

# Schools and Professors Abroad: The Soviet Union and the Development of Post-Secondary Education in Africa and Asia\*

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## ABSTRACT

As part of its new international policy toward the Third World since the second half of the 1950s, the Soviet Union began developing a number of tertiary-level educational institutions in Asian and African countries. This article provides an outline of Moscow's activity in this field from India and Cambodia to Algeria and Mali. It examines the objectives of the Soviet Union and the receiving states, looks at the achievements and limits of their cooperation, and argues for the importance of these mostly technical training institutions in the development of the receiving countries. At the same time, this article explores the educational and cultural work of Soviet professors serving in these schools, showing that both these professors and the schools became part and parcel of the Soviet Union's friendly ties with selected Asian and African countries.

“We consider that educational aid and the training of national elites is one of the most important and effective forms of our cooperation with the developing countries,” stated a report of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) of the Eastern bloc states following a meeting between ministers of education and other officials held in Budapest in March 1967.<sup>1</sup> During another meeting held in Sofia, CMEA encouraged its member states to pursue the construction and equipment of educational institutions in Asia and Africa, urging them to collaborate in the recruitment of a teaching staff with knowledge of French or English. Indeed, Polish and Romanian professors of geology, mathematics and agronomy, who knew French, took mission at the Technical Institute of Conakry in Guinea and at the Rural Institute of Katibougou in Mali that the Soviet Union established during the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Vocational and higher level educational institutions were created with the bloc's assistance, while Soviet

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\* This paper was made possible by funding from the PRIMUS 21/HUM/29 grant for the research project “African and Middle Eastern Elites Educated in former Socialist Countries: Studies, Trajectories, and Mindsets.”

1 For information about this meeting, see the CMEA “secret report” of 1967 in: State Archive for the Russian Federation (hereafter, GARF), f. (*fond* means collection) 9606, op. (*opis'* is inventory) 2, d. (*delo* is file) 266, l. (*list* means page) 36.

2 Meeting held in April 1963, see l. 140 in the same file.



and East European educational planners and professors served in several friendly countries. Along with the provision of scholarships and the training of students in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, these initiatives and assignments became an important component of the bloc's development aid to countries that had recently acceded to independence.

This article revisits the establishment of higher and professional-technical educational institutions in Africa and Asia with the assistance of the Soviet Union. Beginning in the late 1950s, Moscow became an important actor in the development of education in many postcolonial countries, from India and Indonesia to Guinea Conakry and Algeria. The article looks at the premises, objectives and politics of educational aid and cooperation in both the donor and the receiving countries investigating the successes and shortcomings. At the same time it takes a closer look at the actors on the ground, namely, the Soviet professors who served in a number of postcolonial countries. Their performance was for Moscow extremely important for many reasons. Soviet academics represented a great power which took pride in the achievements of its education and research institutions embodying the superiority of the socialist model. They interacted on a daily basis with students, colleagues and officials, and were expected to cultivate friendly ties with them and to win their respect. In some cases, they set up cultural organizations promoting Soviet culture and defending the Soviet worldviews. As Moscow had a keen interest in remaining a strong player in the higher education of developing countries, the role of these professors was crucial.

The literature on the educational assistance of state socialist countries to the Third World has witnessed spectacular growth in recent years. Its biggest part examines the training of Third World students in Europe concentrating on three host countries: the Soviet Union, East Germany and Czechoslovakia.<sup>3</sup> Among the major questions that scholars have addressed are the policies and expectations of both host and sending countries, the nature of training, which often took place in special institutions like the Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow, the University of the 17<sup>th</sup> of November in Prague or the School of Friendship in the East German city of Stassfurt, and the experiences of foreign students.<sup>4</sup> While this literature has pointed to the weaknesses

3 M. DE SAINT MARTIN — G. SCARFO GHELLAB — K. MELLAH (eds.), *Étudier à l'Est. Trajectoires d'étudiants africains et arabes en URSS et dans les pays d'Europe de l'Est*, Paris 2015; L.V. IVANOVA — S.V. MAZOV, *Afrikanskíe studenti v SSSR, 1960-e*, in: A.C. BALEZIN — A.B. DAVIDSON — S.V. MAZOV (eds.), *Afrika v sud'be Rossii, Rossiia v sud'be Afriki*, Moscow 2018, pp. 429–481. E. BURTON et al. (eds.), *Navigating Socialist Encounters. Moorings and (Dis)Entanglements between Africa and East Germany during the Cold War*, Berlin 2021; B. BUZÁSSYOVÁ, *Socialist Internationalism in Practice: Shifting Patterns of Czechoslovak Educational Aid Programmes to sub-Saharan Africa (1960s-1980s)*, Ph.D Thesis, Bratislava, 2021.

