adopted this interpretation wholecloth, as all were aware of racism in the United States and in colonial territories, but they proved susceptible to major elements of it in the commotion over Assare-Addo’s death.

---

an exposé about his experiences at People’s Friendship University, “Moscow Prepared Me for Revolution in Africa,” in *The Sunday Telegraph* (London), on July 16, 1961, as a paid servant of British intelligence. RGANI, f. 5, op. 35, d. 180, l. 133-136. See also the discussion of Okullo in GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 7, l. 24-27, and of Ayih in *ibid.*, d. 132, l. 88-89.

53. Okullo, in particular, had sounded this alarm. See, for example, the interview with him in *US News & World Report* (Aug. 1, 1960), “A Negro’s Life in Russia — Beatings, Insults, Segregation,” or “Apartheid Spreads to Russia,” *African Mail* (August 14, 1960). The same concern emerged in Priscilla Johnson’s discussions with African students before she lost her visa as a foreign correspondent in Moscow; see her “Apartheid in Moscow: Disillusioned African Students Fear Segregation by Reds,” *Cape Argus* (Capetown, Sept. 6, 1960).

54. On African students’ discontent in Beijing, see F. X. Gerald, “Red China Foreign Students Dissatisfied with Conditions,” *Japan Times* (Feb. 17, 1961); on their protest, see U.S. State Department Record Group 59, Subject Files: Foreign Students, Box 5, Folder 24.3.1. On protests in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, see “Rioting Between African and Bulgarian Students,” *Africa Diary*, 11, 38 (Sept. 15-21, 1962): 761-762; “Those Foreign Students,” *Eastern Europe*, 12, 3 (March, 1963): 25, and “Bulgaria: African Students Leave After Clash,” *ibid.*: 36, and “Ethiopian Student Tells Tale of Disillusionment,” *ibid.*: 40-41; Wilton Dillard, “Wandering African Intellectuals,” *The New Republic*, 148, 10 (March 9, 1963): 17-19; and see also the comment on the Bulgarian incident in Thompson, *Ghana’s Foreign Policy...*, 277-278.

### The December, 1963, protest and its aftermath

The Soviet suspicion of cooptation seems misplaced with respect to Okonkwo, but with regard to the December, 1963, protest, it rested on a genuinely mysterious sequence of events. Assare-Addo died on the 13th and the protest took place on the 18th. As early as Monday, December 9, however, universities and institutes in Leningrad and Kalinin notified Minvuz that students from Ghana had been summoned to Moscow to spend the weekend of December 14-15 at their country's embassy. The Ministry's query to a Ghanaian diplomat yielded the surprising response that the embassy had no idea who had summoned the students or for what purpose, and the embassy purportedly sent out a telegram to institutions of higher education in Leningrad countermanding the summons. The Ministry itself informed the rectors of these institutions to try to prevent the students from departing. Universities and institutes in other cities, including Kalinin, were not alerted to the problem.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Assare-Addo, who was a student at the medical institute in Kalinin, was almost certainly on his way to the Ghanaian Embassy when he met his untimely death. In the event, roughly two hundred students from Ghana and over one hundred from other African countries descended on the Ghanaian Embassy on Friday the 13th, arriving from Kharkov, Kiev, Kalinin, and other cities. Discussing the situation with S. Sokhin, the chief of the Foreign Relations department of Minvuz, on the 17th, Ambassador John Elliot said that the students had been camping out for four days, getting drunk, creating a ruckus, obstructing the work of the embassy, and endangering Elliot's wife and children, who had barricaded themselves into a suite on the top floor of the building.<sup>56</sup>

What was going on? This article is based on Soviet sources, which is to say that blank spots for Soviet officials at the time remain blank spots for us today — and as far as I have been able to determine, the provenance of the summons was never resolved. In his dealings with Soviet officials over the incident, Ambassador Elliot pointed the finger at the Western embassies in Moscow (“the U.S., England, France, the FRG, or even Holland”) as the probable instigators of the affair. This explanation, which dovetailed with the preconceptions of Elliot's Soviet interlocutors, is plausible, but it seems at least equally likely that the erratic Nkrumah had first called for the meeting and then changed his mind. Though Nkrumah had supported sending students to the USSR as a counterweight to the influence of foreign study in the West from 1960 on, a historian of Ghana's foreign relations indicates that he consolidated his ties to the Soviet Union precisely in the period December, 1963, to May, 1964, when he also embraced “scientific socialism” as an ideology.<sup>57</sup> This shift had a concrete impact on the attitude of the Ghanaian Embassy. As of the previous May, the embassy had not yet adopted the Soviet interpretation of African students' experiences; not only had it initiated a

---

55. GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 83, l. 338.

56. *Ibid.*, l. 349-350.

