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The Politics of Anti-Imperial Nostalgia: South Africa's Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

When the UN General Assembly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and called for the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces in March 2022, barely half of African states voted in favor. This lukewarm support contrasted with strong support for Ukraine elsewhere in the world. Among those abstaining from the vote was South Africa, a country with a long history of interaction with the post-Soviet space. This essay considers the interplay of historical remembering and forgetting that has contributed to the South African response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A longstanding commitment to non-alignment, the long shadow of the anti-colonial struggle, and the complicated legacy of the Soviet Union, its collapse, and who rightly carries its anti-apartheid mantle, have all played a role in shaping the South African response.

"I one hundred per cent support the decision of the Russians to intervene. . . . The BBC is spreading the lie that they invaded without an invitation—this is a well-known technique of Western propaganda; they always present the case in such light that the Russians are to blame," said Billy Godwin-Mawa, a student from Nigeria and head of the African student organization in Kharkiv. Samuel Danko, a Ghanaian student also living in Kharkiv agreed: "I think the Russians did the right thing. We must not forget the Second World War."¹ Billy and Samuel were not talking in February 2022, but in August 1968. It was not Ukraine that had been invaded, but Czechoslovakia. The tanks that rolled into Prague were not Russian, but Soviet. But Billy and Samuel were not alone in 1968 in supporting the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. The South African Communist Party, founded in 1921 as the Communist Party of South Africa, banned by the apartheid government in 1950 and reconstituted as an underground organization in 1953, vociferously supported Operation Danube.²

Much has changed in the past half century, not least in northern Eurasia and the south of the African continent, and there is obvious danger in reading the past into the present, as if Billy, Samuel, or the SACP in 1968 could have anticipated the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Nonetheless, in the context of the African continent's ambivalent response to Russian aggression today, what is striking about these positions is the way in which they

¹ State Archives Department of the Security Service of Ukraine (HDA SBU), f. 16, op. 1, spr. 976, ark. 177–81, V. F. Nikitchenko to TsK KPU, August 26, 1968.

² Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba, *Comrades against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (Bloomington, 1992), 9. In retrospect, Ronnie Kasrils acknowledged the ideological orthodoxy of the SACP, while admitting that he personally had been impressed by Dubček, see Ronald Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous: My Undercover Struggle Against Apartheid* (Oxford, 1993), 37–38, 103.

seem to bridge the past with the present.³ The invocation of the Second World War, a nefarious yet ill-defined “West” juxtaposed against an unduly maligned Russia, and, implicitly, an acknowledgement of the deep bonds of personal connection that bind the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia to the Global South suggest a worldview that has survived the seismic geopolitical transformations of the past thirty years.

Billy and Samuel spoke in 1968 as citizens of two independent republics (albeit in Billy’s case one amid an incredibly bloody civil war). South Africa’s experience of the second half of the twentieth century was quite different. Though South Africa had achieved independence in 1910, the Nationalist Party government in Pretoria had since 1948 enforced a policy of apartheid that ensured white minority rule. In 1960, the African National Congress had been banned following the proscription of the Communist Party a decade earlier. Many of its leaders were subsequently imprisoned, assassinated, or forced into exile as part of the “External Mission.” Forced from their homes, activists found their ways to “hubs of decolonization” elsewhere on the African continent—in Accra, Dar es Salaam, and Cairo—to London or, increasingly, to eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, where hundreds of activists were trained in everything from medicine and engineering to guerrilla warfare and party organization.⁴ It was not until 1990, when the ANC was legalized once again, that its members could emerge from the underground.⁵

It is to the memories of this struggle and of this “hidden thread” between South Africa and the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia that we must begin to make sense of South Africa’s muted response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁶ Bonds of historic friendship and a shared anti-(western) imperialism continue to shape the South African-Russian relationship in the present. However, to reduce South Africa’s position to one of simple nostalgia for a revolutionary past is to deny the contemporary realities in which the country finds itself. While appealing to historical solidarities might be a convenient shorthand, a convergence of interest between Russia and South Africa in the twenty-first century is equally important for understanding the South African position. Foremost among these is a fundamental critique shared by both Russia and representatives throughout the Global South of “Western” control of international institutions and a call for greater multipolarity in a seemingly unipolar world.