4 M.E. HOLEČKOVÁ, *Konfliktní lekce z internacionalismu: studenti z 'třetího světa' a jejich konfrontace s českým prostředím, 1961-1974*, in: *Soudobé Dějiny*, Vol. 20, No. 1-2, 2013, pp. 158–76; T. MÜLLER, *Legacies of socialist solidarity: East Germany in Mozambique*, Lanham 2014; C. KATSAKIORIS, *The Lumumba University in Moscow: Higher Education for a Soviet-Third World Alliance, 1960-1991*, in: *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2019, pp. 281–300; J. KOURA — M. PEŠTA, *Československo a studená válka v Africe. Přístupy, interpretace a roviny zkoumání*, in: *Paměť a dějiny. Revue pro studium totalitních režimů*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2020, pp. 3–13.

of the student exchange programs and questioned the internationalism of the host countries, it has also demonstrated that Eastern bloc educational assistance was instrumental in the establishment of East-South relations, the training of the postcolonial elite and the development of postcolonial states.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the creation of schools and the work of Eastern bloc academics in the Third World, which constituted the other component of the bloc's educational assistance, have received much less attention. In one of the first studies on this topic, Vladimir Bartenev draws a particularly bleak picture of Soviet aid to French-speaking West African countries pointing to such problems as the poor facilities of the schools established, the lack of lecturers who knew French and even the bad translations of Soviet textbooks.<sup>6</sup> Eric Burton does not dismiss the importance of the work of East German academic staff in Tanzania but stresses, as a comparison, that West German educational aid was massive and more effective.<sup>7</sup> Alexandra Pepiorka and Eduardo Buanaissa, who examine the work of East German academics at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique, refer to intercultural misunderstandings and ideological clashes with the Mozambican faculty members, but at the same time underscore the genuine commitment of East German lecturers to assist the newly-independent and socialist Mozambique.<sup>8</sup> Rachel Applebaum, too, stresses the commitment of Soviet educators who taught in Africa and Asia and saw themselves as agents of the Soviet Union's influence in the developing world. Their experiences, Applebaum argues further, ultimately reinforced their identification with the Soviet project and their trust in the universality of communism.<sup>9</sup>

The present article sets itself the task to outline the evolution of Soviet educational aid in Asia and Africa and to emphasize its political and economic dimensions. These dimensions are visible not only in the agreements between states, but also in the initiatives of Soviet professors serving abroad, who were aware of the political and ideological stakes and of the economic interests of their country. The article argues for the importance of the higher and professional-technical educational institutions and of the missions of academics abroad for both the Soviet Union and the receiving countries, and explains why this form of cooperation declined in some cases but increased in others. Along with surveying the political and economic motives, the first section outlines the evolution of Soviet educational aid in Asia and Africa. In the second section, the focus shifts from the states to the professors who taught in postcolonial countries.

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- 5 M. DE SAINT MARTIN — P. YENGO (eds.), *Élites de retour de l'Est. Quelles contributions des élites "rouges" au façonnement des États post-coloniaux?*, special issue in: *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, Vol. 226, No. 2, 2017.
  - 6 V. BARTENEV, *L'URSS et l'Afrique noire sous Khrouchtchev : la mise à jour des mythes de la coopération*, in: *Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire*, Vol. 95, No. 354–355, 2007, pp. 63–82.
  - 7 E. BURTON, *In Diensten des Afrikanischen Sozialismus: Tansania und die globale Entwicklungssarbeit der beiden deutschen Staaten, 1961–1990*, Berlin 2021.
  - 8 A. PIEPIORKA — E. F. BUANAISSA, *A (Post)Socialist Memory Space? East German and Mozambican Memories of Cooperation in Education*, in: E. BURTON et al. (eds.), *Navigating Socialist Encounters*, pp. 351–385.
  - 9 R. APPLEBAUM, *Educators for Export: Soviet Teachers in Africa and Asia during the Global Cold War*, in: *Cahiers du Monde russe*, Vol. 63, No. 3–4, 2022, pp. 577–598.



