

The Soviet influence on African thinkers after WWII

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Marxist ideas became central to African political organizing from the late 1940s through the 1970s—a development which took place at the same time that the Soviet Union emerged as a new global superpower. During and after WWII, the USSR (and Soviet doctrines of Communism) began to exert the most profound influence in Africa precisely at the time when the incredible emancipatory potential of the 1917 Russian Revolution had been obliterated by Joseph Stalin’s campaigns of mass state violence. What was left—the Soviet model of coercive, state-led economic development—was nevertheless appealing to many emerging African leaders who organized newly independent states.



The 1917 Russian Revolution had important repercussions in Africa, notably in the new connections formed between Black Marxists from the Americas and trade unionists and anti-colonial figures on the African continent. These links were primarily forged through the Comintern, the international body created in 1919 to coordinate the activity of revolutionary Marxists from across the globe. In the early years of the Comintern, representatives emphasized that the defeat of capitalism was impossible without a simultaneous struggle against both imperialism and racism on a global scale. The Comintern backed Pan-African initiatives that aimed to undermine European colonialism in Africa—and also challenged many white Communists in Europe who were reluctant to organize campaigns against racism and imperialism.

However, outside of South Africa and Egypt, the influence of the Communist movement in Africa before World War II remained extremely limited. Although the Comintern became an important resource for influential African intellectuals and trade unionists like Lamine Senghor and I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, their organizational initiatives were often short-lived due to colonial repression.

The Second World War created a dramatically new context, where anti-colonial movements burst through bounds of colonial illegality. This part of the article focuses on how Marxist ideas became central to African political organizing from the late 1940s through the 1970s—a development which took place at the same time that the Soviet Union emerged as a new global superpower.

I argue that the USSR (and Soviet doctrines of Communism) began to exert the most profound influence in Africa precisely at the time when the incredible emancipatory potential of the 1917 Russian Revolution had been obliterated by Joseph Stalin’s campaigns of mass state violence. What was left—the Soviet model of coercive, state-led economic development—was nevertheless appealing

to many emerging African leaders who organized newly independent states under the banner of African Socialism in the 1960s.

As I show below, African Marxists, workers, and students often rejected the limits of African Socialism, and led repeated mass uprisings and strike waves in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, this oppositional left usually failed to gain a substantial and sustained audience—both because of state repression and because they too struggled to break from the top-down models of ‘really existing socialism.’

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 greatly debilitated African Marxist organizations at a time when the imposition of neoliberalism by Western powers was ravaging African lives. But the past decade’s explosive wave of popular struggles has created the space for a return of Marxist organizations unfettered by the same Cold War frameworks.

Weakened Empires, Emboldened Anti-Colonialists, and a Revived Communist Movement

World War II created an opening for new waves of anti-colonial agitation around the world. Although most of the major imperial powers in Africa emerged victorious from the war (France, Britain, and Belgium), they nevertheless came out militarily and economically weakened. Moreover, the legitimacy of foreign occupation and systematic racism was being questioned on an international scale after the German conquest of Europe and the horrors of the Nazi-orchestrated genocide. The Allied powers now had to justify why their pledges to eradicate such injustice in Europe did not apply to their colonies—where forced labor, the absence of legal rights, and racial discrimination remained codified.

Having suffered exactions at home during the war and brutality on Europe’s battlefields in the name of defeating tyranny, many Africans believed that their sacrifices should be recognized with greater rights. (More than a million African troops joined or were forcibly conscripted into the French, British, and Belgian militaries.) During and immediately after the war, the continent was rocked by militant general strikes, boycotts of European stores, protests led by African war veterans, farmers withholding cash crops, campaigns demanding access to schools, and armed responses to settler colonialism—most notably the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya.