The View from South Africa

On the same day that Russia renewed its invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) released a statement calling for a peaceful resolution to what they referred to as the “escalating conflict” between Russia and Ukraine and expressing their “dismay” at the hostilities,

³ The response by African states has been far from uniform and, while on a continental scale the response has been ambivalent, there have been African states that have been unequivocal in their support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Nevertheless, even Kenya, whose envoy to the UN Martin Kimani made headlines in February 2022 with his condemnation of Russia, has since welcomed Russian delegations and embraced a policy of “strategic ambiguity.” See Jeff Otieno, “Russia-Ukraine War: Why Kenya Is Now Playing Both Sides,” *The Africa Report*, June 12, 2023 at <https://www.theafricareport.com/312267/russia-ukraine-war-why-kenya-is-now-playing-both-sides/> (accessed April 17, 2024).

⁴ Eric Burton, “Hubs of Decolonization: African Liberation Movements and ‘Eastern’ Connections in Cairo, Accra, and Dar es Salaam,” in Helder Adegas Fonseca, Lena Dallywater, and Chris Saunders, eds., *Southern African Liberation Movements and the Global Cold War “East”: Transnational Activism 1960–1990* (Munich, 2019), 25–56. On Soviet training for South Africans, see Vladimir Shubin, *The Hot “Cold War”: The USSR in Southern Africa* (London, 2008), 239–63.

⁵ Stephen Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960–1990* (Oxford, 2013). On the SACP, see Eddy Maloka, *The South African Communist Party: Exile and After Apartheid* (Johannesburg, 2013); Tom Lodge, *Red Road to Freedom: A History of the South African Communist Party, 1921–2021* (Johannesburg, 2021).

⁶ Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson, *The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era* (Johannesburg, 2013). See also Vladimir Shubin, *ANC: A View from Moscow*, 2nd ed. (Johannesburg, 2017); Vladimir Shubin and Marina Traikova, “There is No Threat from the Eastern Bloc,” in South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, vol. 3, *International Solidarity, Part II* (Pretoria, 2008), 985–1066.

though stopping short of categorizing the invasion as such. The DIRCO statement did, however, call on Russia to immediately withdraw its forces from Ukraine. It also signaled at this early stage what has proven to be a consistent South African framing of the invasion. DIRCO emphasized the global consequences of armed conflict in Ukraine, warning that no country was immune. Furthermore, the statement appealed to international institutions and agreements, particularly the UN Security Council, but also to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the UN Charter, as well as those informal groups established in the wake of the war in Donbas. Calling on “all parties” to respect human rights, DIRCO invoked South Africa’s own history in its call for a negotiated end to the violence.⁷

Almost a week later, the UN General Assembly’s 11th Emergency Special Session passed a resolution denouncing Russian aggression against Ukraine and calling on Russian forces to withdraw.⁸ South Africa joined sixteen other African nations in abstaining (Eritrea voted against the resolution).⁹ Explaining their decision to abstain, Mathu Joyini, South Africa’s Permanent Representative to the UN, criticized the General Assembly resolution for “not creat[ing] an environment for diplomacy, dialogue, and mediation.” Furthermore, Joyini decried the process by which the resolution had been negotiated, expressing a preference for an open and transparent process: “This would have allowed us, as equal members of the Assembly to present our views and ideally reach a level of understanding before the text was tabled.”¹⁰

South Africa abstained again on the General Assembly resolution of March 24, 2022. Joyini’s statement explaining the vote differed from both her earlier pronouncements and those made by DIRCO. This statement continued to emphasize the need to prioritize the “human situation” and respond to the “humanitarian crisis” while seeking to situate the invasion in a broader spatial and chronological context. Invoking the US-led invasion of Iraq, Joyini drew attention to the millions dead and countless displaced by thirty years of western invasion and occupation. Anticipating accusations of “whataboutery,” Joyini said that drawing attention to conflict elsewhere in the world was simply “underscoring the point that many countries and their peoples suffer the consequences of wars that are not of their own doing.” Drawing again on South Africa’s own history of colonization and anti-colonial resistance, Joyini drew tacit links between western colonialism and the invasion of Ukraine, but nonetheless advocated a negotiated solution.¹¹

⁷ Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), “South African Government Calls for a Peaceful Resolution of the Escalating Conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine,” February 24, 2022 at <https://dirco.gov.za/south-african-government-calls-for-a-peaceful-resolution-of-the-escalating-conflict-between-the-russian-federation-and-ukraine/> (accessed March 31, 2024).