57. Thompson, *Ghana's Foreign Policy...*, 165, 292-295 *passim*.

formal inquiry into the students' allegations of racial harassment, as described above, it had tried to use student politics as a vehicle for furthering Nkrumah's dream of pan-African unity under the Ghanaian — not Soviet — aegis. At an invitational gathering with representatives from every African student contingent, Ambassador Elliot had called for a boycott of FASSS as a "pro-Soviet organization" and tried unsuccessfully to persuade the students to abandon it for an "independent" Pan-African Union sponsored by his embassy.<sup>58</sup> Elliot may have advanced Soviet, rather than Ghanaian, interests in most of his dealings as ambassador,<sup>59</sup> but his manoeuvres in May, 1963, indicate that with respect to students, this was not always the case.

Yet a third possible explanation of the summons is that it came from the Ghanaian students themselves. The all-Union Ghanaian *zemliachestvo* was established that year, with the effect that students were in possession of an alternative channel of communication. Moreover, according to a 1968 Komsomol report, many Ghanaian students of the period before the "well-known events of December 1963" ranged themselves in opposition to their government; they had even circulated manifestos about the "necessity of fighting against the power-loving Kwame Nkrumah" and their intention of "overthrowing" his "dictatorial government."<sup>60</sup> Nkrumah's government, which had indeed become a one-party dictatorship, subsequently tightened its political control over Ghanaian students in the USSR; as of early 1964, they were obliged to join the Convention People's Party and to submit to party discipline.<sup>61</sup> In the lead-up to the Assare-Addo affair, however, students had both the means and, it would seem, the desire to organize themselves for political change.

Ambassador Elliot downplayed the political character of the gathering at the Ghanaian Embassy. At "turbulent meetings" attended by Ghanaians and other Africans studying in Moscow as well as the students from other cities, students aired their fears and grievances concerning racial harassment and demanded redress. Assare-Addo's death naturally overshadowed the proceedings, and the students resolved to boycott their classes until the Soviet government had opened a public investigation.<sup>62</sup> Ambassador Elliot brushed aside the boycott in his remarks to Soviet education officials, going so far as to suggest that students who "behaved poorly" and "skipped class" should be expelled and repatriated. He placed more weight on complaints that were raised at the meetings about various everyday problems, but here, too, his tendency was to disparage the students as politically

58. TsKhDMO, f. 1, op. 46, d. 342, l. 12-14 (1965 Komsomol report on the evolution of the Ghanaian contingent in the Soviet Union).

59. Thompson, *Ghana's Foreign Policy...*, 166, 274-275; and see also his remark about Elliot as "[Nkrumah's] worst ambassadorial appointment in this period" [105].

60. TsKhDMO, f. 1, op. 46, d. 136, l. 14-22, here at 14.

61. *Ibid.*, and see also d. 342, l. 12-14.

62. These meetings are described from a hostile point of view in "Krepiť internatsional'niuu družbu!" *Druzhba* (UDN student newspaper) (Jan. 4, 1964) and in GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 127, l. 32-37, here at 31-33.

ignorant and immature. Students wanted larger stipends, better accommodations, cafeteria food that included Ghanaian dishes, a regular supply of rice, preferably flown in from Ghana, and the freedom to travel to Western Europe for the holidays, preferably with the Soviet government supplying the airfare — a list of demands that Elliot dismissively termed the “completely unfounded and even fantastical pretensions” of “16- or 17-year-olds,” who seemed to think that “Soviet authorities should cater to the whims of Ghanaian students.”<sup>63</sup> Whatever his role may have been in the convocation of the student gathering at the embassy, Ambassador Elliot clearly sided with the Soviet position in the wake of these events. The students, by contrast, utilized the gathering to define a course of collective action, in which the boycott was merely the prelude to the public demonstration of December 18.