As space for political mobilization was pried open by these actions, many African activists turned to Marxist critiques of capitalism and imperialism. In part, this was due to the unique position held by the Soviet Union at the end of the war: it had been a part the Allied mobilization against the fascist powers, but at the same time claimed to represent an alternative to the exploitative practices of Western European colonial powers. Moreover, Communist Parties had played a major role in the resistance to fascism in Europe, most concretely in France, Italy, and Belgium—and in these places became mass political parties in the aftermath of the war. Their newfound popularity in Europe was also key to their appeal for African activists, who sought a viable alternative to the metropolitan parties who had overseen the colonial project up to that point, including Social Democratic parties. Thus, the Soviet Union and associated Communist organizations in Europe were the dominant representatives of ‘Marxism’ that most new African activists engaged with.

With the Comintern disbanded by Stalin in 1943 to ease Soviet relations with the West, concrete connections between African activists and Communist organizations largely took place through colonial metropolises. The tiny fraction of African students who were permitted to study at universities in Europe often engaged with the local left and read Marxist literature unavailable to them in Africa because of colonial censorship. African students abroad formed their own organizations, most notably the West African Students Association (WASU) in Britain and the Federation of the Black African Students in France (FEANF), which became venues for political debate and anti-colonial organizing in the 1950s.

As these groups established connections to Communist organizations, students gained scholarships to study in the Eastern Bloc, the Soviet Union, and China. It was through these links, for example, that a young Senegalese student, Majhemout Diop, spent three years in Romania in the mid-1950s where he began reading Marxist and Soviet writers in study groups. Upon returning to Senegal, Diop led the nascent Parti africain de l'indépendance (PAI), the country's first revolutionary Marxist political party, and the first to call for complete independence from France. As I note below, the PAI and its youth section played a key role in the decade that followed, training a core of new activists, even in the face of great repression, first from colonial authorities and then the Senegalese state.

Similarly, the Portuguese Communist Party played a major role in training the future leaders of anti-colonial movements in Cape Verde/Guinea-Bissau (Amilcar Cabral) and Angola (Agostinho Neto). At the same time, the growing ranks of African trade union militants attended trainings and conferences alongside European Communists. In the French colonies, Communist functionaries and trade unionists stationed in Africa were able to briefly organize openly after the war and created Communist Study Groups (GECs) across France's African empire. In these multi-racial groups, future African leaders like Modibo Keita, Madeira Keita, Sékou Touré, Gabrielle Lisette, and Ouezzin Coulibaly studied politics and theory with Communist activists from France. Moreover, as the French bowed to activist pressure and allowed a limited African electorate to choose representatives for the French National Assembly, the first pan-territorial party, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA) entered into a parliamentary alliance with the French Communist Party.

Emerging African political leaders and intellectuals had diverse reasons for allying with the Communists movement. The Soviet Union, with its anti-colonial and egalitarian roots in the Russian Revolution, seemed to offer a different model from Western European capitalism, which had produced little more than colonial pillage in Africa. Marxist analyses, particularly Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), which describes imperialism as the automatic outgrowth of the economic competition between capitalist states, resonated with many young African intellectuals and activists who passed around mimeographed copies.

Moreover, Communist prestige was enhanced by the Chinese Revolution of 1949, the Cuban revolution of 1960, and the armed struggle for Vietnamese independence led by Ho Chi Minh—a Communist who had worked alongside African Marxists like Lamine Senghor in the 1920s in Paris. These examples provided new evidence of Communist relevance for the colonized world just as most of Africa's colonies became formally independent countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

However, the relationship between African leaders and Communist organizations was quickly strained by the onset of the Cold War and the expulsion of Communists from Western European governments in the late 1940s. Some Africa anti-colonial leaders, like the leadership of the RDA, responded by dropping their alliance with European Communists, in exchange for mitigating state repression against their local trade unions and parties. But for a vocal minority, increased animosity toward Communists and the Soviet Union from the same governments that oversaw empires in Africa was interpreted as a reason to move *closer* to the Communist movement.

Exporting the Soviet Model

Even for new African political leaders who distanced themselves from Communist networks, the USSR still appealed as a model because it had cast aside its quasi-feudal inheritance to become an industrial and military superpower in just a few decades. The Soviet Union seemingly showed a way for colonized parts of the globe to rapidly overcome their impoverished and subordinate position in the global system.