⁸ “General Assembly Overwhelmingly Adopts Resolution Demanding Russian Federation Immediately End Illegal Use of Force in Ukraine, Withdraw All Troops,” March 2, 2022 at <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12407.doc.htm> (accessed March 31, 2024).

⁹ Olayinka Ajala, “The Case for Neutrality: Understanding African Stances on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict,” *Journal of Military & Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2 (2022): 129–53, here 135.

¹⁰ DIRCO, “South Africa’s Statement in Explanation of Vote on Ukraine in the UN General Assembly Emergency Special Session,” March 2, 2022 at <https://dirco.gov.za/south-africas-statement-in-explanation-of-vote-on-ukraine-in-the-un-general-assembly-emergency-special-session-2-march-2022/> (accessed March 31, 2024).

¹¹ Mathu Joyini, “Explanation of Vote on the Humanitarian Resolution in Ukraine on the Occasion of the Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly on 24 March 2022,” March 24, 2022 at <https://dirco.gov.za/explanation-of-vote-on-the-humanitarian-resolution-in-ukraine-on-the-occasion-of-the-emergency-special-session-of-the-general-assembly-on-24-march-2022/> (accessed March 31, 2024). This position was reiterated in a statement by DIRCO spokesperson, Clayson Monyela: “South Africa calls for Humanitarian Assistance in Ukraine and Dialogue, Mediation and Diplomacy to End the Russia-Ukraine Conflict in the UN General Assembly,” March 24, 2022 at <https://dirco.gov.za/south-africa-calls-for-humanitarian-assistance-in-ukraine-and-dialogue-mediation-and-diplomacy-to-end-the-russia-ukraine-conflict-in-the-un-general-assembly/> (accessed March 31, 2024).

The Roots of Anti-imperial Nostalgia

For all their invocations of South Africa's experience, these statements elide one key aspect: the role of both Ukraine and Russia in South Africa's fight against apartheid. This stands in stark contrast to memoirs written by ANC and SACP members, whose time spent in the Soviet Union has been thoroughly woven into their revolutionary biographies.¹² Chris Hani, chief of staff of uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the paramilitary wing of the ANC, from 1987 to 1992, and General Secretary of the SACP from 1991 until his assassination in 1993 (coincidentally by a far-right immigrant from Communist Poland), was among the first group of MK activists to arrive in the Soviet Union in 1963. Writing in 1991 about his experiences nearly thirty years previously, Hani remarked: "How can the working class forget the Soviet Union? I went to Moscow when I was 21 for military training. I was accepted there and treated wonderfully."¹³

Ronnie Kasrils, a white South African who from the mid-1980s served concurrently on the National Executive Committee of the ANC and the Central Committee of the SACP and who spent time in Odesa undergoing military training, wrote in his memoirs of the transformative experience of life in the Soviet Union for many of his black comrades. "Virtually all of our contingent . . . were experiencing, for the first time in their lives, care and hospitality at the hands of white people. . . . For us, this was 'socialist solidarity' and 'proletarian internationalism' in practice. My colleagues . . . experienced non-racism for the first time in their lives."¹⁴ "To my colleagues," Kasrils concluded, "the general level of life was so far in excess of the living conditions they had known that Odessa [sic] was paradise by comparison."¹⁵ This mirrored, in more quotidian terms, the words of J. T. Gumede, ANC president from 1927 to 1930 who, following a trip to the Soviet Union in 1927 to mark the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution, proclaimed that "I have seen the new world to come, where it has already begun. I have been to the new Jerusalem."¹⁶