Figure 2

When the students assembled again at the Ghanaian embassy on the morning of the 18th, they drew up a “Memorandum” to present to Soviet authorities. Several students had painted political posters denouncing racism in the USSR,<sup>64</sup> and they carried them aloft as they left the embassy and started marching in a column towards Red Square. Passing through Red Square, the demonstrators halted at the Spasskie Gate to the Kremlin, where they posed for photographs and gave interviews with the correspondents of Western newspapers and the BBC [see Figure 2]. They also spoke with a group of Soviet officials, who had been hastily convened to defuse the situation: the leading officials of Minvuz’s Foreign Relations department; the rector of People’s Friendship University, the provosts of other institutions in Moscow with

63. *Ibid.*, d. 127, l. 32-33.

64. In addition to the slogans listed at the beginning of this article, posters were observed with the slogans, “Friendship has been transformed into murder,” “House of Friendship [Dom Druzhy, a club for international gatherings] = House of Discrimination,” “Hands off Africans!” “No more murders!” *Ibid.*, d. 83, l. 337.

substantial African student contingents, and representatives of the university-level Communist Party organizations. These officials' efforts to persuade the students to disperse and return to class "elicited a sharply negative reaction"; the students instead demanded a hearing at the Supreme Soviet, where they intended to present their memorandum. Acting as intermediaries, the Soviet officials proposed that the students select ten delegates for a meeting with "responsible worker of the Supreme Soviet's Presidium" V. I. Snastin (the deputy chief of the Central Committee's Ideological Department), who told the students that two cabinet-level ministers, V. P. Eliutin (Minvuz) and S. V. Kurashov (Health) were prepared to meet with them and discuss their demands. All of this took about two hours, during which time the students continued to shout slogans and mill around Red Square.<sup>65</sup>

The demonstrators in the end agreed to meet with these ministers. Accompanied by the official intermediaries, they proceeded to the main building of Minvuz, where ten or fifteen spokesmen were ushered into Eliutin's office for a private audience. The remaining students crowded into the assembly hall of the adjacent Architecture Institute, and if the ministers had hoped to resolve the conflict behind closed doors, they were disappointed. The delegates merely invited them to hold an open meeting with the demonstrators, and refused to present or discuss their memorandum outside that forum. The subsequent meeting, which Eliutin later characterized as "extremely heated" and "tense," lasted for about two hours. There was some attrition by this point — 300-400 students were reported to have participated in the meeting at the Architecture Institute as against 500-700 demonstrators on Red Square — but the passions excited by Assare-Addo's death and the experience of collective protest dissipated slowly.<sup>66</sup>

In contrast to the Soviet response to the accusers of 1960, Eliutin handled the situation skillfully. The students had placed on the stage of the assembly hall a funerary wreath with a photograph of the deceased Assare-Addo. Taking his cue from this gesture, Eliutin opened the meeting by expressing his sympathy over the death of the Ghanaian student, and proposed that students stand silently for a moment to solemnize the memory of their friend. After introducing what had expanded into a large retinue of intermediaries and officials, he invited the students to present their memorandum. He then gave an impromptu speech, and while he mainly reiterated the standard Soviet interpretation of African students' experiences, he also made a great point of reassuring the students that he would bring their memorandum to the attention of the Soviet government. In his speech, he rehearsed the Soviet coroner's conclusion about Assare-Addo's death, repeated the Soviet government's desire to aid African nations through education, and recited the official view of racism:

---

65. *Ibid.*, I. 337-338.

66. *Ibid.*, 338-339, 341. Eliutin described the incident in a memo to the Central Committee (I. 337-340), to which he appended the minutes of the meeting (I. 341-348) and various other materials. What follows below is culled from the minutes of the meeting.

