

Review Article

‘Catalyst, Stake, Pretext, Symbol, Mask’: On the History of Relations between the Comintern, the Soviet Union and Southern Africa

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Apollon Davidson, Irina Filatova, Valentin Gorodnov, Sheridan Johns (eds), *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History. Vol. 1: Socialist Pilgrims to Bolshevik Fightsoldiers, 1919–1930* (London, Frank Cass, 2003), lxii + 263 pp., £65.00 hardback, ISBN 0-7146-5280-6. *Vol. 2: Bolshevik Fightsoldiers to Victims of Bolshevisation, 1931–1939* (London, Frank Cass, 2003), lxi + 304 pp., £65.00 hardback, ISBN 0-7146-5281-4

Valentin Gorodnov (compiler), Apollon Davidson (ed.), *Komintern i Afrika: dokumenty* [The Communist International and Africa: Documents] (St. Petersburg, Izdat. Aleteia, 2003), 352 pp., ISBN 5-89329-547-1

Apollon Davidson (editor-in-chief), *Stanovlenie otechestvennoi afrikanistiki, 1920-e - nachalo 1960-x* [The Formation of Domestic African Studies, 1920s to Early 1960s] (Moscow, Nauka, 2003), 391 pp., ISBN 5-02-008900-1

Afrikanistika XX veka: vremia, liudi, vzgliady. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii [African Studies in the Twentieth Century: The Times, the People, the Opinions. Materials from an International Scientific Conference] (Moscow, Institut Vseobshchei Istorii, 2002), 256 pp., ISBN 5-94067-068-7

In the introduction to *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History* (hereafter *SACI*), Apollon Davidson, Irina Filatova, Valentin Gorodnov and Sheridan Johns remark that the Communist International (the Comintern) ‘may seem to belong to a very distant era’. It was nevertheless, they continue – assuming that we accept that communism was itself a noteworthy phenomenon – ‘without doubt one of the most important global organisations ever to have existed’ [*Vol. 1*, p. 1]. This is a large claim, and presumably underpins the short historical account of Comintern activity in South Africa in the rest of the introduction. It also belongs to a class of claims about Soviet and communist history that has come under increasingly critical scrutiny in recent years. As Neal Ascherson has observed, it is not so long since

it seemed incontrovertible that the most significant event in the 20th century was the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917. Now it is highly controvertible. Thirteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the view is current that the Revolution achieved almost nothing of its original intentions.¹

Ascherson goes on to argue that the revolution and its consequences are nowadays often assessed on an uncomplicated humanitarian scale that leads ineluctably to the conclusion that the implicit political bargain involved – suffering now for the sake of an improvement for future generations – is morally unacceptable. But he cautions that ‘to see Soviet history merely as inherited homicide is an excuse for not thinking about it’.²

1 N. Ascherson, ‘Victory in Defeat’, *London Review of Books*, 26, 23 (2 December 2004), available at http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n23/asch01_.html [9 February 2005].

2 Ascherson, ‘Victory’.

The publication of the books under review offers us an opportunity to see how post-Soviet Russian scholars are meeting the challenge of 'thinking about' the Soviet past in the special context of the historical relationship between, on one side, the international communist movement, the now defunct Soviet Union, and present-day Russia; and on the other, colonial and post-colonial Africa. In African countries, including South Africa, the Soviet historical trajectory as 'catalyst, stake, pretext, symbol, [and] mask for African social and political struggles'³ was and continues to be reflected and perceived in characteristic local ways.⁴

The writing of these works by Russian academics was enabled, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, by three key changes in the conditions under which they worked.⁵ Apart from the determinant opening of the archives, itself a highly politicised, uneven and problematic process, the crucial changes were, first, a sharp move away from the monothetic model of Soviet Marxism, with its required adherence to the Party line, towards the kind of pluralism of thought common in the west; and second, freedom to enter the international community of scholarship to work, contest and debate with non-communist foreigners.⁶

The expression 'the opening of the archives' seems to point to a relatively simple linear process of increased access to formerly secret materials, but the Russian experience since 1991 has in reality been uneven, marked as much by broken promises and contested rulings as by systematic declassification.⁷ Nevertheless, despite the anomalies and irregularities, 'researchers familiar with the Soviet archival scene in pre-1991 decades will all admit that access to Russian archives and their finding aids is now much more similar to the situation in other parts of the world than they encountered before the age of *glasnost* and *perestroika*'.⁸ For one thing, you can get in.

Getting in includes, of course, access to the previously super-secret Comintern archive, preserved through the decades up to 1991 by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The archive turns out to be vast, with an estimated 55 million pages in nearly 90 different languages, dating from the organisation's foundation in 1919 until its dissolution in 1943. Afterwards, the records were handed over to the CPSU Central Committee, and later passed into the keeping of its *Tsentral'nyi partiinyi arkhiv* (Central Party Archive or TsPA) under the *Institut marksizma-leninizma pri TsK KPSS* (Institute of Marxism-Leninism or IML). This archive has been open to researchers since late 1991, and online access to an at least partial database of metadata and scanned pages has been available since August 2004.⁹

The documents are organised in 237,000 files (*dela*), grouped into larger *fondy* or collections. Altogether, the Comintern held seven congresses (the last in 1935), and the Executive Committee (ECCI) had thirteen plenary meetings (the last in 1933). Much of the public documentation of these meetings has been available to English-speakers for many years in the three-volume Degras collection, but vastly wider access to internal documentation opens up a varied range of possibilities.¹⁰ For