The meteoric rise of the Soviet Union (and later China), however, had come about precisely through the abandonment of the principles of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

The Russian Revolution—as an emancipatory, democratic, mass revolution—lasted only a few years. Its collapse was rooted in two main factors: First, the civil war that was necessarily fought to defend the revolution devastated the Russian industrial economy and the working class—the social base that had led the Revolution. Second, the defeat of socialist revolutions outside of Russia in the decade that followed left the new state economically and militarily isolated. In the turmoil, Bolshevik leaders took a greater hand in state decision making, hoping in time to rebuild the democratic base of the Revolution.

But without functioning soviets (worker's councils), state bureaucrats held increased influence over the economy by 1923. At the close of the decade, a section of the bureaucracy led by Stalin had vanquished their opponents, often by violence, and silenced open debate within the ruling party.

In 1924, Stalin and his erstwhile ally Bukharin, had proclaimed the Soviet vision as 'socialism in one country'—a direct repudiation Lenin and Trotsky's insistence that Russia's socialist revolution was doomed if it could not spread to other countries. Instead, Lenin's ideas were posthumously distorted into Stalin's 'Marxism-Leninism,' which claimed that the resources of a single nation were enough to create a full-fledged socialist society, even when those resources were highly underdeveloped, as in Russia. By the end of the 1930s, 'socialism in one country' in the USSR amounted to state-led economic growth through many of the same brutal means as capitalism: the forcible expropriation of peasants from their land, the creation of a brutalized and exploited working class, and the use of massive prison labor systems.



Youth contingent marching in Brazzaville, Congo, circa 1966, with placards featuring Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara and other Third World leaders

Stalin justified these violent acts in a 1931 speech to industrial managers by concluding: 'We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this lag in ten years. Either we do it, or they crush us.'

Stalin's urgency was a response to trying to squeeze 'socialism in one country' into a system of global capitalism. The Soviet Union competed internationally with foes that were much more powerful in terms of both military and economic strength, and this forced the regime to generate its own accelerated processes of mass dispossession and exploitation in order to successfully compete.

To export 'socialism in one country' to the colonized world, Stalin began promoting two linked concepts in 1926: revolution by 'stages' and the 'bloc of four classes' (the latter popularized by Mao Zedong). These theories argued that since the creation of an indigenous bourgeoisie had been stifled by colonial rule, nations coming out of colonialism first needed to pass through a 'bourgeois-democratic' (or 'national democratic') stage of development. This required Communists to forge a strategic bloc that brought together intellectuals, peasants, workers, *and* the emerging 'nationalist bourgeoisie.' In this framework, class differences in the colonized world were secondary to cross-class alliances against imperialism. [1]

After Stalin's death, his theory was replaced with the concept of the 'non-capitalist path to development,' which like Mao's theory of 'New Democracy' sought to soften the distinctions between the 'national democratic' stage and the implementation of socialism. However, the concept of 'stages' of development and the necessity of an alliance with the 'nationalist bourgeoisie' remained strongly embedded ideas among most African Marxists.

The impact of Stalin and Mao's frameworks was twofold. First, Communist organizations in Africa (most importantly, in South Africa) tended to back the limited goals of the 'nationalist bourgeoisie,' while subsuming socialist demands that would have challenged them. Second, African Marxists often equated socialism with coercive state intervention aimed at rapidly increasing national revenue. As the following sections show, this core belief was shared both by post-colonial state leaders committed to 'African Socialism' and their 'Marxist-Leninist' critics, often reducing the struggle to a battle over who would control key positions within the state.

African Socialism(s)

Despite the appeal of the Soviet Union as a model for rapid national development and an alternative to Western hegemony, none of the incoming heads-of-state in sub-Saharan African countries identified themselves as Communists. This was no accident. Where possible, colonial powers attempted to facilitate a transfer of power to African leaders in the 1960s who were willing to safeguard the economic and diplomatic interests of the former metropole.

