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STEFFI MARUNG

**A ‘Leninian moment’? Soviet Africanists and the Interpretation of the October Revolution, 1950s–1970s<sup>1</sup>**

*ABSTRACT* *The October Revolution was pivotal in the globalisation of socialism as a claim-making device. Soviet Africanists interpreting the revolution and its legacy vis-à-vis African dynamics were part of this process. The more the revolution became an event of the distant past, the more it was mobilised as a short hand for post-colonial development and the repositioning of societies in a new global order. This article sheds light on the transfers and circulations of these ideas during the 1950s to the 1970s, and how these impacted on the understandings of socialist development in the Soviet Union. The experiences of Soviet scholars with and in ‘Africa’ played a crucial role for the co-production of such concepts: academic as well as personal frustrations became a driver for change of Soviet Africanists’ theorisations on development and socialism in Africa.*

*KEYWORDS* *socialism, Cold War, African Studies, Soviet Union, globalisation, October Revolution*

**I. The globalisation of socialism and ‘African’ challenges for Soviet conceptualisations**

It certainly does not come as a surprise that the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, as an anti-imperialist overthrow, was perceived and promoted by actors from the socialist world and by radical anti-colonial activists in the Global South during the Cold War as a caesura in world history. Not only from a Soviet perspective did the revolution’s importance as a historical

turning point in world history seem unparalleled, demonstrating the possibility of building a socialist state and thus dramatically transforming the system of international relations (Gromyko 1980). Pro-Soviet and Marxist scholars, as well as activists in Africa and the Soviet Union in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, celebrated the radical transformations as a watershed for the colonial world. However, this understanding became ever more nuanced and differentiated, the more the world was restructured in the wake of decolonisation and with the onset of the Cold War. With the challenges of state-building and economic and social transformations rising on the agendas of post-colonial elites, the October Revolution became a metaphor and promise for the solution of the manifold problems the newly independent states in Africa were confronted with. The more the revolution became an event of the distant past, and with the post-colonial present evolving in complex ways, the more it was mobilised as a shorthand for post-colonial development and the repositioning of societies in a new global order. With its call for the right of self-determination of oppressed peoples all over the world, as well as its potential as a model for social, political and economic transformation in the countries emerging in a post-colonial global order (Sozidatel'nyi primer), the October Revolution became the shorthand for this model to be exported globally, including in decolonising Africa.

The structure of these arguments shows considerable parallels with an argument which has been discussed for some years among global historians after Erez Manela had powerfully formulated it (Manela 2014): that of a 'Wilsonian moment', with Woodrow Wilson – helped by American public diplomacy – personifying the global breakthrough of the principle of national self-determination, which was appropriated by actors in the colonised parts of the world and used as an argument and mobiliser in liberation movements. Manela has not only been celebrated but also criticised for his Wilson-centric interpretation of the dynamic, neglecting the developments prior to Wilson's call as well as the agency of activists in the Global South putting the US as well as the European colonial powers under massive pressure. He had also been criticised for not paying sufficient attention to the parallel and entangled dynamics in the wake of the October Revolution (for critical comments e.g. Naumann 2009; Karl 2008; summarising the discussion: Maddux 2009; see also Mayer 1967). It

is, however, striking how similar the Soviet arguments about a ‘Leninian moment’ are to more recent scholarly efforts to interpret the end of empires in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Against this background, one might take the criticism of Manela’s argument as a starting point to reinterpret the parallel ‘Leninian moment’ – not by engaging in a debate about which moment was more important for Africa and other world regions going through a process of decolonisation, but by rethinking the logic of the argument. Like the ‘Wilsonian moment’ the October Revolution has indeed been decisive in the longer transformation and ending of empires and of decolonisation. It has undoubtedly opened pathways for the globalisation of socialism as a form of political and economic organisation of societies, thus providing arenas for the promotion of Soviet and socialist modernity in other world regions. But more precisely it was also a decisive moment in the emergence of the global condition (Geyer/Bright 1995), i.e. the emergence of a new quality of entanglements between different world regions since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, leading to a world in which no society would be able to effectively withdraw from the effects of global flows of goods, people, ideas etc., which were complemented by parallel efforts by states as well as individual actors to control and manage these flows and to profit from them in the pursuit of their own quest for power and wealth. The global condition thus gave birth to modern globalisation in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bayly 2002; McKeown 2008), a process which is far from being shaped by the dissolution of borders only, but rather driven by the dialectic of de- and re-territorialisation (Middell/ Naumann 2010; Brenner 1999). Accordingly, the nation state rose as one powerful answer to the increasing density and quantity of these flows and thus also contributed to the concrete forms ‘globalisation’ took. The October Revolution played a key role in the shaping of this global condition, as it provided one vision of how to organise global flows and how to position societies in this global order – a vision which is only slowly attracting the attention of global historians, which have focussed during the last decades on the entanglements and networks between the transatlantic North and the Global South, leaving Eastern Europe as a blank spot on the research agenda. The revolution had furthermore a profound impact on their dialectics of the global – the parallel dynamics of opening and closing to global flows – faced by the Soviet Union: in the very same way that the October Revolu-

tion 'opened' Africa for socialist thinking and experiments, it also 'opened' the Soviet Union – and later the Eastern bloc – for more intensive and confusing encounters with 'Africa', which had deeply felt effects on the reformulation of what socialism was about.

Thus, the dynamics which the October revolution inspired had a double effect: they 'globalised' Soviet society and politics by making developments in other world regions part of the domestic story, and they contributed to the globalisation of socialism as a language with which to articulate social and political demands for welfare, security, political participation, economic and social modernisation, and a new international order. Some years ago, Frederick Cooper argued that 'modernity' has been so successful as a concept because it became a powerful claim-making device (Cooper 2010: 113-149). The same can be stated for socialism (Laidi 1988): the dynamics in the wake of the October Revolution transformed 'socialism' into a truly global, transnational project, pluralising it and challenging its Europe-centred orientation.