## FRUITS OF SOVIET AID: EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN ASIA AND AFRICA

Both the training of Third World students in the socialist countries and the foundation of schools in Asia and Africa with Eastern bloc assistance served the needs of the receiving countries in many ways. Creating an administrative, technical and cultural elite as soon as possible was the necessary precondition for postcolonial regimes, socialist and Western-oriented alike, to build the nation-state, foster economic development and try to modernize largely agrarian societies. Sending students to the Eastern bloc had obvious advantages but also involved dangers. On the one hand, the host countries assumed the full cost for the overwhelming majority of international students and provided education in very good schools. On the other hand, some students opted to stay abroad and to pursue their career in the West instead of returning back. Others adopted radical political ideas against the wishes of the government at home.

Likewise, there existed advantages and disadvantages in relation to the creation of training centers with Eastern bloc assistance in the developing countries. The obvious advantage was that these badly-needed schools were becoming integral part of the national education system eventually reducing the dependence on foreign countries. The disadvantage, however, was their cost, as most Eastern bloc and Western countries refused to create these schools free of charge or granted only part of the aid that was necessary for their establishment. In the context of the East-West rivalry, most developing countries pursued negotiations with many developed ones seeking to diversify their international cooperation and receive assistance from various donors. One of those donors was also the Soviet Union which had a keen interest in cultivating ties with the non-Western world and for this purpose, as stated earlier, raised educational aid into a major instrument of its international policy. Through a combination of grants free of charge and low-interest rate loans, which were often rescheduled, the Soviet Union met the requests of several Asian and African countries setting up higher and vocational training institutions and dispatching hundreds of professors.

India was among the first non-communist countries that benefitted from Soviet educational aid. A non-aligned giant, the country engaged with many donors at the same time managing to establish four major Institutes of Technology between the late 1950s and the early 1960s: in Madras with West German support, in New Delhi and Kanpur with British and US support respectively, and in Bombay with Soviet assistance. The Agreement of December 1958 between India and the Soviet Union, providing for the creation of the Institute of Technology of Bombay (ITB), was actually the first one. A landmark in the Soviet-Indian cooperation, ITB disposed laboratories of Physics, Electrical engineering, Radio engineering and Television, Electronic devices, and others, whose equipment was offered by the Soviet Union free of charge.<sup>10</sup>

10 R. BASSETT, *Aligning India in the Cold War Era: Indian Technical Elites, the Indian Institute of Technology at Kanpur, and Computing in India and the United States*, in: *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 2009, p. 787. For the Agreement of 18 December 1958, see: <http://www.commonlii.org/in/other/treaties/INTSer/1958/15.html> (accessed on 15 March 2022).



Between 1959 and 1966, the school employed 101 Soviet lecturers. Funding for most lecturers and for the equipment did not come directly from the USSR but indirectly, namely, from the Soviet Union's financial contribution to the UNESCO.<sup>11</sup> The same agreement also provided for the training of Indian students at Soviet universities on Soviet scholarships.<sup>12</sup>

Technical universities were much-demanded in the developing world and the Soviet Union had an excellent reputation in technical education. Following India, a number of Asian countries, including Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Afghanistan and Indonesia, turned to the Soviet Union for aid. In Burma, the Rangoon Institute of Technology in Yangon, which was constructed and equipped by the Soviet Union between 1958 and 1961, became the first school of engineering in the country. As Burma's government refrained from employing expatriates, most lectures were Burmese who had trained in Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union. Still, during the 1960s, the school employed nearly ten Soviet lecturers every year, who made up the biggest group of expatriates.<sup>13</sup> In Cambodia, the Higher Technical Institute of Khmer-Soviet Friendship in Phnom Penh was a gift of the Soviet government established between 1962 and 1964. Contrary to the Rangoon Institute of Technology, in Phnom Penh the Soviet academic community was very big boasting sixty lecturers and professors during the school term 1966–67. Substantial numbers of Soviet academics also served in Afghanistan where, during the 1960s, the Soviet Union created three schools. The Technical Institute of Construction and Electrification in Kabul and the Institute of Mining and Petroleum in Mazar-i-Sharif were both professional-vocational schools.<sup>14</sup> However, the most important educational institution Moscow established in Afghanistan was the Kabul Polytechnic Institute. This institution opened its doors in 1967 boasting 27 Soviet lecturers.<sup>15</sup>

There was finally one more training and research institution that the Soviet Union set up in South-East Asia during the same period. This was the Institute of Oceanography, which was attached to the University of Ambon in Indonesia and specialized in naval architecture, oceanographic research and technology of fishery. A champion of the Afro-Asian movement, Indonesia began sending students to the Soviet Union in 1959. The creation of the Institute of Oceanography in Ambon was eventually supported by the loan Moscow granted to Jakarta in 1960.<sup>16</sup> For the world's biggest island country which is surrounded by an archipelago, this institution was meant to foster the exploitation of the marine floral and faunal belt, support the development of

11 CMEA "secret report" of 1967, in: GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 266, p. 42.

12 A. HILGER, *Building a Socialist Elite? Khrushchev's Soviet Union and Elite Formation in India*, in: J. DÜLFFER and M. FREY (eds.), *Elites and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century*, Basingstoke 2011, pp. 262–286.