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- 3 J. Copans, 'The USSR, Alibi or Instrument for Black African States?', in Z. Lăidi (ed.), *The Third World and the Soviet Union* (London, Zed Books, 1988), p. 25.
- 4 For an archetypal Soviet version of how 'Great October' was perceived by Africans, see A.A. Gromyko (ed.), *The October Revolution and Africa* (Moscow, Progress, 1980), especially Chapter 1. The Lăidi volume already cited is to some extent an antidote.
- 5 I. Filatova describes the first two of these as being 'of crucial importance for the humanities'; see her 'Some Thoughts on Soviet African Studies under Stagnation and Perestroika', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 25, 1 (1992), p. 23.
- 6 There is some evidence that contacts with individual communists were possible, at least in the liberal period of the late 1950s. See for, example, Potekhin's correspondence with L. Forman and F. Carneson from 1958 and 1959 in Forman's *A Trumpet from the Housetops* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1992), pp. 190–2, 211–15.
- 7 P.K. Grimsted provides a detailed and ongoing account of these struggles in her *Archives of Russia Seven Years After: Purveyors of Sensation or Shadows Cast to the Past?* (Washington, DC, Cold War International History Project, September 1998), 2 volumes. She also pointedly quotes a Russian newspaper article to the effect that 'who controls the past controls the future' (Part 1, p. 21).
- 8 Grimsted, *Archives*, Part 1, p. 183.
- 9 The database referred to is available at *Comintern Electronic Archives*, <http://www.comintern-online.com/> [registration required; last accessed 16 February 2005]. For descriptions of the supporting international co-operative project see R.D. Bachman, 'The Comintern Archives Database: Bringing the Archives to the Scholars', *Slavic and East European Information Resources*, 6, 2/3 (2005), forthcoming; and T. Doorn-Moissenko, 'The Comintern Archives Online', *Ibid.*
- 10 *The Communist International, 1919–1943: Documents*, edited by J. Degras (London, Oxford University Press, 1956–1965), 3 volumes.

instance, the administrative structure of the Comintern was fluid and complex, but was kept obscure until recently by obsessive secrecy. It is, however, only through a grasp of the relationships between various commissions, committees and other organs, as well as of their composition and membership that we can see in detail exactly how processes such as Russification, bureaucratisation and Bolshevisation actually proceeded.¹¹

Naturally enough, the new conditions have produced a new historiography.¹² Prior to 1991, there had been speculative histories of the Comintern 'written from a party or partisan viewpoint', most of which, in the absence of primary sources, 'could be read only as [...] apologia or as [...] sweeping condemnation[s]'.¹³ The opening of the archive at once raised new and sometimes urgent technical and methodological problems for researchers. The immediate question was how they, and the archivists, were to process all this new information for public consumption. Some succumbed to the temptation to unearth what have been called 'fabulous secrets' from the 'Ali Baba cave-system' for partisan or even commercial ends.¹⁴ But such unproblematised fetishism could only function in the short term. This was at least partly because at the macro level the purpose of archival preservation in the Soviet system was not primarily historical but political. This in turn was determinant in defining the character of the collections, and thus – eventually – in defining the character of research in them. At micro level as well, the documents themselves cannot necessarily be counted on: they turn increasingly circumspect, to choose an understated term, in tone and content as Stalinist political practice becomes the norm from 1930 onwards:

[...] distortions of reality find their structural reflection in the text, the words of which often conceal more than they purport to say. Many documents are rather testimonials to the hostile imagery in the mind-set prevalent in the Comintern and Soviet leadership of the time than evidence about any one political viewpoint or the oppositional stance of any one party member [...]. Documents of this kind demonstrate how memory forms and re-forms itself in a culture where the expurgation from memory is an essential part of autocratic power-consolidation.¹⁵

Two of these four books deal with relations between the Comintern and Africa – principally, in fact, South Africa. The other two focus on the history of the development of African studies in, primarily, the Soviet years. It would be naïve to suppose that the two themes are, or were ever, anything but closely related. Soviet African studies was for most of its uneven history overtly and explicitly a collective undertaking, with the express aim of supporting the policy objectives of the Soviet Union, although academic influence on the policy process appears to have been, paradoxically, almost non-existent. The intimate relationship between activism and the academy is made startlingly clear when we read that the South Africa specialist Ivan Potekhin, together with Aleksandr Zusmanovich – both founding fathers of Soviet African studies – were expelled from the Comintern in 1935 and 1936 and then accused of Trotskyism. They only escaped the Gulag or worse because they had been sacked before the more serious accusation surfaced [*SACI, Vol. I*, pp. 18–19].

11 See F.I. Firsov's analysis on this question in *Novaia i Noveishaia Istoriia*, 2 (1991), quoted by K. McDermott, 'Rethinking the Comintern: Soviet Historiography, 1987–1991', *Labour History Review*, 57, 3 (Winter 1992), pp. 44–46. For a monographic treatment, see G.M. Adibekov and E.N. Shakhnazarova, *Organizatsionnaia struktura Kominterna, 1919–1943* (Moscow, RossPEN [Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia], 1997).