Thus, it is not the aim of this article to prove or disprove how successful the Soviet export of the socialist model of development was. What is at stake here, is rather to shed light on some of the aspects of how these transfers and circulations unfolded during the 1950s to the 1970s in the context of the Cold War and ongoing state building in Africa, and what effects these had on the conceptualisation of socialism as a model of development in the Soviet Union. With a focus on the academic production of knowledge on Africa in the Soviet Union, the article will trace how the encounters with 'Africa' have changed the conceptualisation both of the political, social and economic developments in the continent, and of socialism. For the globalisation of socialism as a claim-making device, it was also Soviet Africanist research which provided the tools for it – in the form of conceptual innovations, but also by participating in the transfer of knowledge to African societies. These were not isolated activities, but unfolded in the contact with African scholars, students and political activists, which thereby co-produced the theorisations of socialism(s) in Africa (Marung 2017). Co-production does not necessarily imply that African actors in fact co-authored Soviet theories in face-to-face interactions. The argument here is that Soviet Africanists had to deal with their – partly frustrating – experiences during field trips, international conferences, and visits of African

colleagues and students to the Soviet Union, which often demonstrated not only the limited applicability of their models to ‘African realities’, but also how difficult it could be for Soviet scholars to promote their claims in front of their African partners and in international arenas. These repeated experiences of academic as well as personal frustration became a driver for a change in Africanist conceptualisations of development and socialism in Africa. The presentation of the October Revolution as a model is an important case in point.

The flexibility and transformations of Soviet theorisations of socialist development in the Global South were already investigated during the closing decade of the Cold War, and Jerry Hough’s book remains an impressive and insightful study in this regard (Hough 1986). He demonstrated how Soviet scholars reacted to global dynamics, yet it is, in his opinion, mainly political events that triggered re-conceptualisations, which he also interprets as a result of change in Soviet leadership and inconsistencies in Marxist theory. Intended as a call for *détente* and a relaxation of US-American anxieties *vis-à-vis* the Soviet activities in Africa, Hough’s contribution is both an example of the wide-spread Cold War efforts of “knowing the enemy” (Engerman 2011b) and of a realist and state-centred perception of Cold War dynamics. What is argued here in addition, is that scholars were not only reacting to changing political realities, but to intra-academic as well as social and cultural dynamics in their field of expertise. They came to understand that Soviet socialism was not the only and undisputed model of development in the Global South, they were confronted with demands by African actors for a different kind of support than they could always appropriately provide, and they were witnessing the failures of Soviet socialism’s implementation in African states. This promoted a perpetual – although not always successful – learning process, which Hough also uncovered, in which, however, contacts with African scholars and students have a more important role to play.

In the following, I will shed light on how the October Revolution has been conceptualised by Soviet scholars specialising in Africa, focussing on their contributions published around the anniversaries of the revolution, the founding of the Soviet Union, and Lenin’s birthday, in the 1960s and 1970s. I will then proceed to analyse how conceptualisations of socialist development – emanating from the October Revolution – have been



adapted in the light of Africanist research and encounters with African colleagues, and will provide insight into the strategies and limits of this transfer in the context of scholarly activities.

## **2. The October Revolution as caesura and model for Africa**

Looking at the list of publications and events produced and organised by Soviet Africanists in relation to the anniversaries of the October Revolution, the founding of the Soviet Union, and Lenin's birthday, offers insights into how the revolution was integrated into a narrative of Africa's position in the global order and the Soviet Union's relations to it.<sup>2</sup> Two main patterns of these narratives can be discerned, which differentiate the simple perception of the revolution as an anti-imperialist upheaval.

Firstly, the October revolution was promoted as a caesura for world and African history. The year 1917 figured prominently as a watershed in the organisation of global history accounts (Kosev 1966; Yakovlev 1966), as well as of African history.<sup>3</sup> Together with the Russian revolutionary dynamics of 1905, which were, in international arenas such as UNESCO, presented as having a major impact on the anti-colonial movements in the Global South (Ivanov 1966; Miller 1966), the October Revolution was presented as a caesura in terms of inspiring a broader movement of decolonisation (Hilger 2017). Explicitly referring to – and rejecting – Wilson's role, Soviet scholars emphasised that it had been Lenin, not Wilson, who coined the slogan of national self-determination (Yakovlev 1966). The understanding of the October events as an anti-imperialist revolution, i.e. the Leninist legacy, was therefore also the main point of reference for actors in the Global South, who were with great interest looking at the development of the former colonial peripheries of the Russian empire (Gromyko 1980). In turn, it was exactly this legacy which was mobilised by Soviet diplomats and other elites, to promote the Soviet model in the Global South (Kalinovsky 2013; Kirasirova 2011).<sup>4</sup> As an anti-imperialist revolution, it was presented as a turning point, giving birth to a new form of international relations. This was rooted not only in the longer tradition of proletarian internationalism (Albert 2017; Dogliani 2017), which was based not on the cooperation of nation states, but rather on transnational

linkages between groups which were economically marginalised in their countries. This new kind of international relations, promoted not only by Soviet scholars, was claimed to emerge precisely because of the existence of a socialist state which would develop ties to other states – in particular those following a socialist path – ties resting not on national(ist) competition but on partnership and assistance in the struggle for independence, thus profoundly challenging the colonial order.<sup>5</sup> Presenting the October Revolution as an anti-imperialist event was particularly promoted in the wake of the Bandung conference in 1955 (Lee 2010) and the Sino-Soviet split (Radchenko 2009; Lüthi 2010), which provoked an intensive competition between Soviet and Chinese models of socialist development in the ‘Third World’ (Friedman 2015).