We have a large country, and it is possible to find isolated individuals who are bad people, just as in any country there is a small number of people prepared to commit hooligan acts. These isolated individuals can, of course, cause offense to a Soviet citizen or a foreign citizen. But it is impermissible and incorrect to generalize or draw conclusions based on such instances, if they should take place, or to talk about the relations of the Soviet people towards you on this basis. This is something that every unprejudiced, objective person should understand. It has also never happened, and none of you can say that it did, that one of our deans, teachers, or ministry officials has let slip a bad word or deed in relation to you.<sup>67</sup>

The entirety of Eliutin's speech was accompanied by angry catcalls, laughs, and shouts — "They are afraid!" "Propaganda!" and the like — but he stayed firmly on message, and gradually, over the course of the question-and-answer session and his own closing remarks, succeeded in lowering the temperature of the hall. Eliutin even managed to elicit applause when he called Khrushchev "a great friend of the African people," and ended the meeting with an exhortation to "study well" and "become good specialists."<sup>68</sup>

The three students who spoke at length also stayed on message; this was not an occasion for raising political or material grievances in general but for highlighting the threats felt by African students. With the evident support of the crowd, all three categorically rejected the "anomalies" interpretation of Soviet racism. Students applauded furiously when the first speaker, a Ghanaian fellow student of Assare-Addo's at Kalinin Medical Institute, stated baldly that "We are not convinced of our security in this country. When we are beaten, no one pays attention. Perhaps the minister is not aware of this." This student put forward the thesis that Russians had killed Assare-Addo because of his upcoming marriage, and concluded — to more applause and shouts of approval — with the suggestion that the African students in Kalinin be transferred to Moscow, where at least they would have some safety in numbers.<sup>69</sup> The second speaker, a Nigerian studying at People's Friendship University, told of his disillusionment with Soviet society after being beaten by Russians in Gorky Park, while the police stood by and looked on; warned of racist attitudes on the part of the Komsomol; and concluded, after carefully distinguishing between the altruism of the Soviet government and the racism of many Soviet people, that "We would rather live without friends than accept this kind of friendship."<sup>70</sup> Finally, the third speaker, a Ghanaian medical student who had observed the autopsy, returned to the subject of Assare-Addo's death. Less polemical than the preceding two, he merely confirmed the fact that Assare-Addo had frozen to death, but refuted the claim made by Soviet officials that he was

---

67. *Ibid.*, I. 342-344.

68. *Ibid.*, I. 348.

69. *Ibid.*, I. 345-346.

70. *Ibid.*, I. 346-347.



drunk, and underscored what for students was the key to the whole mystery: how had he ended up 22 kilometers from Moscow in a strip of deserted wasteland?<sup>71</sup>

The memorandum itself was confined to the same subjects (the need for an open investigation into Assare-Addo's death and the need for a guarantee of African students' security), but still more moderate in tone:

*Memorandum to the Soviet Government from African Students in the Soviet Union*<sup>72</sup>

In light of the numerous threats of murder directed at African students in the Soviet Union, and especially the most recent threat, which claimed as its victim one of the African students from Ghana, Addo, we urgently demand of the Soviet authorities:

1. That Soviet authorities publicize the results of the investigation connected to the suspicious death of our brother.

2. All details of this case and all steps taken in connection with it should be explained and publicized, as well as any conclusions reached. We should also be informed, if possible, as to whether there was any foulplay here, and if there any did occur, the individuals implicated in it should be severely punished.

3. We would like to draw the attention of the Soviet authorities to the fact that several incidents in which African students were subjected to physical violence have already taken place.

4. Immediate measures should be taken to curtail terrorist acts directed at African students in particular and at foreign students in general.

5. People committing barbaric acts must be reeducated by Soviet organizations and institutions in such a way that they alter their rude actions in relation to African students and other foreign students.

6. Since the Soviet government has invited us here to carry out our education, we would like a guarantee of our personal security.

7. We expect prompt action to be taken in accordance with the present petition.

8. We hope that friendship between the African and Soviet peoples will find expression not only in words but also in deeds.

[signed] The Nations of Africa

The memorandum thus focussed on the specifics of the investigation and racially-motivated violence, but the contrast drawn in its final article raised the protest, at least implicitly, to a more general level of political critique. As the catcalls during Eliutin's speech indicated, this contrast could be recast as one of "propaganda" versus "reality." African students had heard oft-repeated assertions of international friendship from the official representatives of the Soviet system, but their dealings with ordinary Soviet citizens seemed to belie those progressive words. Yet even while the students rallied behind slogans that Soviet officials found offensive, drew foreign attention to Soviet failings, and utilized techniques of self-organization, mobilization, and protest typical of advanced democracies but anathema in the

71. *Ibid.*, 1. 347.