As Gumede's comments suggest, those South Africans who travelled to the Soviet Union in the years after the ANC and the SACP were banned built on a long history of convergence between anti-imperialism and Soviet socialism that stretched back to the earliest days of the Revolution.¹⁷ Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, the Soviet Union committed itself, albeit imperfectly and, arguably, hypocritically, to the cause of global anti-racism and anti-imperialism. South Africans were among the only African representatives at early meetings of the Communist International, where the "Native Republic" thesis advocating black-majority rule was passed at the Sixth Congress in 1928. It was in this period that leading members in the South African communist movement and the ANC travelled to Moscow for further training at the International Lenin School. Among these early visitors were Albert Nzula and Moses Kotane, both later secretaries-general of the SACP and members of the ANC.¹⁸

The drastic contrast between realities in apartheid South Africa and the Soviet Union helps explain why South Africans were among the most vociferous defenders of the Soviet

¹² For more on South Africans' reminiscences about their time in the Soviet Union, see D. A. Turianitsa and V. G. Shubin, "Vospominaniia uchastnikov bor'by protiv aparteida ob uchebe v SSSR (1960–1980-e gg.)," *Vostok (Oriens)* 5 (2021): 191–202.

¹³ *Star* (Johannesburg), December 11, 1991, quoted in Shubin, *Hot Cold War*, 242.

¹⁴ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 83.

¹⁵ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 89.

¹⁶ Quoted in H. J. Simons and R. E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850–1950* (Harmondsworth, 1969), 401–2.

¹⁷ For a useful discussion of the Soviet relationship with Black liberation, see Hakim Adi, "The Negro Question: The Communist International and Black Liberation in the Interwar Years," in Michael O. West, William G. Martin, and Fanon Che Wilkins, eds., *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International since the Age of Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 2009), 155–78.

¹⁸ For more on the South African reaction to the Russian Revolution, see Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson, "We, the South African Bolsheviks: The Russian Revolution and South Africa," *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, no. 4 (October 2017): 935–58. The appeal of the Russian Revolution extended well beyond South Africa. See, for example, Vijay Prashad, *Red Star Over the Third World* (London, 2019); Walter Rodney, *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World*, eds. Robin D. G. Kelley and Jesse Benjamin (London, 2018).

Union against accusations of racism. Following African student protests in Kyiv in early 1964, the president of the South African student community in the city, Kenneth Swakamisa, remarked that: “the actions of African students who gathered at this meeting and talked about alleged racism in the USSR are not reasonable. These students do not know what racism is at all.”¹⁹ Fanele Mbali, who likewise spent time in Kyiv as a student in the early- to mid-1960s, echoed these thoughts in his memoirs. Dismissing the protests of other African students, Mbali writes: “After all, the students who had demonstrated were sent by their governments from independent states while we were still fighting oppression.”²⁰ This was despite evidence from the Soviet authorities themselves that not only did African students face discrimination, but that South African students specifically had been targets of abuse.²¹ Looking back, Ronnie Kasrils was philosophical about these blind spots: “Perhaps we might have been more perceptive to the defects in the system had Western cold war propaganda been less hostile and hypocritical. While the West offered only pious statements about apartheid’s evils, the Soviet Union gave practical support. It appeared that their interests in seeing the end of colonialism and racism in Africa were similar to ours.”²²

We see the long shadow of this moral relativism in some of the reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in invocations of NATO’s intervention in Libya, of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the bombing of Belgrade. In an article in the *Daily Maverick* assailing the “West” for its “obsession” with Ukraine, Clayson Monyela, a spokesperson for DIRCO, wrote that “[i]t is time to recognise that the lives of brown people are no less valuable than others, and it is time to call out the big powers for their violations of international law and human rights, as well as their double standards.”²³ In this vision of the world, imperialism flies under the red, white, and blue flag. Just not *that* red, white, and blue flag.