The second main pattern was more closely linked to domestic developments in the Soviet Union. Very soon, the understanding of the October revolution merged with the foundation of the USSR, and the revolution’s impact became equivalent with the foundation of the first socialist state.<sup>6</sup> In this narrative it symbolised the promise of overcoming backwardness, of successful state building, economic modernisation and independence, welfare and improvements in education and healthcare, of the stabilisation of national integration, and the solution of ethnic conflicts.<sup>7</sup> In the presentation of the October Revolution and in particular Lenin’s legacy, Soviet Africanists prepared lectures, which were published in French and English, to be distributed in African countries, and devoted attention to different aspects of the model, depending on the country addressed: Vasily G. Solodovnikov, e.g., discussed national liberation and Soviet-African relations in the case of Kenya, Tanzania and Egypt; Gleb B. Starushenko elaborated on social-economic development focussing on Algeria, Tunisia, Guinea and Burundi; P.N.Tret’iakov explained the economic and technical assistance of the Soviet Union to African countries, addressing Senegal, Mauritania and Marokko; Leonid D. Iablochikov prepared lectures on the solution of the national question, Lenin’s theory of proletarian internationalism, and the development of social relations for Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria.<sup>8</sup> It was thus not the revolution as such which was elaborated upon in these commemorative speeches, but questions of how to implement its assumed goals. Some 50 years after the event, it was more about the revolution’s legacies and

the proposed path of development, than the understanding of the revolutionary events themselves, which took centre stage.

The interpretation of the revolution as a model for state building and modernisation was complementary to the ambitions of postcolonial leaders seeking partners to boost their countries and economies into ‘modernity’. From their perspective, this promise of the October Revolution and of the success of state building in the post-colonial Soviet Union included hopes for economic aid as well as technical assistance, such as the training of specialists in economic planning.

“It is only when the more advanced socialist states appreciate and understand the needs and desires of the progressive forces of the newly independent and developing nations, along with the political realities and differing political systems operating in them, can these attempts [of a socialist transformation, S.M.] be made a success,”<sup>9</sup>

declared one Sri Lankan participant at an international conference devoted to the celebration of the founding of the USSR in Tashkent in 1972, and specified this in his call for economic aid. Transferring competencies in economic planning – in addition to gaining economic aid – was not, however, a purely Soviet specialty, but part of many economic programmes for newly independent, developing countries devised by Western donors, in their cases rooted in traditions of colonial development, which found its way into the development schemes of international organisations in the early Cold War (Webster 2011). The interest of African elites in training in economic planning (Eckert 2008) could therefore not be equated with a decision to build socialism in their countries, but rather reflected their desire to acquire competences in the management of post-colonial conditions.

From the Soviet Africanists’ perspective, there were two main conceptual innovations with which they tried to reconcile the Marxist-Leninist theory of socialist development with the complexities of post-colonial African dynamics: the non-capitalist path to development and the concept of *mnogoukladnost*’ (multistructurality). Both models were rooted in Leninist theorisations of the development of Russian and Soviet economy (Hough 1986; Piazza 1975), but both were further elaborated as an effect of

the expansion of Africanist research and experiences with African developments (Marung 2017; Friedman 2015).

The concept of the non-capitalist path to development was introduced in order to deal with the theoretical and political question of how to proceed towards a socialist form of social, economic and political organisation without passing through capitalist development, as the stagist logic of Marxism suggested. This question gained new relevance in the face of the superpowers' competition for the right model of modernisation (Westad 2007), and Soviet Africanists in different institutes intensified their efforts to deal with this concept (Guzevatyj 1963; Avakov 1974; Solodovnikov et.al. 1975).<sup>10</sup> Against this background, the concept of the non-capitalist path to development was re-introduced – after having been banned in the 1930s and 1940s by Stalin – both as a political doctrine and as part of the scholarly agenda with the aim of identifying drivers for socialist change in Africa (Hough 1986). While this concept was understood as representing a transitional form on the path to socialism, *mnogoukladnost'* (Engerman 2011a; Hough 1983; Valkenier 1986) was seen rather as an analytical tool.<sup>11</sup> It had been used to describe the mixed character of the Soviet economy after the revolution, from which specific challenges for socialist economic management ensued. The new economic policy (NEP) drafted by Lenin reacted to the co-presence of capitalist, feudalist and socialist modes of production and opened the space of manoeuvre for a combination of market-oriented activities with economic planning, aiming at the redistribution of wealth, but in particular at promoting economic modernisation (industrialisation) and solving the problem of the lack of capital to finance this ambition.

Although the concept of *mnogoukladnost'* had been marginalised for the interpretation of Soviet history, for which it had originally been developed, during the 1960s (Hildermeier 1998: 816; Plaggenborg 2006: 114), it became all the more popular in Africanist research. The character of the newly emerging economies on Africa was described exactly in these terms (Levkovskij 1970). That the more analytical concept of *mnogoukladnost'* became more popular during the 1970s, reflected the increasing frustration and caution with regard to developments in Africa, although the 1970s had seen the spread on the continent of regimes declaring themselves to be Marxist-Leninist. While certainly welcoming these moves towards the socialist camp, the analysis of economic transformations

and the limited success of modernisation in these societies warned Soviet observers of excessive optimism. In addition, the looming economic crisis in the socialist camp promoted a more pragmatic and interest-oriented approach towards African states, many of them producing raw material also needed in Eastern Europe (Lorenzini 2014). The limited potential of the Soviet Union both in the international economic order and as a donor massively restricted its capacity to change the patterns of economic globalisation (Sanchez-Sibony 2014), as well as to ignite the socialist transformation they had hoped for. Soviet Africanists were well aware of these deficits and intensified their efforts to analyse the reasons for this delay.<sup>12</sup>