13 CMEA "secret report" of 1967, in: GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 266, p. 42.

14 Y. BAIZA, *Education in Afghanistan: Developments, Influences and Legacies since 1901*, London 2013, pp. 109–112.

15 "Report on our cooperation with foreign countries," Ministry of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education of the Soviet Union (hereafter Minvuz), 9 February 1965, in: GARF, f. 9606, op. 1, d. 1842, ll. 70–76.

16 R. BODEN, *Die Grenzen der Weltmacht. Sowjetische Indonesienpolitik von Stalin bis Brežnev*, Stuttgart 2006, pp. 141–143.





fishery, aquaculture, and other offshore activities. For all these reasons, the Institute of Oceanography of Ambon had a tremendous importance for Indonesia. While the project was almost completed, it was however abandoned after the socialist president Ahmed Sukarno was ousted by General Suharto in 1966.

In Africa, where the need to train a national elite was perhaps more urgent than anywhere else in the postcolonial world, Moscow's response to the call for cooperation was swift. Soviet educational assistance took the form of major projects, which aimed to support friendly governments to realize their aspirations of socio-economic development along socialist lines. To begin with, the Soviet involvement was significant in countries where the rift with the metropolis had been abrupt and bloody or where the strategic and economic stakes were particularly high. Such a country was Guinea Conakry, the only French colony that rejected to join the French-African Community in a referendum held in 1958. The consequence of this vote was Guinea's exemplary "punishment" by the French government which, among other punitive measures, ordered the immediate repatriation of French civil servants, engineers and citizens. In this dramatic context, the independent Republic of Guinea appealed to volunteers and friendly states for assistance.<sup>17</sup> The socialist countries responded eagerly sending doctors, professors and their own experts. It was however clear that the country could not rely forever on foreign staff, but needed instead a native educated elite and its own training institutions. Mali, which acceded to independence two years later proclaiming its socialist orientation, faced similar problems. Neither Mali, nor Guinea had a university before acceding to independence.

Against this background, the Soviet Union emerged as a key partner of both Guinea and Mali.<sup>18</sup> Not only did Moscow offer scholarships for studies at Soviet universities, but also founded educational institutes in both countries. The Polytechnic Institute of Conakry and the Higher Administrative School of Bamako became the first institutions of higher education in Guinea and Mali respectively. Constructed and equipped by the USSR, staffed with nearly thirty Soviet professors and lecturers each one, these schools became the proof of Soviet solidarity to countries fighting for emancipation from colonialism. In Guinea, the Polytechnic School trained specialists in fields such as civil, electrical and mechanical engineering, agronomy, geology and the detection of minerals, and represented the country's effort to break its isolation imposed by France. Despite the serious organizational and educational problems that they faced during the period of their establishment, both schools nevertheless accomplished their mission as the first tertiary education institutions addressing the needs of independent countries.<sup>19</sup> The Bamako School trained nearly 250 students in each academic term, most of whom served afterwards in the public administration of the friendly regime of Modibo Keita. Furthermore, Moscow supported socialist Mali creating two more training centers. The first one was a vocational school of medical specialists in Bamako. The second was the Rural Institute of Katibougou. Founded earlier by France, this school was fully reestablished and developed with Soviet aid