Another area of convergence between South Africa and the Soviet Union worth considering is their common history of anti-racism and anti-fascism. The victory over Nazi Germany and the victory over apartheid have often been imagined as part of the same front against racism. In his introduction to Fanele Mbali’s autobiography, Pallo Jordan, a member of the ANC’s National Executive Committee from 1985 to 2014 and cabinet minister under President Thabo Mbeki wrote: “During the 20th century two movements attracted near universal support from all who considered themselves democrats. The first was the struggle against fascism/Nazism in Europe; the other was the struggle against apartheid/racism in South Africa.”²⁴

Admiration of the Soviet victory over fascism was not one simply of retrospective comparison. During the fight against apartheid, activists drew inspiration from and celebrated the Soviet victory over Nazism. Charles Nqakula remembers his “first experience of deep political debates” at Pango, Angola, where they commemorated the 40th anniversary of Germany’s surrender. After travelling to Moscow for further training, the memories of anti-fascism continued to appeal to Nqakula: “One of the traditions I thought we should borrow from the Russians was the way they celebrated and preserved the memory of the heroes of

¹⁹ Central State Archive of Public Organizations of Ukraine (TsDAHOU), f. 1, op. 24, spr. 5661, ark. 63–7, I. T. Shvets’ to A. D. Skaba, January 21, [1964], 65.

²⁰ Fanele Mbali, *In Transit: Autobiography of a South African Freedom Fighter* (Cape Town, 2012), 118.

²¹ TsDAHOU, f. 1, op. 24, spr. 5661, ark. 40–2, P. V. Kryven’ to TsK KPU, September 23, 1963. There is now an extensive literature on African students in the Soviet Union. For example, Constantin Katsakioris, “Burden or Allies? Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 3 (2017): 539–68; Riikkamari Johanna Muhonen, “‘Good Friends’ for the Soviet Union: The Peoples’ Friendship University in Soviet Educational Cooperation with the Developing World, 1960–1980,” (PhD diss., Central European University, 2022).

²² Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 82.

²³ Clayson Monyela, “Why is the Brenthurst Foundation Obsessed with Ukraine—What about Palestine, Yemen, Libya, Western Sahara?,” *Daily Maverick*, October 4, 2022 at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-10-04-why-is-the-brenthurst-foundation-obsessed-with-ukraine-what-about-palestine-yemen-libya-western-sahara/> (accessed March 31, 2024).

²⁴ Z. Pallo Jordan, “Preface,” in Mbali, *In Transit*, 9.

their revolution and the defence of the Motherland against the German invaders.” His favorite hero was Aleksandr Matrosov, who sacrificed himself to a German gunner to aid his comrades.²⁵ The fact that their instructors were themselves veterans of the Great Patriotic War added a further personal dimension to these comparisons, as did the contemporary struggle against the Portuguese dictatorship and, before 1979, the Smith government in Rhodesia.²⁶ In this context, Vladimir Putin’s spurious claims to have been de-Nazifying Ukraine has co-opted a particular moment of historic convergence between South Africa and the Soviet Union. The reports of racism directed against Africans fleeing Ukraine only served to reinforce this sense of shared interest.²⁷

One of the cruel ironies of the South African position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that much of the training of South African students and soldiers took place on Ukrainian soil, either at universities and institutes or at military training centers at Pereval’noe in Crimea or in Odesa.²⁸ When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia inherited not just its seat on the UN Security Council and its nuclear weapons; it seemingly inherited the Soviet Union’s anti-imperial mantle as well. This is not simply a post-Soviet phenomenon. Even as South African students studied in Ukraine, the conflation of “Soviet” and “Russian” was common enough that Ivan Dziuba, one of the leading figures of the sixties’ generation of Ukrainian dissidents, complained in his *Internationalism or Russification?* about the repeated elision of Ukrainian achievements in the minds of foreigners.²⁹ This was one reason that some Ukrainian nationalists came to imagine African visitors, ironically, as the face of Russian colonialism in Ukraine.³⁰

This juxtaposition between African and Ukrainian liberation has had a curious after-life following the 2014 Maidan Revolution, when the name of Lumumba Street in Kyiv—like Friendship University in Moscow, named for the murdered Congolese independence leader—was changed to John Paul II Street. Explaining the change, the Kyiv City Council stated that “[t]his decision will contribute to the democratization of Ukrainian society and its progress towards European values.”³¹ At the 2017 renaming ceremony, the Polish Ambassador to Ukraine remarked similarly that “Moscow does not want Ukraine to be part of a common European space, the space of peace and well-being.”³² As if to contrast the Ukrainian

²⁵ Charles Nqakula, *The People’s War: Reflections of an ANC Cadre* (Johannesburg, 2017), 164–68. On the strength of the mythology surrounding Matrosov, see Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “World War II Memories and Local Media in the Russian North: Velikii Novgorod and Murmansk,” in David L. Hoffmann, ed., *The Memory of the Second World War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* (Abingdon, 2022), 202–28, here 219.