But even new state leaders who had held close connections to Communist networks in the 1940s and 1950s had reasons to be wary of the Soviet Union. The weakening of Western European empires had allowed Stalin to show his true colors as he expanded his empire by setting up subservient regimes across Eastern Europe after the war. In Africa, Stalin had even attempted to claim a Soviet mandate over Libya after the defeat of Italy. Perhaps more importantly, Stalin's attempts, since the late 1930s, to create an alliance with Britain and France in the face of a German threat had produced a strategy of downplaying former Comintern critiques of British and French imperialism. As a result, after World War II, European Communist parties were often important allies for African campaigns against certain brutal colonial *practices*—but ultimately defended 'their' empires in Africa. Moreover, the Soviet Union played little direct role in supporting anti-colonial movements in Africa until after Stalin's death in 1953.

Thus, wary of being forced to accept the tutelage of either of the major Cold War superpowers, African leaders like Gamel Abdel Nasser (Egypt), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), and Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), played important roles in the formation of an alternative: the Third World movement.

The Third World project brought together new heads of state from across the former colonized world in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with the aim of creating a bloc of newly-independent governments that could withstand the pressures of being dragged into either the United States' or the Soviet Union's Cold War spheres. The project sought to foster economic collaboration between member countries, spread decolonization, and offset the growing threat of nuclear annihilation. [2]

Across Africa, the Third World movement's commitment to Cold War non-alignment was translated into parallel domestic ideologies—usually under the umbrella term 'African Socialism'—that were adopted by more than two dozen African states in the early 1960s. In most cases, state leaders defined their vision as an amalgam of 'traditional' communal African social relations, Marxism, and Christian or Islamic values. African socialisms sought to propose a distinctly African response to the challenges of decolonization, one that did not fit into the ideologies of either West or East.

Nevertheless, African Socialisms were a response to the exploitative nature of colonial capitalism and reflected an openness to the anti-capitalist ideas of Marxism. Equally significant, by framing African Socialism as a revival of past egalitarian social structures and invoking shared religious values, state leaders used it to make calls for national (or even continental) unity as they took the helm of former colonies whose borders had been carved out by European powers with little regard for the boundaries of pre-colonial societies.

Fundamental to these visions of African Socialism were two common tenets: a) pre-colonial African societies had been essentially communal and undivided by social class and b) colonial capitalism had not fundamentally changed this dynamic, having purposely refused to allow for the creation of an African bourgeoisie, and having created a relatively small industrial working class.

Crucially, this entailed a rejection of the notion that class struggle was a necessary component of establishing socialism in Africa. The state could thus bring socialism because it transcended class. The *only* 'class' struggle was instead between rich and poor countries.

African Socialisms thus embodied both the desire to withstand being pulled into a Communist Cold War sphere *and* the allure of the Soviet and Chinese models, which seemed to hold the key lessons for how to drive rapid economic development without a reliance on Western capital. The experience of two of the boldest advocates of African socialism—Nkrumah in Ghana and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania—illustrate the limits of this framework.

Nkrumah's Revolution

In 1951, Nkrumah and his Convention People's Party (CPP) rode a wave of popular protest to secure limited self-government in the British colony of the Gold Coast. Six years later, the colony became the first to become a new sovereign nation in sub-Saharan Africa, which Nkrumah, as head of state, renamed Ghana.

For the first decade of Nkrumah and the CPP's dominance in Ghanaian politics (1951-1961), the party sought to maintain enough pressure on colonial authorities to assure an eventual transfer of political power, while simultaneously assuring both colonial authorities and foreign businesses that they would be 'responsible' successors. This entailed two important actions: First, non-interference in the economy controlled by foreign businesses and cocoa trading companies; and second, the elimination of Communists and other radicals from the ranks of the party and their suppression in the trade unions. [3]

Despite Nkrumah's call for industrialization, the modernization of agriculture, and the diversification of the economy, the CPP left these tasks to private investors. The cocoa boom of the 1950s brought in huge amounts of revenue for the new administration, which, like the previous colonial marketing board, set the price paid to farmers at less than the price of cocoa on the international market. Some of this income was used to build up public services in the cities and towns (where the CPP was strongest) and buy the allegiance of small farmers for the CPP, but the administration decided to keep most of the revenue as reserves in British banks to appease British authorities. Paradoxically, while this national income was sequestered abroad, Nkrumah struggled to attract foreign investors.

