# Communist states and post-war Africa

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The notion of 'Red Africa' can perhaps be dated to the period immediately following the Russian Revolution of October 1917. From that time, many Africans gravitated towards the revolutionary events in Russia and to Communism, seeing in them a path to their own liberation from colonial rule. The Communist Party in South Africa, founded in 1921 and one of the few on the African continent in the early twentieth century, soon had many black as well as white members. As one of its early leaders explained: 'the influence of the Russian Revolution is felt far beyond the boundaries of the vast soviet Republic and probably has even more immediate appeal to the enslaved Coloured races of the earth than to Europeans'.[1]

The earliest African supporters of the Russian Revolution may well have been those combatants who, as participants during the First World War, were contacted by revolutionary Russian troops demanding an end to the global conflict, or those impressed by the stands of the Soviet government which exposed the secret treaties of the big powers in late 1917. There is some evidence that a few African troops joined the Red Army and fought in support of the Revolution in the early years of the new Soviet power. In South Africa, African communists such as T. William Thebedi also emerged in this period, although an African interest in socialism in that country can be dated much earlier. In other parts of Africa, such as Egypt, marxism had been discussed as early as the 1890s. Perhaps not surprisingly then, the colonial powers began to fear that the spectre of communism might haunt the African continent and, in the period after 1917,

did everything possible to monitor and prevent any links between Africans and the Soviet Union or the adherents of the Communist International, both in Africa and abroad.

Because of the repressive nature of colonial rule, very few Africans had the opportunity to travel to the Soviet Union in the period before the Second World War, but the few who did were often complimentary. When Anton Gumede, one of the founders and the president-general of the ANC – and a man who had previously expressed strong anti-communist sentiments – returned from the Soviet Union in 1927 he explained: 'When I left South Africa I was under the impression that in Russia people were not safe. But what I saw there surprised me. I saw a new Jerusalem. I found people happy, contented and prosperous. The Government of Russia is the Government of the working classes. Today in Russia the land belongs to the people'.[2] Others, such as Bankole Awooner-Renner from the Gold Coast, were enabled to travel to the Soviet Union as students during this period, or, like Lamine Senghor, joined communist parties in Europe. Thus, Africans began to develop support for the new economic and political system being constructed in the Soviet Union and the doctrine of communism. These seemed to offer inspiring alternatives to the repressive and exploitative nature of colonial rule.

The Comintern from its inception took a very keen interest in the African colonies, as well as in what came to be called the Negro Question – the question of how Africans and those of African heritage could liberate themselves and put an end to all forms of racist oppression. In fact, there was no other international organisation that took such a stand, that was openly opposed to both colonialism and racism and attempted to organise all those of African descent for their own liberation. There was a widespread view that the Comintern itself was more revolutionary than some of its constituent parties. This certainly seemed to be the case when the Comintern demanded that the Communist Party in South Africa should become a party of the masses of the people of that country, led by Africans, and that it should first champion the rule of the majority in what was considered

a colony of a special type, even though many of the leaders of that party had a contrary view.

The efforts of the Comintern to organise in Africa through the auspices of the South African, French, British or other parties in Europe met with limited success. Eventually black communists took a lead in demanding a specialised organisation under the auspices of the Profintern, the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW). The importance of the ITUCNW – and its organ *Negro Worker*, as well as other publications – was that it promoted the spreading of the revolutionary politics of the Comintern and the impact of the Russian Revolution throughout Africa, as well as to Africans in Europe, throughout the late 1920s and 1930s. As part of the work of the ITUCNW, workers and others were recruited from the British and French colonies in West Africa, as well as from South Africa, and, in time, students were sent from many parts of Africa to the Soviet Union. In the period between the wars, hundreds made this journey, including leading anti-colonial figures such as Isaac Wallace-Johnson from Sierra Leone, Jomo Kenyatta, a future president of Kenya, and Albert Nzula, the first black general secretary of the SACP.

Perhaps the most important legacy of the October Revolution was the theory that emerged from it and the experience of building a new social system while surrounded by a capital-centred world. What was demonstrated was that another world was possible, and that those who were the producers of value could be their own liberators and could construct this new world themselves. This alternative, and the prospect of liberation, continued to inspire individuals and organisations in Africa, particularly during the Second World War, when the Soviet Union played a central role in the defeat of fascism, and helped create the possibility of national liberation and the restoration of sovereignty in those countries that had languished under colonial rule. New communist parties such as those in Algeria and Sudan emerged during this period and often played a key role in the anti-colonial struggles.