72. *Ibid.*, 1. 353-354. Unfortunately, although the memorandum was written in English, the archives have preserved only the Russian translation. This is thus my own re-translation into English.

communist bloc, their presentation of the memorandum indicated their continuing engagement with the Soviet regime. The student protesters rejected the thesis that racial prejudice was rare or anomalous in Soviet society, but the minutes of the open meeting suggest that they generally accepted Eliutin's insistence on the enlightened attitude of education and government personnel. This apparent consensus — corroborated, incidentally, by a survey of African students who subsequently left the USSR for the United States<sup>73</sup> — that racism was an *unofficial* aspect of Soviet life gave the regime's spokesmen an important opening for reestablishing goodwill. For they, too, were committed to continuing their engagement with African students, though they hoped to prevent future confrontations along the lines of December 18.

\*

The Soviet government succeeded in dispersing the African students' demonstration without resorting to arrests. In fact, it took a strikingly conciliatory tack, having two of its ministers meet with the students and hold an assembly to discuss their demands. In the aftermath of the 18th, however, official analyses of the episode were overdetermined by the preexisting Soviet interpretation of African students' grievances. The protest was thus assumed to be rooted in malign influences at work amongst the students as against structural problems, which in turn indicated a policy of isolating and expelling the "ringleaders" before they could resume their agitation. Within days, the chief of the Foreign Relations department of Minvuz was corresponding with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the KGB with requests to repatriate this or that malcontent. A Kenyan student in Minsk, for example, Charles Okot Missiani, was an obvious candidate for expulsion. Having heard about the protest after the fact, Missiani tried to organize a memorial trip to Moscow of all the African students in Belorussia for a repeat demonstration. He was prevented from obtaining tickets, but did manage to "coerce" his fellow African students "by means of threats, intimidation, and even physical violence" to attend a protest meeting and to boycott their classes.<sup>74</sup> Without agitators of Missiani's ilk, the thinking went, the mass of African students would soon return to studying for exams, and the problem would go away.

The effort to isolate troublemakers was aided by a wave of indignation and censure that swept Soviet campuses in the wake of the demonstration. Steeped in the self-image of the Soviet Union as the world's leading altruistic state, teachers, deans, Komsomol members, and even some of the other foreign students reviled the demonstrators as ingrates. By publicly charging the Soviet Union with racism,

---

73. Kenneth L. Baer, "African Students in the East and West, 1959-1966. An Analysis of Experiences and Attitudes," Syracuse University, Maxwell Graduate School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Program of Eastern African Studies, occasional paper 54 (July, 1970), Appendix, xii-xix *passim*.

74. GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 127, l. 29-31, 55-59. Other named "instigators" came from Kharkov Medical Institute, Moscow Auto-Roads Institute, and People's Friendship University.

these critics felt, the demonstrators had abused the Soviet Union's hospitality and besmirched its honor, and at the same time they had "played into the hands of the imperialists." Though the official interpretation of the demonstration at the ministerial level emphasized the corrupting influence of a few "bad apples," the response on campus was to indict all of the demonstrators as having betrayed the Soviet Union's trust.

We can observe these dynamics best by tracking the fallout at a single university. With its large African contingent and relatively accessible archives and student newspaper, Lumumba People's Friendship University (UDN) affords an ideal vantage point. Some 150 of the university's African students participated in the boycott of classes and the demonstration,<sup>75</sup> enough to make the incident a topic of general discussion. The student body soon split between sympathizers and critics. Tensions escalated sharply when the militantly communist Somalian *zemliachestvo* inveighed against the protesters as "agents of imperialism" in an open letter posted on a university bulletin board, and ten days later, when the Sudanese *zemliachestvo* posted its denunciation of the event, a large fistfight broke out.<sup>76</sup> Between these two postings, the student newspaper, *Druzhba* [Friendship], took up the charge. In a lengthy editorial masquerading as an article, editors expressed their dismay that "some UDN students ha[d] fallen into the instigators' trap." By refusing to attend class, the newspaper opined, African students had "grossly violated academic discipline at the University," and by lending their voice to the protest, "they then, under the influence of *provocateurs*, committed acts offensive to the Soviet people."<sup>77</sup> *Druzhba* thus adopted the official line about instigators, and portrayed the mass of African students as having been hoodwinked or misled, but at the same time it underscored the gravity of *all* of the demonstrators' offense.