Nevertheless, by 1960, CPP leaders had parlayed their increasing political power into economic gain. Even if the Ghanaian economy's wealth lay primarily in the hands of foreign businesses and traders, its activity was still managed by the state through customs, tariffs, taxes and the awarding of contracts. As CPP leaders increasingly took over these 'gatekeeping' functions of the colonial state, the party became the vehicle for creating a new African ruling class in Ghana.

In 1960-61, Nkrumah pronounced the need for a 'second revolution,' heavy in Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, which was to consist of a push toward rapid industrialization, increased collaboration with the Communist world, and greater participation of the masses in national politics. The 'second revolution' was partially intended to challenge the sclerosis of the CPP old guard, who had found great profit in their positions as state managers.

Nkrumah's new push was troubled from the start. First, with international cocoa prices falling by the late 1950s, Nkrumah's efforts to industrialize exposed the extent to which new African nations were still subject to the whims of private Western capital. In speeches during this time, he argued that if the country did not industrialize quickly, it would be strangled by neocolonialism.

Since the early 1950s, the cornerstone of Nkrumah's vision had been a major dam project on the Volta River that would provide electricity for an integrated aluminum processing industry based on locally-mined bauxite. After partnerships with Canadian and British mining companies fell through, the Kennedy administration eventually backed a US investment in the dam that required Nkrumah to make a series of concessions to benefit US aluminum firms, thereby eviscerating Ghanaian goals for the project. [4]

Nkrumah had secured funding for the dam from the US by playing the Cold War superpowers off one another, but this strategy, more often than not, made potential funders on both sides more wary to commit. Although the Soviets were outspoken in their support for African independence and economic solidarity, in practice, they could not—or chose not to—compete with Western capital in Africa in the 1960s.

Nkrumah's tenure as head of state was ultimately crippled not only by the fickleness of foreign investors, but by his personalization of power and elimination of democracy. Despite Nkrumah's regular exhortation of the need to implement 'Leninist' party-building principles, his vision of 'Leninism' was not that of Lenin, but of Stalin's rigidly authoritarian distortion. Thus, Nkrumah's call in the 1960s for the increased participation of the masses entailed integrating mass organizations, notably the trade unions, into the CPP machinery. Far from giving the rank-and-file more say in government decisions, this move served to bring them increasingly under the weight of the CPP bureaucracy and eliminate their autonomy.

Simultaneously, Nkrumah's means of challenging the entrenchment of the party's 'old guard' was to elevate himself further above the bureaucrats. Dissenters of all political orientations—including leaders of the 1961 strike of rail and port workers—were repressed and/or co-opted into Nkrumah's regime. In the early 1960s, Nkrumah clung to the belief that the CPP was the vehicle through which socialism could be brought to Ghana, but there was a crucial contradiction in his vision: The party had been created not as a party of social revolution, but of the Africanization of existing colonial institutions. Party leaders (Nkrumah included) had previously acted to silence those who had called for revolutionary change and the party was now home to most of the members of the new Ghanaian ruling class, who were happy to profit while Nkrumah called the shots.

In 1966, Nkrumah was overthrown in a military coup—with the connivance of CIA officials. But despite his immense consolidation of authority, there was little pushback against the coup. The trade unions and other mass organizations that could have defended Nkrumah had been demobilized and

demoralized through their forced integration into the CPP and their exclusion from genuine political and economic decision making.

Nyerere's Ujamaa

Nearly all of the newly independent African states faced Nkrumah's dilemma: a desire to implement a national development plan, but a continued reliance on foreign investment. Julius Nyerere, the first Prime Minister, and then President, of Tanzania echoed many of Nkrumah's ideas about the need for African unity to combat imperialism and neo-colonialism in Africa. Like Nkrumah, Nyerere critiqued the capitalist changes brought about by colonial rule and instead argued that 'traditional African society' provided a natural model for modern socialism. Thus, for Nyerere, socialism in post-colonial Africa would not be based on class struggle. Rather 'true socialism [was] an attitude of mind'—borne of a personal commitment to unity, hard work, and the selflessness that he believed animated life before colonialism.