The post-second-world-war period was one of greater influence for the Soviet Union, as well as for People's China and other socialist countries, as they too championed the anti-colonial struggles in Africa. Often this influence was facilitated through such organisations as the World Federation of Trade Unions and the International Union of Students, which held their congresses in the capital cities of Eastern Europe. Students from African countries were also encouraged to study in the universities of the Warsaw Pact countries, such as Charles University in Prague. At the same time, as the Cold War intensified, the United States and the old colonial powers stepped up their anti-communist activities and used the taint of communism to subvert the most militant anti-colonial movements and their leaders.

The Soviet Union manged to establish some influence with two of Africa's most important post-colonial leaders, Nasser in Egypt and Nkrumah in Ghana, but failed to intervene effectively in the important Congo Crisis in the early 1960s. Thereafter, individual countries in the Warsaw Pact often pursued their own strategies in Africa, providing 'aid' for their own economic interests and as an expression of soft power. From this point onwards, the Soviet Union and its allies often found themselves condemned for their 'social imperialist' activities in Africa by Mao's China, which claimed for itself the role of leading defender and supporter of African and other 'Third World' countries. Perhaps the greatest influence of the Soviet Union, as well as the countries of the Warsaw Pact, China and others from the 'socialist camp' was with the national liberation organisations in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea Bissau. These organisations received military support and training, and often had a marxist, or socialist, orientation, that drew them to certain foreign allies. However, perhaps the greatest military contribution to the national liberation struggles in southern Africa was made by the intervention of Cuban troops in Angola, culminating in the decisive battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1987-8.

Events during the late twentieth century – in particular the case of the military regime, or Derg, in Ethiopia – showed clearly that

appearances could be deceptive. Support by ostensibly socialist allies, or the adoption of the language and symbols of Marxism-Leninism, might be deployed in the pursuit of 'red terror' rather than popular government in the interests of the many rather than the few. Indeed, the armed struggle against the Derg showed that even a small country such as the People's Socialist Republic of Albania could exert a significant influence, as was shown through its influence on the Tigray People's Liberation Front, which ultimately defeated the Derg.

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With the collapse of the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe, any prospect of a Red Africa must today be once more primarily connected with the struggles of Africans, rather than any intervention by foreign powers. In the twenty-first century, China has emerged as the single biggest economic influence in Africa, but few consider that this will lead to any revolutionary transformation in favour of the masses of the African people.

Some people's vision of a future Red Africa drew inspiration from the revolutionary activities of leading Communists. Amilcar Cabral, the famous leader of the national liberation struggle in what was then Portuguese Guinea, is reported to have said: 'How is it that we, a people deprived of everything, living in dire straits, manage to wage our struggle and win successes? Our answer is: this is because Lenin existed, because he fulfilled his duty as a man, a revolutionary and a patriot. Lenin was, and continues to be, the greatest champion of the national liberation of the peoples'.[3] Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary leader from Burkina Faso, not only expressed his admiration for Lenin's writing, which he claimed to have read in its entirety, but also specifically praised the 'great revolution of October 1917 [that] transformed the world, brought victory to the proletariat, shook the foundations of capitalism and made possible the Paris Commune's dreams of justice'.[4] Marxism and Communism have found many adherents in Africa, including famous writers and cultural workers such as Alex La Guma and Ousmane Sembene. Perhaps the most

notable adherent was Nelson Mandela, although it was not until after his death that his membership of the Central Committee of the South African Communist Party, at the time of his arrest in 1962, became well known.

The contributors to this volume cover a variety of themes but they mainly focus on the second half of the twentieth century, and on the relationships between communist countries and African states and liberation movements. Their essays detail the influence of marxist theory and the Communist International on anti-apartheid politics in South Africa, and discuss the relationship of various African countries with People's China, Romania, Hungary and the German Democratic Republic. The impact and influence of the Soviet Union in Africa in that period, is traced both through an analysis of Soviet-Ghanaian relations during the Congo crisis of the early 1960s and through the memoirs of Vladimir Shubin of his posting to Egypt during the Six Days War.

## Notes

1. H. Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919-1939*, Trenton: Africa World Press, 2013, p11.
2. South African History Online: www.sahistory.org.za/people/josiah-tshangana-gumede.
3. *African Communist*, No 53, 1973: www.sacp.org.za/docs/history/dadoo-19.html.
4. *Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983-1987*, Pathfinder, London 2015, p165.