The student editors had without doubt been given instructions. According to a follow-up report by the university's Komsomol cell:<sup>78</sup>

From the start the Komsomol leadership [*aktiv*] of the University, and subsequently the departmental organizations, were informed about the events in detail. Instructions were given as to the line of behavior Komsomol members should adopt under the circumstances. It must be said that the Soviet students

---

75. As estimated by rector Rumiantsev. Tsentral'nyi munitsipal'nyi arkhiv Moskv (TsMAM), f. 3061, Universitet Druzhby Narodov imeni Patrisa Lumumby, op. 1, d. 235, l. 88. The total student body was roughly 2,700 at this time.

76. A Kenyan student, Alex Omondi, had to go before the University Council for his role in the melee on the night of January 11-12. Provoked by the Sudanese posting, a number of sub-Saharan African students faced off against the North Africans. Omondi was singled out for punishment because he threw a couple of bottles at one of his adversaries, and the shards injured two students. Interestingly, the feuding African contingents joined together after the incident to petition that Omondi not be expelled. *Ibid.*, l. 165-173. On the Somalian posting, see TsKhDMO, f. 1, op. 46, d. 357, l. 28-31, and the quotations in "Krepit' internatsional'nuiu druzhbu..."

77. "Krepit' internatsional'nuiu druzhbu..."

78. *Note*: Soviet students made up one seventh of the student body of UDN. All were members of the Komsomol, which accordingly served a dual role at the university as the *zemliachestvo* of the Soviet students and an auxiliary to the administration.

and staff of the University correctly understood their tasks and carried out significant work in explaining the position of Soviet people towards these events among the foreign students.

These “explanations,” the report continued, took place in conversations and arguments both in class (Russian language teachers made a particular point of addressing the incident) and “in hallways, after class, and in the dormitory,” and their main point was to combine a “firm and definite condemnation of the demonstration as an action injurious to international friendship” with an affirmation of the sincere commitment of the Soviet people to educational aid.<sup>79</sup>

Subjected to this barrage of reproach, incrimination, and “explanation,” a number of students who had taken part in the demonstration elected to drop out of UDN. This, however, was not so simple. Each student wishing to withdraw had to present his petition before the University Council, which proceeded to give him a tongue-lashing on moral and political grounds.<sup>80</sup> The rector, Rumiantsev, made it clear that any transcript from UDN would include language about the students’ “disruptive,” “undisciplined,” and “depraved” influence, and threatened to inform the students’ governments (Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana) of their behavior as well. When a student tried to defend himself, as did Cabo Ibrahim Omar, Arthur Davis, Caleb Johnson, or Colin Maccolin, on the grounds that the demonstration was a legal and legitimate defense of African students’ rights, this only inflamed the sentiment of the tribunal. “What connection do you see between Moscow and Alabama?” a teacher on the council would ask, in reference to the provocative poster “Moscow — a second Alabama.” “Do you know anything about Alabama?” The meetings of the University Council were not public, so these cross-examinations cannot have been for the purpose of making an example of the student; rather, they seemed a vehicle for Council members to vent their feelings of outrage. Humiliating rhetorical questions alternated with homilies about the importance of gratitude and straightforward moral censure (“You know your guilt before the University,” “You have offended human dignity,” etc.) before the petition for withdrawal was contemptuously approved.

Probably the most interesting dialogue occurred during the cross-examination of Colin Maccolin, the president of UDN’s Sierra Leone *zemliachestvo*; more than the other students, he took the opportunity to raise fundamental criticisms of Soviet university life. Although Maccolin specifically praised UDN’s professors for having taught him a great deal, he echoed the 1960 criticisms of surveillance and political pressure levelled by Okonkwo, et al. Above all, Maccolin blamed the university administration for pitting students against each other. In his words, instead of trying to identify problems that impeded students’ learning, “the senior instructors walk around the dormitory asking what you think of such-and-such

---

79. TsKhDMO, f. 1, op. 46, d. 357, l. 28.

80. A number of transcripts of the exchanges between the students and the Council have been preserved in the archives (notably, these are the only items in these files for which stenographic reports, as opposed to summary protocols, have been kept). See TsMAM, f. 3061, op. 1, d. 138, l. 212-220; d. 235, l. 84-101, l. 165-180.