12 Several works have been published in English on new historical questions since the early 1990s. They include McDermott, 'Rethinking the Comintern', pp. 37–58; J.D. Hargreaves, 'The Comintern and Anti-Colonialism: New Research Opportunities', *African Affairs*, 92 (1993), pp. 255–61; McDermott, 'Stalinist Terror in the Comintern: New Perspectives', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 30 (1995), pp. 111–30; McDermott, 'The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents', *Communist History Network Newsletter*, 1 (Spring 1996), available at <http://les1.man.ac.uk/chnn/CHNN01HCL.html> [7 February 2005]; M. Narinsky and J. Rojahn (eds), *Center and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents* (Amsterdam, International Institute of Social History, 1996); B. Studer and B. Unfried, 'At the Beginning of a History: Visions of the Comintern after the Opening of the Archives', *International Review of Social History*, 42, 3 (December 1997), pp. 419–46; E. Ching and J. Pakkasvirta, 'Latin American Materials in the Comintern Archive', *Latin American Research Review*, 35, 1 (2000), pp. 138–49; R. Storch, 'Moscow's Archives and the New History of the Communist Party of the United States', *Perspectives Online* (October 2000), available at <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2000/0010/0010arc1.cfm> [14 February 2005].

13 Studer and Unfried, 'At the Beginning of a History', pp. 419–20.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 423.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 422.

By far the most substantial text, *SACI* is a two-volume collection of documents, with a 32-page introduction by the editorial collective. The second book on the Comintern, *Komintern i Afrika: dokumenty* (hereafter *KiAD*), is also a collection of documents, but in Russian and with different coverage. *SACI* prints 90 documents or extracts in volume one, and another 93 in volume two, starting with a report dated 15 April 1920, and ending with an extract from the minutes of the Colonial Committee of the CPGB dated 21 February 1939. All are published in English. *KiAD* prints 98 documents, of which a substantial number also deal with South African issues. The volume starts with some extracted remarks on the 'Negro Question' by Zinov'ev at an ECCI session on 25 January 1921 and closes with a letter from André Marty to Georgii Dimitrov, dated 26 April 1940. We thus have altogether a total of 281 documents covering a period of twenty years.

It must be said straight away that the publication of both these documentary histories must be very warmly welcomed indeed, and that they have been compiled with exemplary scholarship, impressive industry and endurance, and a high level of linguistic mastery. The fact that their publication inevitably raises theoretical and methodological questions about the history of the Comintern in relation to Africa is in a real sense a tribute to the editors' efforts. These efforts have not been negligible – the compilation of *SACI* took ten years, starting in 1991, and involved not only selection but frequently also dating, back translation from Russian or German into English, and the identification of coded or transliterated personal and place names – and saw at least two of the editors (Davidson and Johns) past retirement age. Davidson, who is now in his mid-70s, seems always to have been a slightly unconventional figure in the Soviet academic spectrum. He published an article about nineteenth-century Russian–South African contacts in a Cape Town journal as early as 1964,¹⁶ visited Mozambique in 1982, and was present with Irina Filatova at the Congress for a Democratic Future in Johannesburg in late 1989.¹⁷ This insistence on maintaining contact with the messy southern African reality apparently did not always endear him to the Soviet authorities.

KiAD and *SACI*, despite having two editors in common, seem to have been compiled independently of each other, with little recognition that they might be useful to a single community of scholars, which is probably not large, working on the Comintern and likely to know at least some Russian. Thus, despite significant textual overlap between documents in the two collections, there is no cross-referencing in either volume. For example, from a total of 98 documents in *KiAD*, about eight deal with the 'Negro Question' at a general level, and another 40 or so with other parts of equatorial or tropical Africa. The remaining 50 – just over half – are South African in character in some way, and 32 of these have either an exact or close equivalence or connection with documents published in the *SACI* volumes.

It was in the nature of Comintern activities that documents existed in translations in various languages, and a comparison of variations could conceivably lead to new insights. Let us take an example more or less at random, and compare document 16 in *Volume 2* of *SACI* (pp. 36–46) with document 75 in *KiAD* (pp. 236–7). The original of this particular text is a longish hand-written letter, in English, from the North American communist Eugene Dennis, who had been sent to work with the CPSA by ECCI in 1932–1933. *SACI* presents the original English text, indicating the source (p. 46) as *Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii* (RGASPI), Fund 495, section 64, file 79, pages 54–69.¹⁸ The editors note that 'of all Dennis's reports to Moscow [...] this seems to be the only one translated into Russian, obviously specifically for the Organisational Department of the ECCI [...]'. The penultimate paragraph, numbered 10, deals with opportunities for agitation work with Mozambican migrant workers. This is the paragraph that appears in *KiAD* as its document 75, with the editorial note (pp. 236–7):

Fund 495, section 25, file 1224, page 39. The document is in Russian. The translation is by the Comintern apparatus. For the complete text of the document, see file 1224, pp. 23–40. For a facsimile of the original, with the signature E. Dennis, in English, see also section 64, file 120, pp. 49–60.

16 See A.B. Davidson, 'As Others See South Africa: the Russian Experience' *The New African* [Cape Town] 3, 3 (28 March 1964), pp. 54–7.

17 He was also, for a time in the 1990s, the director of the Centre for Russian Studies at the University of Cape Town.

18 RGASPI is the current name of the archive referred to earlier as TsPA.

We thus have, in the public domain, both the English original *and* an extract from a contemporary Russian translation made 'specifically for the Organisational Department of the ECCI', but it is left to the researcher to discover this potentially useful fact, leaving aside the significance, if any, of why this particular report was translated and others not.