### **3. Bumpy roads: strategies of transfer**

Not only for the expansion and professionalisation of Soviet African Studies, but also for the strengthening and diversification of contacts between Soviet and African scholars, students and politicians, the foundation of the Africa Institute at the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1959 was an important innovation. From its inception, the institute's task was not only to develop Soviet research on Africa and provide in this way assistance and urgently needed knowledge for political decision makers, but also to strengthen the ties with African societies, in particular with scholars, intellectuals, as well as political elites (Solodovnikov 2011; Mazov 1999).<sup>13</sup> In his presentation of the institute's history at a conference in 1974, the economist Vasily G. Solodovnikov – the institute's second director after the death of the historian Ivan I. Potekhin in 1964 – described the increasing professionalisation and diversification of research at the institute, which started with three departments on contemporary problems, history, and information, but rapidly expanded its branches to include economic development and planning, economic cooperation between the Soviet Union and African states, social and political developments, international relations, country specific departments including Arab states, culture, technical-economic research, as well as state studies and law.<sup>14</sup> In the mid-1960s, research on the non-capitalist path to development became one of the main research avenues of the institute. The institute's staff grew from 18 scholars in 1960 to 150 in 1974.

Yet, the success story which Solodovnikov presented, was unthinkable without the close cooperation with African academic centres and colleagues, as he explained (Marung 2013). Providing access to primary sources, exchanging books, as well as offering assistance for field research, made African partners indispensable for the Soviet scholars. Finally, the institute became an important meeting place for African and Soviet actors. Most Africans travelling to Moscow also stopped at the institute. Some of them gave lectures or reported, in unofficial conversations, on developments in their countries, sometimes also trying to persuade scholars to take a certain position in conflict situations.<sup>15</sup> Others received academic degrees at the institute for original studies (Ukazatel' 1983)<sup>16</sup> – in most cases on their home countries – thus also contributing to the academic knowledge on Africa in the Soviet Union. Again others spent shorter periods of time at the institute as interns, which included travels across the Soviet Union to inspect the successes of socialist development.<sup>17</sup> Their itineraries extended mostly to Central Asia, where the visitors were supposed to make themselves familiar with the Soviet variant of post-colonial transformation. Interestingly, these kinds of trips were designed specifically for visitors from African countries. Western visitors were, in contrast, mostly taken to Leningrad and Moscow only, to admire the monuments both of Russian and Soviet history. This illustrated the Soviet mapping of socialist modernity, and the diversification of models to be presented. Central Asia was mobilised as a blueprint for post-colonial socialist development in Africa, while the Western regions of the former empire were inscribed into a narrative of Western civilization.

The exchange of books between African academic centres and the Africa institute represented another important avenue of transfer. Soviet institutions invested enormous efforts, not only to export propaganda material in the narrow sense to African countries. As they were aware of the competition with not only Western sources but also with Chinese ones, they planned, in addition, to spread academic publications both on the Soviet Union and its patterns of development as well as Soviet Africanist research across the continent. Publishing Houses such as Progress publishers were the most important instruments in the African market (Ottaway 1978), but books were often given in the context of visits to and from African partners, as well.<sup>18</sup> Yet, this ambition suffered from a limita-

tion of resources to translate Russian texts into French, English or African languages, although the call to increase investment into these activities belonged to the mantra of Soviet scholars up to the 1980s (Marung 2013). Soviet publications shared a marginalised status<sup>19</sup> with African contributions on the international academic market (Eckert 2001). The export of books – in addition to radio and television broadcasting (Mazov 2010: 16ff.) – nevertheless helped to circulate Soviet knowledge and conceptualisations. This, however, was not a one-way street. Soviet scholars were not only exporting books, but were exchanging them for academic works held by libraries in Africa. This included Western as well as African sources Soviet scholars were eager to get hold of, given the limited resources for expanding the collections of the institute's library, as well as the restricted access for many of these scholars to travel to African countries.<sup>20</sup>

A further arena for the transfer of conceptualisations and knowledge was provided by collaborative projects in the framework of international organisations. Here, UNESCO played a prominent role, in addition to other UN agencies responsible for development and planning in Africa, such as the African Institute for Economic Planning and Development (IDEP) in Dakar.<sup>21</sup> UNESCO provided a peculiar arena of exchange between scholars from the humanities and social sciences, as it opened, with its broader interest in culture and development, room for larger conceptual discussions and more intensive social interaction between scholars from East, West and the Global South. In contrast to the IDEP, for example, African scholars played here a more important role in the establishment of the agenda and the unfolding of the organisational dynamics. Two of its major international projects, the writing of a History of Mankind and the writing of a General History of Africa, offered a space in which Soviet scholars could advertise their positions. After first ideas for a History of Mankind had been discussed in UNESCO as early as the late 1940s, the Scientific Commission for the envisaged six volumes met for the first time in 1952 (Duedahl 2011; Naumann 2014; Betts 2015). While the Soviet Union joined UNESCO in 1954 and so had not been part of the project from its beginning, it became all the more active from then on. The Soviet historian Alexander Zvorikine, from the Institute of History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, joined the Commission as Vice-president in 1956.<sup>22</sup> Soviet scholars engaged particularly in the writing of the 6th

volume on the 20th century published in 1966, which was edited by Caroline Ware (USA), K.M.Panikkar (India) and Jan M.Romein (The Netherlands). Soviet insistence on a stronger representation of the non-European world finally led to the decision to draft a supplementary volume focussing on the Global South.<sup>23</sup>

It may not be surprising that immediately after Zvorikine joined the Commission of the Mankind-Project as Vice-President, an intensive discussion ensued about how to integrate the socialist world and the Soviet Union, with its particular historical experience, into the new global narrative. This, however, was at the same time related to how the Soviets wanted to present the socialist model of development to the world, the Global South in particular. In the extensive comments to volume 6, for instance, Soviet scholars struggled to correct the interpretation of the history of collectivisation and Stalin's role in the 1920s and 1930s. They emphasised that Stalin had committed a number of crucial mistakes. The presentation of the Stalinist strategy in the volume, they complained, was problematic in its positive evaluation, and explained how the Leninist policy was the correct way of transforming the country's economy and agriculture (Tikhomirov 1966).