student.”<sup>81</sup> The effect was that even African students were divided and wary of each other. Maccolin concluded his remarks, which were punctuated by a stream of hostile interruptions from his interrogators, by invoking Lenin: “I’ve studied your history. When people came up to Lenin and asked, ‘Why do we have both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks?’ he replied, ‘You will see for yourself which organization is necessary for you.’ In the same way, the interests of Africans are not your affair.”<sup>82</sup> As a result of this exchange, and also for his persistent criticisms of the leftist orientation of FASSS, Maccolin was singled out in the university’s report to Minvuz as the student who had displayed the worst ingratitude for Soviet educational aid. Clearly, this was a “ringleader” — and in light of the fact that Maccolin chose to travel to West Germany, using suspiciously new bills, instead of home to Sierra Leone after his dishonorable discharge, administrators were certain that he was a corrupt one as well.<sup>83</sup>

What we learn by tracing the fallout from the December, 1963, protest at a single university is in some ways a negative conclusion. In the short run, students’ passions were inflamed by the incident, which divided the student body into a beleaguered minority of protesters and their sympathizers and a much larger, more vocal majority bent on condemning the event. Feeding into this latter group was the Komsomol, which received and purveyed instructions as to the correct view of what happened, and which sought to monopolize the public understanding of the episode. Part of the same political and cultural orthodoxy as the Soviet teachers and administrators at the university, the Komsomol was largely successful in regaining control over public discourse within the student body. The interpretation that it offered differed little from the view of race relations promoted in response to the 1960 accusations, with the exception that moralistic condemnation was now extended to cover all participants in the demonstration and not just “ringleaders.” With so little acknowledgement of the concerns that gave rise to the demonstration, this orthodox position was not likely to satisfy African students or bring them into the mainstream. The intense political polarization of December, 1963, and January, 1964, accordingly reverted to a humdrum social and cultural polarization of the student body, in which Soviet students and the various foreign contingents, including sub-Saharan Africans, largely went their separate ways.

---

81. *Ibid.*, 1. 90.

82. *Ibid.*, 1. 96.

83. GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 135, l. 48-50. Maccolin was not alone in traveling to West Germany after withdrawing from UDN; so did the other eleven Sierra Leonians who left UDN in January-February, 1964.

## Conclusion

The African students' protest was an incident with few, if any, long-term consequences. Soviet foreign relations with African countries were scarcely altered even in the short run, and African students continued to come to the Soviet Union to study, though they never approached the number of Africans at universities in the West. Even in the realm of educational policy, the incident had few repercussions. It is probably no coincidence that the Communist Party inaugurated a campaign to strengthen ideological education for foreigners through the social science curriculum in January, 1964, just one month after the African students' protest, or that "internationalism" was to become a more important theme in the education of Soviet youth.<sup>84</sup> By and large, though, these initiatives represented an intensification of the existing strategy of political and moral education rather than a policy shift. Colin Maccolin, in his session before the UDN University Council, had predicted that "after we leave, things will be better for students, since you will try to provide them with better conditions for studying."<sup>85</sup> In the extant archives of his university and Minvuz, there is no direct evidence of such an institutional response.

The historical significance of the episode lies not in its impact but in the light that it sheds on the social and political dynamics of the later Khrushchev years. What is clear is that African students tested the limits of Soviet toleration in their December, 1963, demonstration. On one level, the protest reflected a limited set of concerns related to the death of a fellow-student. On a more general level, though, it brought into question such key aspects of the Soviet Union's political ideology as "international friendship" and, above all, socialist "democracy." Whether from the experience of decolonization in their home countries or from time spent in the West, the Ghanaians and other students involved in the protest were familiar with the forms and methods of political protest. They showed particular skill in generating publicity for their cause: the exaggerated character of their slogans guaranteed headlines in the foreign press, and their decision to stage the demonstration at the symbolic locus of Soviet power made for visual impact as well. These same choices angered and alienated the Soviet public, insofar as the episode became publicly known, but they also helped to win the students a hearing from top-level officials and to preclude the use of force.