The presentation of the two collections raises larger questions of method. In preparing a selection of documents from a substantial archive, editors may typically choose from two courses, representing two polar extremes on a continuum. The first is to place the chosen texts in the context of a more-or-less developed analytical argument, using them to support a particular line of reasoning, as it were, at the same time as offering them to other researchers to use for other purposes. In this way, the rationale for choosing one document rather than another is rendered explicit, since the argument is openly made. In the field of Comintern studies, this was very much the approach taken 30 years ago by Helmut Gruber in his work *Soviet Russia Masters the Comintern: International Communism in the Era of Stalin's Ascendancy*, in which editorial analysis occupied perhaps half the space in the book. Indeed, Gruber was sharply dismissive of what he called 'trendy weekend-specials' that 'place the burden of making the subject coherent on the reader'.¹⁹ Davidson and his colleagues laboured for a decade and so can hardly be accused of having produced a 'weekend special'. They do however deliberately adopt the more self-effacing methodology, stating that their

goal was to present this history through the documents, to let the documents speak, rather than use them to illustrate the editors' text. Thus the editors' text, both in the introduction and in the notes, was kept to a minimum while as much documentary text was included as was possible and necessary to allow the documents [to] tell their story in its entirety and diversity. (*SACI, Vol.1, p. 25*)

There are two problems with this approach. The first is that it opens the editors to charges of falling prey to what E.H. Carr called the 'fetishism of documents'.²⁰ Nothing in historical documents, argued Carr 'means anything until the historian has got to work on it and deciphered it'.²¹ If this is correct, then the editors' modesty is possibly misplaced, since the documents cannot in fact speak as they hope, and even if they do may misdirect the unwary. This is especially true if Comintern documentation is inherently unreliable and opaque – as I have already argued – both at the macro level (why the collection was made) and at the micro level (whether the individual document deliberately distorts or misrepresents). This leads to the second difficulty, namely that the distinction made between the 'editorial' text and the 'documentary' text is largely artificial. In a work of this kind, the act of selection is in itself an act of interpretation, of choosing a *problématique*, and this text *as a whole* thus constitutes the editors' text, an *account* of the Comintern's relations with South Africa.

As Christopher Saunders pointed out in an earlier short review of *SACI*, there are few scholars who can claim higher levels of professional competence in Soviet and South African history than the collective of Davidson, Filatova, Gorodnov and Johns, who 'are superbly equipped to write a history of relations between the CPSA and Moscow based on these documents and other sources'.²² It is therefore something of a pity that they did not in the meantime provide more narrative and analytical context for the rest of us. One possible and ironical outcome is that it may in fact be easier to use *SACI* to reinterpret CPSA history, than to locate it in the wider international movement.

The collection provokes other questions. In the introduction the editors discuss the impact of the Stalinist purges on the Comintern and on the CPSA, pointing out that many of the 'leaders and ideologues [...] who formulated [...] strategy on national and colonial problems' [pp. 9–10] perished, including not only Zinov'ev and Bukharin but also such relatively minor figures as G.I. Safarov, L. Magyar, David Petrovskii and B.I. Idel'son. In line with their general editorial policy, they avoid any

19 H. Gruber, *Soviet Russia Masters the Comintern: International Communism in the Era of Stalin's Ascendancy* (Garden City, NY, Anchor Books, 1974), pp. xi–xii.

20 E.H. Carr, *What is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge, January–March 1961* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1964), p. 16.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

22 *South African Historical Journal*, 50 (2004), p. 274. In fact, two Finnish historians have announced their taking up of the challenge at continental level. See H. Weiss and R. Marjomaa, 'Comintern and African Nationalism, 1921–1935' [undated project proposal], available at <http://www.helsinki.fi/~hweiss/comintern.pdf> [17 February 2005].

analytical comment, only remarking that the purges, ‘in which millions died, were something quite different. *Nobody has a theory adequate to explain this phenomenon*’ [SACI, Vol. 1, p. 22, emphasis added]. It may well be true that attempts to theorise the Great Terror are unconvincing, and the editors are certainly entitled to hold that view. Nevertheless, it can also be argued that new documentation from the archives, such as the Dimitrov diaries, offers information that is already being used by commentators to analyse the character of the Terror *specifically* within the Comintern. As Kevin McDermott has pointed out in a survey article on this very topic, historians such as Anatolii Latyshev and Jonathan Haslam have offered highly suggestive analyses. Latyshev, for instance, argues (without any supporting references) that by 1934 Stalin believed that he was losing control of the Comintern, and that the VII Congress had been a personal defeat. In this view, the purges of 1937 constituted a counter-attack against comrades who had supported the Popular Front.²³ Haslam offers a more complex argument, arguing that Stalin faced both domestic and foreign policy crises in mid-1936, and he saw the Comintern, ‘standing for revolutionary internationalism’, as the source of the threat. Hence the attack on the organisation.²⁴