²⁶ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 84; Jonathan Hyslop, Kasper Braskén and Neil Roos, “Political and Intellectual Lineages of Southern African Anti-Fascism,” *South African Historical Journal* 74, no. 1 (2022): 1–29.

²⁷ Kamogelo Segone, “Ukraine Conflict Shows Africans Still Fighting for Their Basic Human Rights,” *Daily Maverick*, March 2, 2022 at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-03-02-ukraine-conflict-shows-africans-still-fighting-for-their-basic-human-rights/> (accessed March 31, 2024); Rashawn Ray, “The Russian Invasion of Ukraine Shows Racism Has No Boundaries,” *Brookings Institution blog*, March 3, 2022 at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2022/03/03/the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-shows-racism-has-no-boundaries/> (accessed March 31, 2024); Tobore Ovuorie, “Ukraine: African Students Face Russian Missiles and Racism,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 9, 2022 at <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-war-african-students-face-russian-missiles-and-racism/a-61356066> (accessed March 31, 2024).

²⁸ Natalia Krylova, “Le centre Perevalnoe et la formation de militaires en Union soviétique,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 57, no. 226 (2017): 399–416.

²⁹ Ivan Dziuba, *Internationalism or Russification? A Study in the Soviet Nationalities Problem*, trans. M. Davis (New York, 1974), 92.

³⁰ On eastern Europe’s global imaginary of empire, see James Mark et al, *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, 2019), 173–218; James Mark, “Race,” in Paul Betts and James Mark, *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonization* (New York, 2022), 221–54.

³¹ “Vulytsiu Patrisa Lumumby v Kyievi pereimenuit’ na vulytsiu Ivana Pavla II,” *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, April 5, 2016 at https://zn.ua/ukr/UKRAINE/vulicyu-patrisa-lumumbi-v-kyievi-pereymenyut-na-vulicyu-ivana-pavla-ii-204750_.html (accessed March 31, 2024).

³² “U Kyievi urochysto vidkryly vulytsiu Ioanna Pavla II,” *Livyi bereg*, October 15, 2017 at https://lb.ua/news/2017/10/15/379325_kieve_torzhestvenno_otkrili_ulitsu.html (accessed March 31, 2024).

move towards Europe at the expense of Africa, in March 2023 Russia re-renamed Friendship University in Moscow after Patrice Lumumba, following extensive lobbying from the Congolese government.³³

Ukraine's growing self-identity as part of the "common European home" of which Mikhail Gorbachev spoke in the dying days of the Soviet Union contrasts with Russia's history of racial ambiguity.³⁴ As Hilary Lynd and I have emphasized, the question of Russia's whiteness has long been the subject of debate, both among Russians themselves and representatives of the Global South looking for allies in the fight against imperialism.³⁵ Emphasis on Russia's position between Europe and Asia, long a feature of its cultural landscape, has served to reinforce this ambiguity.³⁶ If there were questions about Russia's whiteness in the middle of the last century, however, they appear to have been answered in the present. The presence and growth of Soviet and post-Soviet racisms—against migrants from Central Asia, visitors and students from Africa, and Russia's Jewish population—reaffirms Russia's whiteness even as Putin seeks to coopt nostalgia for an imagined anti-western, non- (or not-quite-) white alliance.³⁷

Thinking beyond Nostalgia

Despite these enduring connections and convergences, there is a danger of over-determining South African-Russian relations in the present by concentrating solely on their shared past. Russia greeted the rise of Thabo Mbeki to the South African presidency with apprehension, for example, even though Mbeki studied in Moscow in the late 1960s and early 1970s.³⁸ Moreover, appeals to anti-imperial nostalgia risk ignoring those areas in the present in which South Africa and Russia share a common interest. Since 2010, South Africa has been a member, along with Russia, in BRICS. One of the features of the South African government's response to the Russian invasion has been an emphasis on risks to the global economy and the need to maintain grain exports through the Black Sea.³⁹ For a country reliant on grain from the region, and still struggling in the aftermath of Covid, violence in Europe is not just an abstract or ideological problem but one with real material consequences.⁴⁰

³³ "RUDN vernuli imia Patrisia Lumumby," TASS, March 23, 2023, at <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/17352875> (accessed March 31, 2024). Friendship University was first renamed after Lumumba in 1961, a year after its foundation.