17 E. SCHMIDT, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946-1958*, Athens 2007.

18 S.V. MAZOV, *A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo, 1956-1964*, Washington 2010.

19 Minvuz "Report," 9 February 1965, in: GARF, f. R-9606, op. 1, d. 1842, ll. 71-72 and l. 141.

in the mid-1960s when it boasted more than 90 Soviet agronomists and other specialists.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, educational aid was offered to a few countries which remained oriented toward the West in terms of their foreign relations and economic policies. This was the case of the Ethiopian Empire. Its emperor, Haile Selassie, an American ally, sought foreign aid from different donors and did not decline Moscow's offer to set up a technical school. Established between 1960 and 1963, the Bahir Dar Polytechnic Institute, which later developed into a Technical University, was "a gift of the Soviet government to the Ethiopian people."<sup>21</sup> In Tunisia, between 1963 and 1968, the Soviet Union constructed and equipped the National Technical Institute of Tunis. In contrast to the Bahir Dar Polytechnic Institute, the construction of the institute of Tunis was financed by a loan Moscow granted to the Tunisian government, after the US government refused to do so. For many years, however, both Ethiopia and Tunisia refrained from employing Soviet professors, something that provoked frustration on the Soviet side.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the most important Soviet educational projects in the Third World were carried out in Algeria. After the war of liberation from France (1954–1962), its accession to independence and the subsequent exodus of French settlers, Algeria faced tremendous economic challenges. The lack of an educated manpower further complicated the situation. To consolidate its relationship with Algeria, the Soviet Union offered a multifaceted assistance. During a visit to Algiers in 1964, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev announced that Moscow was ready to sponsor the foundation of an institute of hydrocarbons for the Algerian people to be able to exploit its own mineral resources and finance with the revenues its development projects. By the end of the same year the Algerian Oil and Gas Institute was founded in Boumerdès, a suburb of Algiers, as a part of the African Center for Oil and Textile (*Centre africain des hydrocarbures et du textile*, hereafter CAHT). The CAHT was a campus created by the USSR, which also comprised a vocational school of textile. Training more than one thousand students in different specializations, the CAHT employed nearly 200 Soviet lecturers.<sup>23</sup>

To be sure, the Oil and Gas Institute had the biggest strategic importance for a country rich in hydrocarbons like Algeria. Many of its graduates initially worked for French and American-owned energy businesses. Yet when the time was ripe, between 1969 and 1971, the Algerian state took over these enterprises effectively nation-

20 Minvuz "Report on the missions of professors abroad" in 1966–67: GARF, f. R-9606, op. 1, d. 3077, l. 17. This school is also mentioned by E.G. TSVETKOV, *Sovetskie spetsialisty v Tropitseskoi Afrike 1960–1970-e: Problemy povsednevnosti*, in: A.C. BALEZIN — A.B. DAVIDSON — S.V. MAZOV (eds.), *Afrika v sud'be Rossii, Rossiia v sud'be Afriki*, Moscow 2018, pp. 394–428.

21 "Report on the construction of educational centers abroad," Minvuz, 4 January 1962, in: GARF, f. R-9606, op. 1, d. 869, l. 3. On the Bahir Dar project, in particular, see also G. TSYPKIN, *Efiopiia (po materialam arkhiva vneschnei politiki RF)*, in A. DAVIDSON et al. (eds.), *SSSR i Afrika. Dokumentirovannaia istoriia vzaimootnoschenii*, Moscow 2002, pp. 102–103.

22 C. KATSAKIORIS, *Creating a Socialist Intelligentsia: Soviet Educational Aid and Its Impact on Africa, 1960–1991*, in: *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, Vol. 226, No. 2, 2017, p. 263.

23 See the report of the Soviet Ministry of Higher and Secondary Technical Education: GARF, f. R-9606, op. 1, d. 9120, l. 25–29.



alizing the country's energy sector. The graduates of the Oil and Gas Institute, who embodied Soviet educational assistance to Algeria, played a key role in this development. Algerian President Houari Boumedienne publicly stressed the connection between the Soviet educational assistance and the nationalization of hydrocarbon industry in May 1971 when he affirmed that, "The recent cohorts of graduates of the African Center of Hydrocarbons and Textile had a major contribution by replacing the foreign technicians and managers when our country got back her national oil riches."<sup>24</sup>

The 1970s witnessed the further development of the Algerian-Soviet partnership and, more broadly, of the partnership between the USSR and the Middle East. With the decrease of French assistance, the dramatic increase in the prices of hydrocarbons after the crisis of 1973-1974 and the nationalization of the Algerian oil and gas sector, Algeria had enough financial resources to invest in Soviet educational services. In the second half of the 1970s, the USSR established the National Institute of Light Industry in Boumerdès and the Institute of Mining and Smelting at the University of Annaba. The first one incorporated the Institute of Textile that used to be part of the CAHT. The second one, however, was directly linked to a major industrial project, such as the Annaba Steel Plant that Algeria developed largely with Soviet, Polish and East German assistance. Around the same time the Soviets established the El-Tabbin Metallurgical Institute in Egypt. This institution too trained managers and technical staff for the Helwan Steel Plant, one of the most successful ventures in the history of economic cooperation between Egypt, the Soviet Union and other Eastern bloc countries, including Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Romania.<sup>25</sup> During the early 1980s, small numbers of Soviet experts contributed to the development of an automotive training school in Damascus and to the establishment of technical centers within the Polytechnic Institute of Homs.<sup>26</sup>