The editors remain silent on questions of periodisation that have emerged in work on Comintern history by F.I. Firsov and others since the late 1980s.²⁵ The conventional view has always been that the Comintern operated, as long as Lenin was alive, according to principles of democratic centralism and collective decision-making: in other words, parties had the opportunity to thrash out issues with the Centre, bringing their knowledge of local conditions to the process. This approach was gradually replaced by the ‘command-bureaucratic’ practices of the Stalin period, of which the most frequently cited example in the South African context is the decision by the Centre to adopt the Native Republic slogan in 1928 over strenuous but futile objections by many local communists. However, in the early 1990s, Russian specialists began cautiously to question the idea that the early Comintern under Lenin had been as democratic in its behaviour as had previously been believed. Firsov quotes a letter written by the German Clara Zetkin to Lenin as early as 1921, complaining of the ‘interventionist’ character of some ECCI communications, which also lacked ‘genuine knowledge of real conditions’.²⁶ It is therefore possible, Firsov concludes, to detect a predisposition to impose centrally-taken decisions on local parties much earlier than had previously been admitted. Historians of the CPSA have sometimes represented the decision of the VI Congress to impose the Native Republic slogan on the party in 1928 as a dramatic departure in style as well as in content from the way that relations had been conducted previously. Sheridan Johns, for example, refers to the ‘surprise and shock’ and ‘consternation’ evinced by the CPSA when ‘distant Moscow’ handed down its decree.²⁷ Davidson himself states that before 1927, the Comintern ‘was watching the developments in the communist movement of South Africa, but did not interfere actively into the events. The Comintern [...] was not actively involved in [...] local politics’.²⁸ Allison Drew writes that the imposition of the thesis ‘marked a shift in the balance between national and international influence in the formulation of [...] policies—a portent of the future’.²⁹ A closer analysis of the new documentation might, however, help us to see if the revisionist interpretation also applies, in fact, to the South African party’s relations with the Centre.

The documents could help to clarify other enduring questions of interpretation. For instance, historians have disputed the *origin* of the Native Republic slogan, some attributing it mainly to James La

23 A. Latyshev, ‘O novykh podkhodakh k izucheniiu istorii Kominterna’, in: *Komintern: opyt, traditsii, uroki* (Moscow, 1989). I am grateful to Kevin McDermott (Sheffield Hallam University) for generously providing me with a copy of this semi-published article.

24 Haslam, ‘The Soviet Union, the Comintern and the Demise of the Popular Front, 1936–39’, in H. Graham and P. Preston (eds), *The Popular Front in Europe* (London, Macmillan, 1987) quoted by McDermott, ‘Stalinist Terror’, pp. 123–4.

25 Davidson has, however, commented briefly on Comintern periodisation in relation to South Africa, in his article ‘The Comintern and South Africa: Dreams and Realities. The Comintern Archive Documents’, in: *Suid-Afrika binne Internasionale Konteks: ’n Historiese Perspektief. Suid-Afrikaanse Historiese Vereniging, Veertiende Tweejaarlikse Konferensie, 20–22 Januarie 1993. Konferensiebundel* (Potchefstroom, Potchefstroomse Universiteit, s.d.), pp. 361–2.

26 *Novaia i Noveishaia Istorii*, 2 (1991), p. 33–35, quoted by McDermott, ‘Rethinking the Comintern’, p. 40.

27 ‘The Comintern, South Africa and the Black Diaspora’, *Review of Politics*, 37, 2 (1975), pp. 200, 204.

28 Davidson, ‘The Comintern and South Africa’, p. 357.

29 A. Drew, *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000), p. 94.

Guma (i.e. to a local black dynamic), others to Nikolai Bukharin (i.e. to imposition by the Comintern). In the mid-1980s, Robin Kelley went so far as to argue that the VI Congress resolution

reflected the actual struggles of Africans in South Africa as well as Africans in the United States [...] Because Europeans retained their leadership position in the [Communist] party, La Guma's position calling for self-determination of African people had to be adopted over the heads of the CPSA's leadership.³⁰

Kelley claims that La Guma, after discussions with the African-American communist Harry Haywood, 'then produced the preliminary draft resolution on the South African question'.³¹ However, *SACI* prints an extract from a speech by Bukharin in March 1927, in which he states that 'the party must make demands, such as a demand for a Negro republic independent of the British Empire' [*Vol. 1*, p. 155]. This is apparently the first mention of the slogan in connection with South Africa, and is surprisingly *ad hoc* in tone, as the editors note: '[t]his mention could have come without any preliminary discussion, casually [...]' [*SACI, Vol. 1*, p. 155]. In other words, Bukharin might have been winging it, with unforeseen consequences.



What about the history of African studies as a discipline, the second major theme in the volumes under review? There are really two possible sets of reasons for an interest in this topic from a western or an African point of view, but they are rarely differentiated. One focuses on the academic, intellectual and political history of the Soviet Union itself, and uses the history of African studies as a case study of the ways in which a particular discipline was affected by the national trajectory, throughout the twentieth century, from revolutionary Leninism to Stalinism to stagnation and eventually to *perestroika* and collapse. African studies, like other social science disciplines, and especially area studies specialisations, functioned at the service of the state. But although the discipline had the potential to provide basic information and analysis on the basis of which policy could be developed, it is unclear whether this actually happened in any systematic way.