³⁴ Mikhail Gorbachev, "Europe as a Common Home," Speech to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, July 6, 1989 at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/speech-mikhail-gorbachev-council-europe-strasbourg-europe-common-home> (accessed March 31, 2024). On the post-Soviet republics' differing relations with Europe, see Katherine E. Graney, *Russia, the Former Soviet Republics, and Europe since 1989: Transformation and Tragedy* (Oxford, 2019).

³⁵ Hilary Lynd and Thom Loyd, "Histories of Color: Blackness and Africanness in the Soviet Union," *Slavic Review* 81, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 394–417, here 405–406.

³⁶ On the history of Russian Eurasianism and its imperial antecedents, see contributions in Mark Bassin, Sergey Glebov, and Marlene Laruelle, eds., *Between Europe and Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism* (Pittsburgh, 2015).

³⁷ On Soviet and post-Soviet racisms, see Ian Law, *Red Racisms: Racism in Communist and Post-Communist Contexts* (Basingstoke, 2012); Nikolay Zakharov, *Race and Racism in Russia* (Basingstoke, 2015); Jeff Sahadeo, *Voices from the Soviet Edge: Southern Migrants in Leningrad and Moscow* (Ithaca, 2019).

³⁸ Samuel Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender?* (London, 2023), 62. On Mbeki's time in Moscow, see Mark Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (Johannesburg, 2007), 268–86.

³⁹ DIRCO, "South African Government Calls for a Peaceful Resolution of the Escalating Conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine," February 24, 2022 at <https://dirco.gov.za/south-african-government-calls-for-a-peaceful-resolution-of-the-escalating-conflict-between-the-russian-federation-and-ukraine/> (accessed April 15, 2024); DIRCO, "President Ramaphosa and President Putin Discuss Black Sea Grain Initiative," July 15, 2023 at <https://dirco.gov.za/president-ramaphosa-and-president-putin-discuss-black-sea-grain-initiative/> (accessed April 17, 2024).

⁴⁰ John Reidy, "Africa Particularly Vulnerable to Ukrainian Grain Loss," *World-Grain.com*, November 3, 2022 at <https://www.world-grain.com/articles/16609-africa-particularly-vulnerable-to-ukrainian-grain-loss> (accessed March 31, 2024). For more on dangers to the global food market, see Natalia Pryshliak et al, "The Sowing and

On a geopolitical level, South Africa has used the Russian invasion to make the case for a reinvention of the global balance of power and the democratization of global political institutions. A statement by South Africa's Cabinet released shortly after the invasion underlined this point: "We believe that developing countries must enjoy a greater share of voice and influence in institutions of global governance. South Africa therefore advocates for a more equitable international system and for the reform of multilateral institutions to promote greater equality."⁴¹ In this, South Africa shares much with Russia, which under Putin has been a consistent advocate of multipolarity as it seeks to carve out space for itself in a world dominated by the US and China.⁴² In his speech to the Munich Conference on Security Policy in 2007, Putin called for a "reasonable balance between the interests of all participants in the international dialogue." The economic potential of the BRIC countries (South Africa would not join until 2009) would, he argued, "inevitably be converted into political influence and will strengthen multipolarity."⁴³ For their part, closer relations between South Africa and Russia have been viewed by some within South Africa's government as a way of ensuring a greater voice for the Global South in world affairs.⁴⁴

The International Criminal Court's warrant for Putin's arrest is unlikely to dampen South Africa's calls for a more equitable international order. The ICC has long had a so-called "Africa problem" amid accusations of hypocrisy and a disproportionate focus on African countries and leaders as the perpetrators of violence in what some consider a continuation of imperial attitudes.⁴⁵ Questions about South Africa's commitment to the ICC have existed since at least 2015, when it refused to arrest Sudan's Omar al-Bashir when he attended a summit of the African Union outside of Johannesburg.⁴⁶ In the context of South African President Cyril Ramaphosa's claim that NATO is to blame for the invasion and South Africa's UN representative arguing that it is turning into another imperial proxy war, the ICC warrant has the potential to add to a growing sense of western dominance.⁴⁷