However, only with the Arusha Declaration in 1967 did Nyerere's theory (Ujamaa, meaning 'familyhood' in Kiswahili) become more clearly bound to an economic program. Tanzania's own frustrating dependence on foreign investors drove Nyerere to turn to the rural population as the driver of capital accumulation, in what he called a policy of 'self-reliance.' Like Nkrumah, he disparaged trade unionists whose incomes exceeded the national average, as well as urban 'idlers,' whom Nyerere argued had not existed in 'traditional' Africa. His attempt to reorganize the dispersed rural population into collective agricultural schemes (Ujamaa villages) began in 1968, rooted in Nyerere's vision of creating voluntary, democratic villages as a means of improving production and distribution—with limited financial investment from the state.

For Nyerere, the Ujamaa village system was the way out of national poverty, and the need to implement it quickly was not up for debate. But most of rural population was not persuaded by the regime's developmental paternalism, so between 1973 and 1975, millions were relocated by force. The turn to coercion—often directly under the president's command—undermined any chance for the local empowerment that Nyerere had emphasized. Tanzania's collectivization of agriculture failed to bring in the revenue that was needed to drive other development plans and the program soon collapsed. In less than a decade, the country had become more, not less, dependent on imported food and food aid; and by the 1980s, the country was mired in massive debt. [5]



Youth organizations rally following the revolution in Brazzaville, Congo (1965)

Nkrumah and Nyerere's visions of socialism shared many key components: a belief that socialism was inherent to African societies; that capitalism and class society had been introduced to Africa by European colonialism; and that therefore nationalism and socialism could be merged into a single project.

In practice, the policies of African Socialism in Ghana and Tanzania mirrored much of the thinking behind 'socialism in one country'—that a single-party state could forcibly implement development programs that would allow Africa to 'catch up' with the West. While Nyerere was deeply hostile to the Soviet Union, his policies drew directly from a similar model of rural sacrifice—that of China's

ultimately disastrous Great Leap Forward (1958-60). In the final instance, due to the fickle nature of foreign investment, he believed that the state's capital accumulation needed to be achieved through the 'sacrifices' of workers and farmers.

These policies required the suppression of any political or economic forces that might disrupt this accumulation—independent trade unions, uncooperative farmers, student associations, rival political parties, and ethnic nationalists. Thus, proponents of African Socialism sought to use their newfound authority and economic clout to remake colonies into more equitable and prosperous independent nations, but they did so with the belief that only unquestioning allegiance to their vision would make this possible.

Avowedly socialist regimes like Nkrumah's and Nyerere's spent a substantial amount of state revenue on social services, the expansion of education, and medical care. But such spending, as crucial as it was, could hardly make up for decades of colonial neglect and an ever-growing demand. They also attempted to develop state-run industries, but most collapsed by the end of the 1970s as they were unable to compete with inexpensive foreign imports. To make matters worse, the value of most African exports (agricultural and mineral) dropped on the international market during the crises of that decade, which further undermined national budgets. [6]

Despite the limitations of their domestic policies, the value of Nkrumah's and Nyerere's commitment to supporting other anti-colonial struggles in Africa was incalculable—as was their role in popularizing ideas of socialism in Africa. Moreover, because of their efforts, Pan-Africanism and Socialism became deeply intertwined on a global scale for the first time since the 1920s and 1930s, as struggles for Black liberation in Africa nourished struggles in the diaspora and vice-versa. [7]

Marxist Critiques of African Socialism

By the late 1960s, theories of African Socialism had come under increasing criticism from African Marxists—particularly those in student organizations and trade unions. Many had questioned the precepts of African Socialism even before independence and by the middle of the decade these small groups of radicals across the continent generally organized around two common grievances. First, they argued that the leaders of single-party regimes in Africa had used control of the state to accumulate wealth, thereby becoming a new African ruling class—often decried as a 'bureaucratic bourgeoisie.' For these critics, growing inequality in post-colonial societies gave the lie to the claim made by leaders like Nyerere that class differences within new African states were inconsequential. Second, Marxists and other radicals were often the most vocal opponents of the suppression of democratic rights under 'socialist' governments (including fighting for the right to organize outside of the single-party apparatus).