According to Irina Filatova there was virtually no expectation that academic studies of Africa would produce any kind of practically useful analysis, in an intellectual environment that valued adherence to the line above independent thinking:

During the 1960s and 1970s Soviet academics were hardly ever consulted by the official bodies on political matters, and did not play any role in political decision-making. Even if they had been consulted, the political climate of the time would hardly have allowed them to give an independent opinion [...]³²

Davidson, however, presents a slightly different picture, describing an Africa Institute in the 1960s that was *incapable* of supplying the right kind of analysis:

The central bodies started to require analytical information immediately. The Central Committee needed information, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs needed information, various State Committees needed information, but in fact there were no Africa specialists. The only section in the Institute made up of trained professionals was the History Department [...] In many cases, however, information was needed not about history, but about politics or the economy [*Stanovlenie otechestvennoi afrikanistiki*, p. 127]

It is also necessary to take into account the fact that African studies was turning into an ideological minefield for the unwary, becoming

one of the most highly ideologised and politicised spheres of Soviet humanities. The official theories [...] could not be disputed [...] In 1979 the administration of the Institute of General History closed the Department of African History, having accused the authors of an introduction

30 R. Kelley, 'The Third International and the Struggle for National Liberation in South Africa', *Ufahamu*, 15, 1/2 (1986–1987), pp. 99, 114.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

32 Filatova, 'Some Thoughts', p. 17.

to one of its publications of not applying class analysis. The Department was opened again only in 1984.³³

The other possible focus of interest looks at the products of Soviet African studies as free-standing texts, and judges them by the same criteria that would be applied to studies written in Africa itself, the United States, the United Kingdom, France or Portugal. By these standards, many believe that very little of the Soviet output would justify the effort of learning Russian (as Davidson points out: 'the language barrier, [...] played and continues to play a dominant role' [*Afrikanistika XX veka*, p. 16]). Filatova herself wrote, perhaps a little testily, in 1992:

For decades Soviet Africanists have been producing largely very weak and secondary literature, the greater part of which is bound to remain in the history of African studies only as an example of the complete failure of this branch in the Soviet Union.³⁴

This may be too strong, but it must still be recognised, as Davidson points out, that in the 1950s and 1960s most Soviet texts were written only after 'very brief visits and without fieldwork' [*Afrikanistika XX veka*, p. 16]. But in the 1970s, Soviet analysts did begin to appear in socialist Mozambique, as I can personally attest, and presumably in socialist Angola and socialist Ethiopia as well. Even on South Africa, works written in the 1980s by such scholars as Gorodnov himself, Aleksei Makarov, or Vladimir Tikhomirov are based on a reading of printed local and western sources, and do present interesting analyses.³⁵ It seems clear that conditions varied over time, even if it was within a narrow range.

Davidson's opening essay in *Afrikanistika XX veka* explicitly tackles the question of periodisation. The volume contains the proceedings of an international conference on the theme 'African studies in the twentieth century: the times, the people, the opinions', that was held in Moscow on 13–14 September 2001. It contains 24 papers, as well as a short piece by A.S. Balezin marking the 30th anniversary of the Centre of African Studies at the Academy of Sciences, with an attached bibliography listing the Centre's output from 1971 to 2002. Of the 24 papers published here, eleven are in Russian and thirteen, by contributors from the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and South Africa, are in English. A short abstract in English prefaces each of the Russian papers, and Balezin's anniversary tribute is accompanied by a three-page English summary. Among the Russian contributions is an essay by Gorodnov on anti-colonialism (see below), and another piece by Balezin on the difficulties that even Soviet researchers had in accessing Russian archives.

Davidson's determinant criterion in his essay on periodisation is the extent to which the Soviet state and its successor, the Russian Federation, supported African studies and, in his words 'paid significant attention to them and subsidised their development' [*Afrikanistika XX veka*, p. 14]. Using this yardstick, Davidson identifies four periods

1. from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s: the period of Comintern interest;
2. from the mid-1930s to the late 1950s: on the periphery of state interest;
3. from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s: Africa as terrain in the Cold War;
4. from the late 1990s: on the periphery again. [*Afrikanistika XX veka*, p. 14]

The rest of the essay is devoted to questions of the political and material conditions in which Soviet researchers had to work, rather than to a further development of the periodisation. Working 'under the conditions of a totalitarian regime', says Davidson, the history of African studies 'reflected the history of the Soviet Union and its tragedy' – indeed, Africanists were subjected to repression and some were shot. But such a periodisation might go further in relating developments in the field to *specific* events in Soviet intellectual and political history. What, for example, was the impact on African studies of the debate at the VI Congress of the Comintern in 1928, Stalin's notorious and menacing letter on the practice of history to *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia* in 1930, or Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation speech to the XX Congress of the CPSU in 1956? The effect of the letter to *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia* on historical studies has been described as 'cataclysmic', and indeed 'hardly any sphere of intellectual activity was [subsequently] spared close

33 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

35 For example, in chronological order, A.A. Makarov, *Bor'ba afrikanskogo naseleniia Iu.A.R. (70-e gody XX v.)* (Moscow, Izdat. Nauka, 1981); V.P. Gorodnov, *Chernie zhiteli belogo goroda: zhizn' i bor'ba afrikanskogo getto* (Moscow, Izdat. Nauka, 1983); V.I. Tikhomirov, *Partiia aparteyda: sotsial'no-politicheskaia evoliutsiia Natsionalisticheskoi partii Iu.A.R.* (Moscow, Izdat. Nauka, 1987).

political scrutiny'.³⁶ In what proportions the virtual silence on African affairs in the 1930s (apart from the Italian invasion of Ethiopia) can be attributed to the Terror, genuine lack of interest, or changes in the political line on the colonial question, remains to a considerable extent an open question. Similarly, it may have been more than coincidence that the Khrushchev speech of February 1956 was followed a year later, in February 1957, by the well-attended meeting at the Ethnographic Institute that led to the reorganisation of African studies and to detailed programmatic planning.³⁷