More surprising, however, at least for contemporary Western academics, was that Soviet scholars invested an enormous effort in trying to transform the narratives about the non-Western World, and Africa in particular.<sup>24</sup> Soviet scholars – world historians, Oriental Studies scholars, African Studies scholars and anthropologists – proposed a new periodisation for all of the volumes, but in particular for Vol. 6, suggesting a Marxist stagist logic from slave societies through feudalism to capitalism.<sup>25</sup> For the 20th century, they suggested a 'Leninian moment' as the main caesura, proposing it as the onset of a global revolution towards socialism and decolonisation. Furthermore, they wanted more emphasis to be put on social movements, the labour movement in particular, as a driver for historical change. They further underlined the centrality of material conditions for cultural and scientific development. In particular, they wished to strengthen the investigation of transregional transfers and entanglements, and accused the presentation of being Eurocentric, and not giving enough voice to the agency from the Global South in shaping European fates.



An intensive debate unfolded about how to present and conceptualise the colonial world in global (cultural) history. Commenting on first drafts of the manuscript for Volume 5 on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, edited by the French historian Charles Morazé, Zvorikine argued:

“For us the concept of ‘white civilizations’ is extremely dubious. First and foremost, it does not fulfil the requirements of historical accuracy, as it is clear that the peoples who do not belong to the white race also have made their contribution to present day European civilization. It is certainly both possible and indispensable to trace apparent cultural phenomena and qualities, rather than those which can be ascribed to whichever race.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, he not only wanted to suggest a different conceptualisation – not of racially connoted and hierarchised “civilizations” but of equal “cultures” – but also emphasised the role of transregional entanglements in global history. The idea of hierarchisation, however, was at that time still defended by Western scholars, among them the first director of UNESCO and initiator of the Mankind-Project, Julian Huxley, who was asked for advice by the commission. He explained: “It is not true that all African peoples have ‘rich cultural traditions’. Some are truly primitive.”<sup>27</sup>

A further issue of contention arose around the problem of how to present colonialism in the volumes. Soviet scholars had massively criticised the underestimation of anti-colonial movements and demanded a more thorough discussion of the atrocities of Western colonialism in Africa. Huxley – as retired director being more outspoken and less constrained by political considerations – mocked these claims:

“If mention is to be made of ‘colonialism’ then reference should also be made to what may be called ‘internal colonialism’ which is in the shape of exploitation of conquered or backward ethnic groups by the dominant party in the country or region. This is so in many Latin American countries and also within the USSR; the latest example of it is China’s action in Tibet.”<sup>28</sup>

Western editors of the volumes struggled with the insistence of Soviet scholars, interpreting this as political propaganda and doubting the academic quality of their arguments: “...if we are treated like ‘cold war’

adversaries rather than sincere scholars, we shall obviously find it difficult to make best use of what the Soviet scholars have to offer,” stated the annoyed Caroline Ware.<sup>29</sup> The Commission, however, had to act within the framework of UNESCO and take the Soviet position into consideration – particularly as scholars from the Global South explicitly supported the Soviet pressure.<sup>30</sup> As Guy Métraux, the commission’s general secretary, conceded: “...we are more or less duty-bound as an International Commission to take the views of the Russian member into full consideration.”<sup>31</sup>

In the Mankind-Project, Soviet scholars set out to enhance the importance of pre-colonial African history in the overall narrative. They also sought to address the role of Africans in the anticolonial struggles, trying to establish an interpretation of these movements along the lines of Marxist theory. Finally, they put particular emphasis on the social, political and economic transformations which occurred after the independence of African countries, with the intention of demonstrating the agency of African people and to expose neo-colonial practices of the West. The Soviet Union was presented as a model for modernisation and for a successful overcoming of underdevelopment, characteristic of the imperial past. Therefore, the scholars claimed that the Soviet Union should assume a leading role in shaping the world’s postcolonial future and the future of the international humanities, and firmly rooted this in the experience of the October Revolution – as the model’s hour of birth – and the ensuing transformations of the Soviet state.

If Soviet scholars had been very active in UNESCO’s Mankind-Project, their role in the later Africa Project (Vansina 1993; Maurel 2014) seemed less central. The only Soviet member in the Scientific Commission was Alexander Letnev, senior researcher at the Africa Institute in Moscow. Among the few Soviet authors contributing to the eighth volume was Apollon Davidson, who had moved from the Africa Institute to the Department for African History at the Institute of World History of the Academy, which had been established in 1971 (Davidson/Filatova 2007). In the context of this project – which had been launched in 1964 by UNESCO after fierce criticism of the Mankind publications as Eurocentric, thus marginalising scholars and perspectives from the Global South (Naumann 2014) – African scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Adu Boahen and Ali Mazrui took the lead. From the socialist camp there were fewer Soviet scholars but,

for instance, colleagues from Czechoslovakia who became more actively involved, such as Ivan Hrbek, a specialist in medieval Arab history and culture who was highly appreciated as member of the Scientific Commission, often asked to give advice, and assigned editor of the third volume. This difficult struggle to gain recognition, not only in Western arenas but also *vis-à-vis* African actors, formed a recurrent pattern of Soviet-African encounters.