All these developments testified to some important transformations that Soviet educational aid underwent from the late 1950s to the 1980s. In Sub-Saharan Africa, both the USSR and the rest of the Eastern bloc reduced their commitments following the demise of socialist regimes in West Africa and the economic crisis that hit the region particularly hard.<sup>27</sup> As a matter of fact, Moscow did not establish any other big training center across Sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, Soviet professors continued to teach at the schools that had been established earlier in Guinea Conakry and Mali. In 1975, there were still 135 Soviet academics working in Guinea Conakry and 34 in Mali. Moreover, there were new client states that benefitted from Eastern

24 H. KHELFAOUI, *La formation des ingénieurs en Algérie : Le cas des Instituts Technologiques de Boumerdès*, Ph.D. thesis, Université de Versailles, 1997, p. 129.

25 R. THADIKKARAN, *Transfer of Soviet Technology to Steel Industry in Select Developing Countries*, PhD thesis, Jawaharlal Nahru University, 1991, pp. 240-46.

26 According to the Annual Reports of the Soviet Ministry of Higher Education for the years 1975, 1980, and 1984: GARF, f. 9606, op.1, d. 6829, ll. 40-41, d.9120, ll. 85-88, and op. 3, d. 606, ll. 69-85. See also Pedro Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship since 1955: A Troubled Alliance*, Boulder, 1990, p. 223.

27 A. IANDOLO, *The Rise and Fall of the "Soviet Model of Development" in West Africa, 1957-64*, in: *Cold War History*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2012, pp. 683-704.



bloc assistance. These states included socialist Ethiopia and Mozambique, as well as oil-rich Angola, which could afford paying the salaries of Cuban and other Eastern bloc academics.<sup>28</sup>

In Asia, most of the countries that had benefited from Soviet aid during the late 1950s and the early 1960s did not pursue their cooperation with Moscow for different reasons. While India opted for educational cooperation with the English-speaking world, notably with Great Britain and the United States, Indonesia cut short its ties with the communist states after the socialist president Sukarno was toppled in 1966.<sup>29</sup> On the opposite side, Soviet assistance increased in Afghanistan after the country was invaded by the Soviet army in 1979. Beyond Afghanistan, the Middle East and North Africa emerged as the most important destination of Soviet academics in the Third World. Algeria, for instance, employed 979 Soviet expatriates in its higher and professional-technical educational institutions in 1978. During the entire period under survey, Algeria was by far the most important destination of Soviet academics in the Third World. Yet even Tunisia, which had refrained from hiring Soviet lecturers in the 1960s, dropped its objections. As a result, the number of Soviet academics in this country rose from 61 in 1975, to 70 in 1980, and 80 in 1984.<sup>30</sup>

## THE MISSION OF SOVIET ACADEMICS ABROAD

As Rachel Applebaum has argued, Soviet professors abroad were the USSR's foot soldiers in the field of education, a major theater of the global Cold War.<sup>31</sup> They represented a superpower, whose scientific and technological achievements, exemplified by the launch of Sputnik satellite in 1957 and the first manned flight into outer space by cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin four years later, had won admiration and whose soft power was extremely powerful across the developing world. Soviet academics came from the universities that had contributed to these scientific and technological achievements. They embodied the socialist system of education which Eastern bloc countries claimed that it was superior to the Western ones. At the same time they were citizens of a country that used to be a backward empire but was transformed into a modern and powerful multinational state by virtue of a socialist revolution. Part of their mission, therefore, was to transmit the experience of the Soviet Union to the Third World and to suggest their audiences how this experience could be used so as to build modern states along socialist lines and freed from imperialism.

If the mobilization of Soviet professors to spread these messages was part and parcel of their assignments abroad, the year 1967 and the commemoration of the

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28 C. HATZKY, *Cubans in Angola: South-South Cooperation and Transfer of Knowledge, 1976–1991*, Madison, 2015.

29 R. BODEN, *Cold War Economics: Soviet Aid to Indonesia*, in: *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2008, pp. 110–128. D. ENGERMAN, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India*, Cambridge Mass., 2019, p. 115.

30 From the Annual Reports of Minvuz, in: GARF, f. 9606, op. 1, d. 6829 for the year 1975, d. 8148 for 1978, d. 9120 for 1980 and op. 3, d. 606 for the year 1984.