What then *are* the claims that might be made for Soviet and Russian African studies from the second perspective, given the apparently crippling weaknesses already conceded? Apollon Davidson again:

it seems indisputable to me that the achievements of [Russian and Soviet] African studies specialists are noteworthy. They studied different types of ancient society in depth. They initiated the study of the social structure of twentieth century African societies, their modernisation, the emergence of new social strata, the origins of the working class, the trade-union movement, and political parties. The achievements of Soviet Africanists in studies of the processes of the anti-colonial struggle are particularly evident. [*Afrikanistika XX veka*, p. 16]

Now for the first time we have a detailed account of the history of Soviet African studies that will allow us to assess such claims for ourselves. The splendid illustrated collection *Stanovlenie otechestvennoi afrikanistiki* [hereafter *SOA*] consists of 31 chapters, of which Apollon Davidson is the sole author of fourteen, all of these being biographical accounts of major or minor figures who played a role in 'domestic' African studies. (The use of the term '*otchestvennyi*' [domestic, home-grown, pertaining to the homeland] in the title of this work and elsewhere, incidentally, seems to be a common way of avoiding the difficulties involved in the use of either 'Soviet' or 'Russian' as descriptors, and of constructing at the same time a continuity of intellectual tradition across both revolution and collapse.) There is little doubt that this volume will also serve as an exceptionally rich resource for future work, not only in Russia but also comparatively.³⁸

Although the character of the work is primarily biographical, the first and the last six chapters are thematic in character and organisation. The biographical emphasis is unsurprising, as the impulse to reconstitute the lives of the culprit–victims of Stalinism was a clear mark of the first phase of historical work after the archives were opened.³⁹ It should be said that not all of the subjects chosen for this treatment are ethnic Russians: the influential Hungarian teacher and activist Endre Sik has a chapter,⁴⁰ as does the Latvian Voldemar Matvei, and the relatively unknown Estonian polyglot, Pent Nurmekund (1905–1997) who founded the Oriental Department at the University of Tartu and is alleged to have had a command of 80 languages. From a South African perspective, the chapter on Boris Idel'son and George Clark, both Soviet citizens and both early ECCI emissaries to South Africa in 1929 and 1930 respectively, are of considerable interest.

But unquestionably, the detailed accounts of the lives of such personalities as Ol' derogge, Zusmanovich and Potekhin are the most fascinating. It is clear that, for Davidson at least, this was an opportunity to pay tribute to his former mentors and to their ability to survive and work, even in the 1930s. His affectionate memoir of Potekhin, whom he met in the late 1940s, is replete with quotations from Akhmatova and Pasternak, and includes such incidental domestic detail as the fact that Potekhin lived for many years in a ground-floor flat in the former building of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East.

But, Davidson continues, 'how was it possible for me to understand him, or his attitude to the Comintern and its history, or to Stalin, or even to his own fate during those years?' [*SOA*, p. 132]. Indeed, he goes on, regarding the *kominternovtsy*, the former Comintern cadres

36 J. Barber, 'Stalin's Letter to the Editors of *Proletarskaya Revolyutsiya*', *Soviet Studies*, 28, 1 (January 1976), pp. 22–23.

37 See the report by R.N. Ismagilova and L.D. Iabochkov, in *Sovetskaiia Etnografiia*, 3 (1957), extracted in English as 'Soviet Africanists' Co-ordinating Conference', *Africa*, 28, 2 (April 1958), pp. 159–62. This was, of course, also when Ghana and Guinea obtained independence, as M.D. Morris points out ('The Soviet Africa Institute and the Development of African Studies', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 11, 2 [1973], pp. 249–50).

38 Peter Limb has outlined some of the possible issues for further investigation in 2003 ('Russian Academics and Africa in 1958: Reply', *H-Net Africa* [23 August 2003], available <http://h-net.msu.edu/> [10 March 2005]).

39 Studer and Unfried, 'At the Beginning of a History', pp. 425–7.

40 The chapter is neutrally entitled 'The Author of the First Multi-Volume History of Black Africa', which is oddly rendered, in the English table of contents [p. 389] as the 'First *Fundamental History*'. Sik lived in Moscow until 1945.

[...] it is hard to find other examples of people who experienced as many dramatic changes in their lives in a period of only a few years. By what miracle did they survive? Could this experience not have led to a split personality, to internal confusion? [SOA, p. 133]

The chapter closes on an elegiac note: 'Every time I pass [Potekhin's] old house', writes Davidson, 'I feel a twinge of melancholy' [SOA, p. 133].

Similarly, of A.Z. Zusmanovich, who was the head of the first African Studies centre in the Soviet Union in 1934–1935, Davidson comments that he only survived the 'bloodbath of 1937' by miraculous chance. Years later, Davidson found documents in the Comintern archive marked 'from Zusmanovich's table' and comments that 'this means that they banished him without even allowing him to tidy his papers'. Later, Zusmanovich worked quietly in the administration of a Moscow theatre, in a job arranged by his wife, without permanent accommodation but with at least 'a piece of bread on the table' [SOA, p. 95]. He was in prison from 1949 to 1956 (that Khrushchev thaw again), when he finally returned to academic life.