This commitment to a world beyond western hegemony in the 21st century has been likened to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in the last century.⁴⁸ While the memory of

Harvesting Campaign in Ukraine in the Context of Hostilities: Challenges to Global Energy and Food Security," *Polityka Energetyczna—Energy Policy Journal* 26, no. 1 (2023): 145–68; Natalia Mamonova, Susanne Wengle, and Vitalii Dankevych, "Queen of the Fields in Wartime: What Can Ukrainian Corn Tell Us About the Resilience of the Global Food System?," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 50, no. 7 (2023): 2513–38.

⁴¹ DIRCO, "Statement on the Cabinet Meeting of 9 March 2022," March 9, 2022 at <https://dirco.gov.za/statement-on-the-cabinet-meeting-of-9-march-2022/> (accessed March 31, 2024). The following day, the South African government announced a partnership with Aspen Pharmacare, Africa's largest pharmaceutical company, to assist the emergency evacuation of South African students who had been studying in Ukraine. See DIRCO, "Aspen Partners with South African Government to Evacuate South African Students from the Ukraine Conflict," March 10, 2022 at <https://dirco.gov.za/aspen-partners-with-south-african-government-to-evacuate-south-african-students-from-the-ukraine-conflict/> (accessed March 31, 2024).

⁴² Elena Chebankova, "Multipolarity in Russia: A Philosophical and Practical Understanding," in Benjamin Zala, ed., *National Perspectives on a Multipolar Order: Interrogating the Global Power Transition* (Manchester, 2021), 94–120.

⁴³ Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," February 10, 2007 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>, (last accessed October 18, 2023; no longer available).

⁴⁴ Ramani, *Russia in Africa*, 62.

⁴⁵ See the contributions in Kamari M. Clarke, Abel S. Kottnerus, and Eefje de Volder, eds., *Africa and the ICC: Perceptions of Justice* (Cambridge, Eng., 2016). On the Global South's evolving attitude towards international governance and neo-imperialism, see Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia, 2010).

⁴⁶ Franziska Boehme, "'We Chose Africa': South Africa and the Regional Politics of Cooperation with the International Criminal Court," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 11, no. 1 (2017): 50–70.

⁴⁷ Tim Cocks, "South Africa's Ramaphosa Blames NATO for Russia's War in Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 18, 2022 at <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/safricas-ramaphosa-blames-nato-russias-war-ukraine-2022-03-17/> (accessed March 31, 2024); Joyini, "Explanation of Vote on the Humanitarian Resolution in Ukraine."

⁴⁸ Monyela, "Why is the Brenthurst Foundation Obsessed with Ukraine?"

non-alignment may seemingly justify a neutral position, as Ravinder Kaur has pointed out, “the non-alignment project entailed more than keeping distance from bipolar world politics: it was an active mobilization to create a community of the decolonized nations. . . . It called for the freedom and independence of all those who remained colonized. To reduce this revolutionary politics to a mere question of neutrality or not-taking-sides is a misreading of the non-aligned movement that had galvanized the newly decolonized world.”⁴⁹ This contemporary de-radicalized non-alignment speaks to perhaps the most enduring continuity between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. A “global socialist ecumene” as envisioned by South African activists and their Soviet patrons failed to emerge.⁵⁰ What has endured is something closer to a global anti-western ecumene, robbed of its radical emancipatory ideology but committed to a world free of western hegemony.

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⁴⁹ Ravinder Kaur, “The Ukraine Question: How Should the South Respond?,” *International Politics* 60, no. 1 (2023): 264–68, here 266–67. For more on the revolutionary potential of the NAM, see contributions in Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH, 2010).

⁵⁰ On the “global socialist ecumene,” see Susan Bayly, “Vietnamese Narratives of Tradition, Exchange and Friendship in the Worlds of the Global Socialist Ecumene,” in Harry G. West and Parvathi Raman, eds., *Enduring Socialism: Explorations of Revolution and Transformation, Restoration and Continuation* (New York, 2008), 125–47.