Beyond the actual demonstration, this article has tried to shed light on two further issues from the early and mid-1960s. First, by highlighting sub-Saharan Africans as a distinctive and unruly presence at Soviet universities, it offers a new perspective on the student milieu of the Khrushchev years. Long identified as the

---

84. GARF, f. 9606, op. 1, d. 1022 (discussion of social sciences scattered throughout the whole file); d. 1532 (entirely devoted to the role of social science departments in strengthening the "political ideological education of foreign students"); *ibid.*, op. 2, d. 135, l. 63-73 (repeat exhortation); RGANI, f. 5, op. 35, d. 210 (on general ideological development of social sciences).

85. TsMAM, f. 3061, op. 1, d. 135, l. 90.

incubator of an individualistic and self-expressive mood, the student milieu of the 1960s was one of the principal apertures through which Western values entered Soviet culture. In particular, scholars have noted the democratizing impact on Soviet students' outlook made by visiting Western students and scholars on cultural exchange programs.<sup>86</sup> This article has pointed to other, less obvious champions of democracy at Soviet universities, namely students from the Third World. Contact with these visitors, no less than with their Western counterparts, surely helped to broaden Soviet university students' horizons, but in addition, as this article has detailed with respect to Africans, the Third World students acted out democratic values in a way that was impossible for either Soviet students or visitors from the West. The Nigerian Theophilus Okonkwo advanced the view that sub-Saharan Africans were the "freest" of all the foreign student contingents in the USSR precisely because they were not bound by cultural exchange agreements, since the latter tended to enlist the students' home governments in the enforcement of restrictive behavioral norms.<sup>87</sup> For Soviet officials, this was the flip side of the public organizations' scholarships, under whose auspices most of the first Africans came; they gave the Kremlin the ability to discriminate in favor of leftists, as discussed early on in this article, but they also gave students a greater license to challenge authority in the USSR.

With African students at the center, this article has also tried to elucidate race relations in the early 1960s. Despite fragmentary and conflicting evidence, I concluded that racism was a genuine problem for the first cohorts of African students, and that their concerns about verbal harassment, unprovoked assaults, and racial profiling by the police were based on everyday experience as well as word of mouth. Did this change? Whereas in the early 1960s, racism was identified with African students' off-campus experiences, scattered reports in the archives suggest that it took root at some Soviet campuses in the middle and later part of the decade. From Voronezh, in 1965, came reports that when Soviet students drank, they often started yelling things like "Let's go lynch the Negroes! [*Poshli linchevat' negrov!*]" in the courtyards of the university dormitories.<sup>88</sup> In 1968, a recently-published overview of student attitudes and lifestyles by a KGB informant in Odessa underscored the same phenomenon. Soviet students had extremely poor relations with "blacks and mulattos," this informant reported; they referred to them with obscenities, gossiped about their supposed "sadism," "dirtiness," and "hypersexuality," blamed them for an outbreak of syphilis in Odessa, and openly fantasized about hate crimes. Girls who dated black men, the report concluded,

---

86. For a recent discussion, see Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003). An interesting memoir that touches on this theme is William Taubman, *The View from Lenin Hills: Soviet Youth in Ferment* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1967).

87. Okonkwo, "Life in Moscow University," *The Sunday Times* (Lagos, Nov. 6, 1960).

88. TsKhDMO, f. 1, op. 46, d. 355, l. 4.

were viewed as “worse than the lowest prostitute.”<sup>89</sup> These documents, it must be emphasized, are extremely unusual for their open treatment of racism. Whether the virulent racism that they describe had indeed become characteristic of Soviet universities by the second half of the 1960s, and whether, as at least two serious students of related subjects have suggested,<sup>90</sup> it subsequently declined, must remain subjects for future research.

*University of Oregon*

*hessler@uoregon.edu*

---

89. “‘Otcuzhdennoe ot partii sostoianie’: KGB SSSR o nastroeniakh uchashchikhsia i studenchestva. 1968-1976 g.g.”, in S. V. Popov and A. D. Chernev eds., *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, no. 1 (1994): 175-207, here at 188.

90. Alvin Z. Rubinstein, “Lumumba University: An Assessment,” *Problems of Communism*, 20, 6 (1971): 64-69, here at 68; Nikolai Mitrokhin, *Russkaia partiia. Dvizhenie russkikh natsionalistov v SSSR, 1953-1985* (M.: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2003), 52-53.