Of course, a potential difficulty with a primarily biographical approach – despite the extraordinary interest of much of the material and the frankness of the writing – is that we may end up with a fragmented account of the actual intellectual history of the discipline. However, the thematic chapters by Balezin, Filatova and others go some way to addressing this problem. Balezin, for example, in his chapter on the Soviet critique of foreign (in other words, western) African studies, presents a comprehensive survey, beginning with the first review of an English book on Africa, published in the first issue of *Novyi Vostok* in 1922, and ending with a discussion of the impact of the XXV Congress of Oriental Studies, held in Moscow in August 1960 and attended by African, British, US and French scholars. The year turned out to be a critical moment, comments Balezin, 'not only for Africa, but for African studies generally. A fundamentally new stage also began in the history of Soviet African studies' [SOA, p. 365].

In her chapter on anti-colonialism as a constant in Soviet analysis of Africa, Filatova identifies a 'wind of change' blowing through the field as early as the late 1940s. Although there is little in the official public documentation, since the Comintern was dissolved and the CPSU held no congresses to define policy, she analyses the themes addressed in general academic publications of the time to buttress her argument. The gradual change of emphasis from the 'crisis' to the 'disintegration' of the colonial system from the 1940s to the late 1950s, she writes, 'completely reflected the content of the rapidly accelerated process of decolonisation' [SOA, p. 312].

For South African historians at least, these works serve as a reminder that the 'remote epoch' of the Comintern remains of interest not least because of its long-lasting influence on national political discourse up to the present day. Faint echoes of the VI Congress can still be heard every time an ANC leader speaks of the 'national democratic revolution', invoking the ghost of Marxist two-stage theory even while implementing neo-liberal economic policies. Davidson and his colleagues have made a monumental contribution by publishing these works, especially – in the case of *SACI* – for those historians who are unlikely ever to make the effort of learning Russian or German and making the journey to 'distant Moscow' to conduct first-hand research. The two works on the Comintern belong on the shelf alongside such essential documentary collections as *From Protest to Challenge, South African Communists Speak, South Africa's Radical Tradition*, and *Quem é o inimigo?*⁴¹

As for 'domestic' African studies, although we are beginning to understand its history better, it is still hard to say what the future holds. There were reportedly 350 researchers working on African questions in the former Soviet Union in 1970.⁴² Vladimir Shubin reported nearly two decades later that despite 'the hard times' after 1991, the same institute

41 T. Karis and G.M. Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge: a Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1964* (Stanford CA, Hoover Institution Press, 1972–1977), 5 volumes; *South African Communists speak: Documents from the History of the South African Communist Party, 1915–1980* (London, Inkululeko Publications, 1981); A. Drew (ed.), *South Africa's Radical Tradition: a Documentary History* (Cape Town, Buchu Books, 1996), 2 volumes; and on Lusophone Africa, I. Wallerstein and A. de Bragança (eds), *Quem é o inimigo?* (Lisbon, Iniciativas, 1978), 3 volumes.

42 V.G. Solodovnikov, 'Ten Years of the Africa Institute: Scientific Achievements and Tasks of Soviet African Studies', *Studies in Developing Countries* [Budapest], 55 (1971), p. 8, quoted in Morris, 'The Soviet Africa Institute', pp. 247–8.

remains apparently the biggest center of African Studies in the world with the staff of over 180 including about 130 researchers, most of whom have Ph.D. degrees. Besides it, African research is conducted at the African Studies Center of the Institute of Universal History, [...] Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Institute of World Literature, Institute of Linguistics, Institute of State and Law (all in Moscow) as well as the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (in St Petersburg).⁴³

The voices we continue to hear are nonetheless to some extent the old familiar ones, and for an outsider it is difficult to say where the next generation of Africanist scholars will come from.⁴⁴

At the beginning of this review, Neal Ascherson was quoted to the effect that the importance of the October revolution and the Soviet experience is now widely seen as 'controvertible'. But the 74 years of Soviet rule cannot, as Moshe Lewin's latest book argues, be dismissed as merely an anomalous interlude: for better or worse, those years helped to define not only the characteristics of modern Russia, but of many postcolonial African societies, including South Africa.⁴⁵ In a similar way, the Marxist periods of Frelimo or the MPLA cannot be seen simply as anomalies in the histories of Mozambique or Angola. More than this: the virtual disappearance of Marxist analysis from twenty-first century historiography has involved other conceptual losses, as Corey Robin has recently pointed out:

[...] the collapse of Communism and disappearance of Marxism have eased the burdens of intelligence. With the market—and now religion—displacing social democracy as the language of public life, writers are no longer compelled by the requirements of the historical imagination. [...] today's intellectuals wave away all talk of 'root causes': history, it seems, will no longer be summoned to the bar of political analysis—or not for the time being. [...] When Marxism was banished from the political scene in 1989, it left behind no successor language—save religion itself—to grapple with the twinned fortunes of the individual and the collective, the personal and the political, the present and the past.⁴⁶

These post-communist Russian works remind us, precisely, of the importance of the historical imagination, and despite the difficulties involved, deserve to be taken seriously on their own terms.

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43 V. Shubin, 'African Studies in Russia', *Africa Update*, 5, 1 (Winter 1997–1998). Available at <http://www.ccsu.edu/Afstudy/upd5-1.html#h12> [9 March 2005].

44 Quite a few scholars have chosen the path of emigration, either permanent or temporary. It is unclear what effect this has had at home.

45 M. Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London, Verso, 2005). Studer and Unfried make the same point ('At the Beginning of a History', p. 424).

46 C. Robin, 'Dedicated to Democracy', *London Review of Books*, 26, 22 (18 November 2004), available at http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n22/robi02_.html [9 February 2005].