Academic exchange in such international forums was complemented by efforts to attract African students to Soviet institutions of higher education. These attempts went back to the founding of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East under Comintern guidance (McClellan 1993, 2007). During the Cold War, the University of Friendship of the Peoples was installed as the major Soviet institution to provide training for the future elites of the newly independent states (Rupprecht 2010; Kret 2013; Katsakioris 2007a; Katsakioris 2007b; Hilger 2011). The training of African elites at Soviet institutions was complemented by efforts to establish training centres in African countries,<sup>32</sup> as well as by courses offered by Soviet scholars – among them Africanists – both in the Soviet Union and in African countries. These courses – often dealing with questions of economic planning and development – were addressed to scholars, analysts, staff of ministries as well as political decision makers, and organised in many cases in the context of international organisations, the UN in particular. Reports of Soviet scholars travelling to Africa – such as Eduard Nukhovich, who was invited to give courses at the Dakar-based IDEP – often reflected the difficult situation Soviet scholars had to deal with in competition with Western and African colleagues, including being confronted with a number of prejudices about the Soviet Union, which massively impaired their self-confident position to ‘export’ the Soviet model of economic planning and development.<sup>33</sup> One obstacle for Soviet-African encounters remained the linguistic deficits of Soviet Africanists, but these were not the only ones. The institute’s vice-director, Irina P. Jastrebova, returning from a conference in September 1965 in Dar es Salaam, explained:

“There is not only a language barrier between the African scientific community and Soviet Africanists. It is not seldom the empirical basis, which poses a

challenge. Generalizations and theorizations, which are only weakly based on concrete African material, often fail to unfold their strength for the African reader in the way it is elaborated.”<sup>34</sup>

Such experiences and frustrations resulted in increased efforts for language training and the strengthening of empirical work in Africa and with African sources, the access to which proved to be a challenge throughout the Cold War. Thus, the institute’s staff attempted to enhance its resources for travel as well as to lobby government agencies for more financial and political support for their trips to the continent (Marung 2013).

It was, however, not only the deficits of linguistic and academic competencies which posed a challenge for Soviet Africanists, but also alternative interpretations of African scholars and activists, with which Soviet scholars had to contend. Even at commemorative events, which were organised in the Soviet Union to celebrate its international merits, alternative, nuanced positions were articulated by African participants and had to be digested by their Soviet hosts. Although, for example, most of the African and Asian delegates to the 1972 conference in Tashkent agreed on the importance of the October Revolution as a caesura for anti-colonial struggles in the Global South and as providing a model for development, it was not taken as a blueprint for African and Asian revolutions *per se*, but rather as an ‘inspiration’ from which to develop autonomous paths: “Because of the differences between our background and those of other socialist-oriented states our socialist paths will no wonder be different from those followed by other comrades. But the ultimate goal of all of us who are so dedicated is to develop, build and maintain classless nations in which every soul enjoys respect and dignity at and to the same degree as any other fellow being,” explained F. Myahoza from Tanzania.<sup>35</sup> And Peter A. Nangolo from Namibia added: “We also agree that ‘revolutions cannot be exported’, but all the same the socialist changes in the USSR and its international significance are inspiring developments, support comes not only from the Soviet Union but from other socialist countries too and this could be attributed to what unfolded here in this country 50 years ago.”<sup>36</sup> The SWAPO<sup>37</sup> representative thus also hinted at further players in the complex networks of socialist circulation. Without Nangolo explicitly mentioning them, this included not only other European socialist states, but socialist

states in the Global South as well, such as Mongolia, Vietnam and Cuba, all three being members of the Comecon (Lorenzini 2014). While Soviet Africanists incorporated Mongolia in arguments about how socialist development could unfold in “formerly backward countries”<sup>38</sup> – also because this country was part of the “East”, with which their field of expertise was related (Marung 2012) – hints about their perception of Cuba or Vietnam are limited, probably also because these were located outside their area of study. They were, in any case, not treated as equal partners in the export of the model, but as showcases.

Other occasions were international seminars for African specialists, financed by the UN and organised by the Africa Institute. Such a two week seminar to make African experts familiar with the experience of the Soviet Union in the field of the financing of economic development in September 1967, gathered 23 participants from 16 African and three Caribbean countries, not only those of socialist orientation. Among them were high ranking representatives of ministries of finance, planning commissions, development aid departments, banking commissions, and technical aid and international relations departments. The actual seminar, with lectures by representatives and scholars from GOSPLAN<sup>39</sup>, IMEMO<sup>40</sup>, the Soviet Ministry of Finance, and the Soviet National Bank, took only two days. The rest of the stay was devoted to visiting museums and theatres in Moscow before the group left for Uzbekistan, where they inspected a textile factory, a kolkhos, a hydroelectric power station and an irrigation plant. Furthermore, they met with representatives from the Uzbek GOSPLAN, from the Uzbek Ministries of Health and Education, and from the Uzbek Society of International Friendship. Back in Moscow, they went to see a machine building plant, the famous candy factory “Red October”, as well as the Africa Institute.<sup>41</sup>

The seminar was led by the institute’s director, Solodovnikov, and its senior researcher, Tokareva. In his introductory lecture, Solodovnikov alluded to a number of conditions which had to be fulfilled in order to make economic planning effective, many of them which were not met by weakly developed African countries. The problems he mentioned included the presence of “reactionary” forces, but also the condition of mixed economies, in which different modes of productions overlapped or competed. He stressed the role of the state and the state sector as a driver for economic

development and for the formation of capital which was urgently needed. Yet, instead of presenting the Soviet historical experience and current practice as a coherent blueprint for economic development in newly independent African states, Solodovnikov developed a more nuanced interpretation. He argued that a simple translation of Soviet methods to African contexts did not seem advisable, but required a careful analysis of local conditions, including the position of the political leadership, the territorial structure of the state, geographical and climate factors, the availability of competent specialists, as well as the international situation and the access to foreign assistance. Reflecting on the historical trajectory of the Soviet Union in the 1920s, he reconstructed how the Soviet government had to experiment in its economic policy under the special conditions of war communism. Lenin's NEP he portrayed as an important transitional phase towards socialist development, given the mixed character of the Soviet economy. This, Solodovnikov suggested, could now be a road to follow for the new African states.<sup>42</sup> The NEP was presented as the immediate translation into practice, by Lenin, of the goals of the October Revolution. The learning experience of the Soviet Union – including the overcoming of the Stalinist excesses – was portrayed as the basis upon which the newly independent states in Africa could develop their own solutions. As argued above, during the 1970s the October Revolution became increasingly a shorthand for socialist state building and modernisation, which is also reflected in the focus on the immediate post-revolutionary decades in the public presentations, and less on the complexities of the revolution itself.