31 APPLEBAUM, *Educators for Export*.



fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution, provided an extraordinary opportunity. Along with approximately five hundred academics already in mission in the developing countries, that year the Soviet Ministry of Higher and Special Secondary Education dispatched nearly five hundred more, including professors in various disciplines, teachers of Russian, as well as doctoral students, to take part in celebrations, attend exhibitions and conferences, and give lectures. “The Global Significance of the October Revolution,” “The Establishment of the First Workers’ and Peasants’ State” and “The Development of Education in the Soviet Union” figured prominently among the topics of these lectures. Fulfilling the Ministry’s instructions, Soviet academics organized film screenings and round tables, and set up friendship societies between the USSR and host countries. In this way, academics and teachers serving in Asia, Africa and the Middle East played a crucial role in the public events which lasted the whole year and culminated in October 1967 celebrating the achievements and legacy of the Revolution from the Soviet point of view.<sup>32</sup>

To be sure, various activities revolving around the development of the Soviet Union and expounding the socialist system, took place on a regular basis. At the El-Tabbin Metallurgical Institute, Soviet professors created stands and distributed leaflets about “The October Revolution,” “The International Women’s Day,” “The Constitution of the USSR,” “Children in the USSR,” “Science in the USSR,” and other themes. Held by a Soviet professor, the chair of philosophy at the Technical Institute of Conakry offered classes of dialectical materialism and Marxism-Leninism, and used to distribute Lenin’s writings and other texts by Soviet authors destined to a foreign readership. Other disciplines were also mobilized to spread Marxist ideas and convince the students about the merits of the socialist system.<sup>33</sup> At the Higher Technical Institute of Khmer-Soviet Friendship in Phnom Penh, faculty members organized conferences and invited the students to give papers about the prospects of Cambodia’s economic development along socialist lines. While ideology and politics shaped to a large extent academic work, the “institute also played an important role in the cultural life of the Cambodian capital.”<sup>34</sup>

Nowhere else was perhaps the activity of Soviet academics more important than in Algeria, where the sheer size of their community was impressive. As stated earlier, the number of Soviet professors and other faculty members increased from two hundred in the mid-1960s to nearly one thousand by the end of the 1970s, only to decline during the 1980s under the weight of the economic downturn and the subsequent policies of Algerianization, that is, the replacement of foreign experts and academics with Algerian nationals. Yet in 1975, for example, there were still 498 Soviet academics working at the Oil and Gas Institute and at the National Institute of Light Industry of Boumerdès, 254 at the Institute of Mining and Smelting in Annaba, while

32 See the “Report of the Ministry of Higher and Special Secondary Education of the USSR on the preparation and celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Glorious October socialist revolution,” established by the Department of foreign relations on 20 September 1967, in: GARF, f. 9606, op. 1, d. 3077, pp. 21-30.

33 “Report on our activity in the framework of our cooperation with the developing countries in 1975,” Minvuz, in: GARF, f. 9606, op. 1, d. 6829, pp. 25-29.

34 CMEA “secret report” of 1967, GARF, f. 9606, op. 2, d. 266, l. 42.

41, 18 and 18 more held positions at the universities of Algiers, Oran and Constantine respectively.<sup>35</sup>

In the outskirts of the Algerian capital, Boumerdès was about to become a university city as well as a stronghold of the Soviet academic community. The Oil and Gas Institute, which became a symbol of the Soviet Union's solidarity with socialist Algeria, was a major center for propagating the socialist path of development to Algerian audiences. Film screenings and exhibitions were regularly organized on such themes as the Soviet technological achievements or the modernization of the Central Asian republics under the socialist regime. Soviet faculty members founded the Society of Soviet-Algerian Friendship, gave lectures about the Soviet Union and organized commemorations of the October Revolution.<sup>36</sup> At the beginning, the Algerian administration was suspicious toward such political and cultural activities. Within a few years, however, as Algeria embraced state socialism along Eastern bloc lines and Algerian-Eastern bloc cooperation gathered pace, the Algerian administration tolerated and even welcomed many activities of the Soviet community. Classes of political economy were introduced in the study programs and Soviet academics were invited to give lectures about socialism. "The chairs of economy and industrial planning" in the two institutes of Boumerdès, stated a Soviet report of 1975, "play an extremely important role in propagating our ideology, making public the foundations of the Marxist-Leninist worldview and demonstrating the advantages of the socialist system in the organization of scientific work and the management of production."<sup>37</sup> As if these activities were not enough, the Algerian administration invited professors from Institute of Social Sciences of the Communist Party of the USSR to give lectures, titled "Peaceful coexistence and the struggle for peace," "Marxist-Leninist lessons on government: The organization of the Soviet government," and "The scientific-technical revolution and its role in the life of socialist and capitalist societies."<sup>38</sup>

To be sure, the Algerian-Soviet partnership was rather exceptional. The educational cooperation between the two countries had tangible results in terms of economic relations and development and was seen from both sides as exemplary. Tellingly, in the early 1980s, Algeria was the second destination of Soviet academics abroad after East Germany, thus surpassing all other Eastern bloc countries. The presence of so many Soviet professors opened up plenty of opportunities for promoting the Soviet views either in classes or through extracurricular activities.