In contrast to the ritualised propaganda circulated on other occasions, this differentiation, as well as the combination of an analysis of domestic trajectories and their adaptation to African contexts, was certainly also a tribute to the international setting of the seminar, with UN representatives being present, as well as specialists from countries having not decided for a socialist path of development during that time, such as Ethiopia, Cameroon and Nigeria. However, this kind of argumentation was not an exception, when looking at archival material documenting discussions at conferences and meetings among Soviet scholars. Here, it was particularly towards the early 1970s that the awareness of the complexities of African developments, as well as the limited potential of Soviet development as a model grew, and provoked the search for new conceptualisations and the call for more careful

analysis, based on primary data and field research (Gavrilov 1974). Hence, it was also the exchange with fellow scholars from Africa and the West, not only political dynamics such as regime changes in Africa or power struggles in the Soviet Union, which drove the search for a more fitting conceptualisation and empirical substantiation of Soviet Africanists' claims.

#### **4. The co-production of socialism as a claim-making device**

The October Revolution had promoted the globalisation of socialism and reshaped the relations of the Soviet Union with other world regions, Africa in particular, but this had considerable effects for the reformulation of the socialist project. Concepts of socialism were co-produced by African scholars and students, as they met Soviet experts – at conferences, seminars, and during field trips. In these settings, Soviet scholars often had to apprehend the gap between the great ambition to shape and elucidate socialist development in Africa, and the limited resources and capacities they were able to invest. This co-production resulted from the Soviet scholars' digestion of field trips, visits to international conferences, and meetings with African scholars and activists 'at home'. The puzzlement and frustration about the deficits of Soviet Africanists' expertise, as well as about the scepticism they were confronted with by African partners, effectively impacted on the research agendas of Soviet African Studies.

Socialism had been used as a claim-making device, which was not only competing with the Western modernisation project (Westad 2007), but showed in many respects considerable similarities (Engerman 2011a). What made the socialist vision specific was linked to the Soviet interpretation of the October Revolution: its anti-imperialist message on the one hand and the modernisation and state-building project in the Soviet Union as a de facto post-colonial transformation on the other. That the Soviet Union seemingly had to solve similar problems in the past, like many contemporary African countries, made the Soviet proposal so inspiring and attractive for African partners. At the same time, these comparisons made Soviet Africanists rethink their theorisations of African trajectories. The implicit provocation this could entail, however, was to cause the rethinking of domestic transformations in the Soviet Union, too.

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- 2 Plan meropriiatii direktsii, partbiuro i mestkoma Instituta Afriki AN SSSR v sviazi s 50-letiem obrazovaniia SSSR [Plan of activities of the directorate, the party office and the local party committee of the Africa institute of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR], ARAN, F. 2010, Op 1, D. 330; Tematika lektsii i spisok lektorov dlia stran Afriki (v sviazi so 100-letiem so dnia rozhdenia V.I.Lenina) [Themes of lectures and list of lecturers for African countries (in relation to the 100th anniversary of Lenin's birthday)], ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D 146; Perspektivnyi plan nauchno-issledovatel'skikh rabot Instituta Afriki AN SSSR na 1966-1970 gody [Perspective plan of scientific and research tasks of the Africa Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR for the years 1966-1970], ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D. 79.
- 3 Protokoly No. 1-13 zasedaniia sektora istorii [Protocols No. 1-13 of the meetings of the department of history], 7.4.1960 - 30.12.1960, ARAN, F. 2010, Op.1, D. 6
- 4 Tezisy dokladov na mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii "Opyt sotsialisticheskikh preobrazovaniia v SSSR i ego mezhdunarodnoe znachenie" [Papers of the international conference "The experience of socialist transformation in the USSR and its international significance"] (16-19.10.1972, Tashkent). ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D. 291.
- 5 Perspektivnyi plan (note 2), Tezisy dokladov (note 4).
- 6 Tezisy dokladov (note 4).
- 7 Perspektivnyi plan (note 2).
- 8 Tematika lektsii (note 2).
- 9 Tezisy dokladov (note 4).
- 10 Gavrilov (1974), Stenogramma 2-i Vsesoiuznoi konferentsii afrikanistov [Short reports of the 2nd All-Union conference of Africanists], ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D. 383,
- 11 Beliaev, I.P. (1974): ARAN F. 2010 Op. 1 Delo 385; Tiul'panov, S.I. (1974): Report on the work in the section on economic problems, ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D. 384.
- 12 Perspektivnyi plan (note 2).
- 13 Solodnikov, Vasily G. (1974): Stenogramma 2-i Vsesoiuznoi konferentsii afrikanistov [Short reports of the 2nd All-Union conference of Africanists], ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D. 383.
- 14 *ibidem*.
- 15 Zapis' besedy s Ganuem E.E.Mensa, doktorom filosofii i iurisprudentsii, vypusknikom Universiteta druzhby narodov im. Patrica Lumumby, rabotaiushchim v nastojashchee vremia v Londonskom universitete [Record of the talks with the Ghanaian E.E.Mensah, Doctor of Philosophy and Law, graduate of the Friendship University and currently working at a London university], ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D 149.



- 16 Solodvnikov (1974) (note 13).
- 17 Programma poezdki po SSSR stazherov Instituta Afriki AN SSSR Komy Kennet i Abdel'bassita Takhira [Programme of travel through the USSR of the Africa Institute's trainees Koma Kennet and Abdelbassit Takhir], ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D. 148.
- 18 Spisok literatury (izdania sovetskikh avtorov), predannoi Iu. N. Vinokurovym v nauchnye tsenry Respubliki Bereg Slonovoi Kosti [List of literature (by Soviet authors), which were given by Iu.N.Vinokurov to the scientific centres in Ivory Cost], ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D. 151.
- 19 Otchet o poezdke v Kamerune na Pervuiu Mezhdunarodnuiu vystavku afrikan-skoi knigi [Report about the trip to Cameroon to the First International Fair of African Books], (ARAN), F. 2010, Op. 1, D. 151.
- 20 Spisok literatury, predannoi v Biblioteku Instituta Afriki [List of literature, given to the library of the Africa Institute], ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D. 151; Spravka o sovetskikh uchebnykh zavedeniakh i tsentrakh v Afrike, ikh profile, kolichestve uchashchikhsia i prepodavatelei [Information about Soviet educational institutions and centres in Africa, about their profile, the number of participants and teachers], ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D. 146.
- 21 Soviet scholars were together with American, French and Polish experts involved in the consultations preparing the establishment of this institute in October 1963: Otchet ob uchastii v soveshchanii v Dakare po voprosu sozdaniia Afrikanskogo instituta ekonomicheskogo razvitiia i planiovaniia [Report about the participation in the consultation about the question of the establishment of an African institute for economic development and planning in Dakar], ARAN, F. 2010, Op. 1, D. 66.
- 22 Topchiev (1955): Letter to Carneiro (20 September), UNESCO archives (UA), SCHM 13, File 2.51 (6).
- 23 SCH/Memo/No. 709: Commentaires du Prof. A. Zvorikine (URSS) sur le principe de structure de six volumes de l'Histoire du Développement Scienifique et culturel de l'Humanité (8 May 1956), UA, SCHM 1 File 0.25, 0.26; Information Paper No. 30: Resolution adoptée par le Bureau au cours de sa 16e Réunion sur le Volume VI (11 Janvier 1962), UA, SCHM 2 File 0.30.
- 24 Zvorikine (1962): Letter to Métraux, 30 November, UA, SCHM 22, File 2.629.91 (3).
- 25 Métraux (1956): Letter to Ware, 24 January, UA, SCHM 34, File 2.83 (21).
- 26 Original in French, own translation. Zvorikine (1956): Letter to Morazé, 3 January 1956, UA, SCHM 21, File 2.629.91 (1)
- 27 Huxley (1959a): Letter to Carneiro, 18 November 1959, UA, SCHM 22, File 2.629.91 (3).
- 28 *ibidem*.
- 29 Ware (1959): Letter to Carneiro, 9 October 1959 (Confidential), UA, SCHM 22, File 2.629.91 (3).
- 30 Majumdar (1959): Letter to Métraux, 23 November 1959, UA, SCHM 22, File 2.629.91 (3).
- 31 Métraux (1956): Letter to Ware, 10 February 1956, UA, SCHM 34, File 2.83 (21).
- 32 Spravka (note 20).

- 33 Otchet o nauchnoj komandirovke v Respubliku Senegal Nuchovicha E.S. [Report about the scientific trip to the Republic of Senegal of E.S. Nukhovich] and Cours d'ete pour etudiants 1966 - Plan des cours du Professeurs de l'Universite de Moscou Mr. Noukhovich, ARAN, F. 2010 Op. 1, D 87.
- 34 Original in Russian, own translation. Otchet o rabote mezhdunarodnogo kongressa po isucheniiu istorii Afiki Dar-es-Salam, Tanzanija, 26/IX – 2/X- 1965 g. [Report about the proceedings of the international congress of African history in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 26 September to 2 October 1965], ARAN, F. 2010. Op.1 Delo 66.
- 35 Tezisy Dokladov (note 4).
- 36 ibidem.
- 37 South West Africa People's Organization.
- 38 Tezisy Dokladov (note 4).
- 39 The Soviet State Planning Committee.
- 40 The Institute of World Economy and International Relations at the Soviet Academy of Sciences.
- 41 Programma Mezhdunarodnogo Seminara OON po oznakomleniiu spetsialistov iz razvivaiushchikhsia stran s opytom SSSR v oblasti finansirovaniia ekonomicheskogo razvitiia [Programme of the international seminar of the UN to make specialists from developing countries familiar with the experience of the USSR in the field of financing of economic development], ARAN, F.2010, Op.1, D. 118; Otchet o razkhodach na provedenie Mezhdunarodnogo Seminara OON [Report about the spending for the proceedings of the international seminar of the UN], ARAN, F.2010, OPI, D. 97.
- 42 Programma (note 41).

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*ABSTRACT Die Oktoberrevolution spielte eine wichtige Rolle bei der Globalisierung des Sozialismus. Die Bemühungen sowjetischer AfrikanistInnen, die Revolution und ihr Erbe mit Blick auf afrikanische Entwicklungen zu deuten, waren Teil dieses Transformationsprozesses. Je weiter sich die Revolution in die Vergangenheit entfernte, desto mehr wurde sie zur Kurzformel für postkoloniale Entwicklung und die Positionierung von Gesellschaften in der globalen Ordnung. Der Artikel untersucht die Zirkulation dieser Ideen von den 1950er bis in die 1970er Jahre und wie sie das Verständnis sozialistischer Entwicklung in der Sowjetunion beeinflusste. Die Begegnungen sowjetischer AfrikanistInnen in und mit ‚Afrika‘ waren bei der Ko-Produktion dieser Konzepte zentral: akademische als auch persönliche Marginalisierungserfahrungen waren ständiger Antrieb für die Rekonzeptionalisierung von Entwicklung und Sozialismus in Afrika.*

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