Yet even in cases where Soviet academics were very few, they did defend the Soviet interests in many ways. The mission of A. Akimov, a specialist of agricultural engineering, at the Bahir Dar Polytechnic Institute between 1971 and 1974, is a relevant case in point. A lecturer at Patrice Lumumba University, Akimov was one of the nine Soviet academics serving at Bahir Dar during those years that preceded the Ethiopian Revolution (1974). In his report to the Soviet Ministry of Education, Akimov castigated the institute's administration for oppressing the Ethiopian students, preventing them from establishing a progressive student organization and, finally, expelling

35 Minvuz report of 1975, GARF, f. 9606, op. 1 d. 6829, ll. 40–41.

36 Ibid., ll. 35–38 and the report of the year 1980 in: d. 9120, ll. 25–29.

37 Ibid., d. 6829, l. 35.

38 Ibid., l. 32.



many of them. A watchful observer of political developments, Akimov sympathized with the students, praised their commitment to democracy and informed Moscow about the foes and friends of the Soviet Union at the institute. The latter, apparently, were usually those who had pursued their studies at Soviet schools. At the same time, Akimov was well aware of the Soviet economic interests and tried to promote them. After he criticized the authorities in Moscow for having equipped the institute with an old Soviet tractor for the training of students, he managed to buy a new “Belarus” one. He also sent his students to the Soviet trading subsidiary in Addis Abeba to pursue their apprenticeships. In his report to the Ministry of Education, Akimov stressed that the Bahir Dar Institute was the only school offering a study program in agricultural engineering and that its graduates constituted the professional group of Ethiopian agronomists. On the one hand, these people had to study the experience of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, they should become familiar with Soviet equipment and use it in the future.<sup>39</sup> Both political and economic considerations lay behind the educational aid of the Soviet Union, something that Soviet academics abroad understood very well. This was affirmed explicitly and at the highest level by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, whose secret decree of September 17, 1974, stipulated that the training of foreign students should serve both the “political and economic interests of the Soviet Union.”<sup>40</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The creation of higher and professional education institutions, usually technical ones, and the work of academics in these and other schools in Asia and Africa was a component of Soviet and Eastern bloc educational assistance that has been largely neglected by scholars. However, this form of aid was extremely important for many reasons. To begin with, it was part and parcel of Soviet international development and cultural policies in regions where Moscow sought to expand its influence. Despite some setbacks, as it was the case in Indonesia, this policy was generally successful in terms of establishing a longer term Soviet presence and building ties with the host countries. More importantly, educational aid abroad served the economic plans of both the USSR and the receiving states. If the Soviet Union sought to export its educational services and advertize its machinery, Asian and African countries expected these schools to be instrumental in their developmental effort training specialists and producing knowledge in fields of vital economic importance. Beyond the specific interests of each side, these institutions arguably played a significant role in the overall political economy of Soviet-Third World relations. Last but not least, these institutions became integral part of the education system and constitute until today an important legacy of Soviet educational assistance in Africa and Asia.

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<sup>39</sup> See his report of 9 September 1974, in: GARF, f. 9606, op. 1, d. 6461, l. 1-17.

<sup>40</sup> The decree is cited by the head of the Central Committee’s Department of Sciences and Educational Institutes of the CPSU, Sergei Kolesnikov, during a speech he delivered at the Moscow Party Committee on December 4, 1974. See Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), f. M-3, op. 8, d. 1152, l. 160.

At the same time, this history cannot be reduced to a number of institutions without regard to the people who manned them. As a matter of fact, academics played the most important role bringing their expertise and commitment, teaching their students, and managing everyday personal and institutional problems. While the institutions themselves had a major political and economic significance in the eyes of the policy-makers who agreed to create them, professors too were fully aware of the stakes and actively engaged in economic and ideological battles to conquer of their students' and colleagues' hearts and minds. While a comprehensive history of Soviet educational aid in the Third World remains to be written, it is safe to argue, along with other scholars, that Soviet academics were important actors in the global Cold War.