Although these oppositional currents had existed even before formal independence, radicals found new audiences after independence, particularly among the growing populations of urban students, school-leavers and unemployed young men who were dissatisfied with the failure of African Socialism to substantially raise living standards.

Revolutionary Marxists were often able to have a significant impact on the direction of national and regional politics in the 1960s and 1970s disproportionate to their small numbers. This stemmed in part from their influence among the ranks of university students, civil servants, teachers, industrial and financial workers, all of whom were necessary components in state plans for advancing 'national development.' A serious strike in any of these sectors—even at universities—was nothing short of a direct attack on the government. Moreover, because formal political opposition parties in most post-colonial Africa states were outlawed, protests led by student and trade union organizations (where Marxists were often the most rooted) generally became the vehicle for popular grievances that found

no place for expression in single-party apparatuses.



Cairo University students crossing the Qasr El-Aini Bridge on their way to Parliament on 24 February 1968

The first remarkable example took place in Congo-Brazzaville. In 1963, trade unions called mass demonstrations to prevent the formation of a single-party state that within days had forced the resignation of the entire government under President Fulbert Youlou. In the political vacuum that was created, a small group of students, recent graduates, and young civil servants in their twenties began to position themselves as the intellectual leaders of Congo's revolution. Through their newspaper, *Dipanda*, and the organization of mass independent youth organizations, they promoted a Marxist transformation in Congo that was in tension with the new president's version of African Socialism. In just a few years, they had recruited thousands of youth activists some who were elevated into positions within the government, and pushed through a number of changes: the expulsion of French troops based in Congo; the nationalization of the education system (previously under the control of foreign administrators and missionaries); and the nationalization of the French companies that had held a monopoly over the provision of water and electricity. [8]

After 1968, a quasi-military coup resulted in the suppression of Congo's autonomous Marxist youth organizations. But that same year mass uprisings swept the globe—including in Africa. In May 1968, university students in Senegal called a general strike in response to government proposals to cut their scholarships. It was not the first time students had openly challenged the regime of Léopold Senghor, who claimed to adhere to a version of African Socialism. But this time, the brutal response of the police triggered a nationwide strike of secondary students, a general strike of workers in the capital of Dakar and an explosion of street battles with police in Dakar's African neighborhoods. Although Senghor eventually regained control of the situation, (in part due to the intervention of the French military), he was forced to grant a number of concessions to both the students and trade unions in the years that followed. Central to the student and trade union actions were activists who were associated with (or had been trained by) the *Parti Africain de l'indépendance* (PAI) or its youth wing—the outlawed 'Marxist-Leninist' party that had been formed by Majhemout Diop in the late 1950s, noted above. [9]

That same year, in Egypt multiple upheavals led by industrial workers and students offered the first real popular challenge to the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser controlled a single-party state operating under the banner of Arab Socialism—a formulation with similarities to African Socialism. Nasser combined highly authoritarian rule with policies that greatly expanded educational opportunities and social services, nationalized and expanded industry and sought to make Egypt a beacon of Third World solidarity. But these gains from above could not prevent frustrations from boiling over: Egypt's military defeat to Israel in 1967 and government proposals to limit the number of students who could advance to the country's universities triggered two waves of strikes and demonstrations that quickly turned into movements for greater political freedom, with small groups of Marxist critics of Nasser playing a significant role.

In Nyerere's Tanzania, a circle of leftist students from across Africa formed the University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF) at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1967. The USARF was inspired in part by the presence of Marxist faculty like Walter Rodney and visiting speakers including Samir Amin, Angela Davis and the C.L.R. James. The USARF's publication, *Cheche*, meant 'spark' in Kiswahili—a reference to the revolutionary newspaper of the same name originally managed by Vladimir Lenin. [10] The paper attempted to popularize the ideas of Fanon, Lenin, Mao, and the Marxist anti-colonial leader of Guinea-Bissau, Amilcar Cabral. Moreover, it took direct aim at 'the so-called 'African Socialism[s]' that have sprouted up everywhere in Africa,' including publishing Issa Shivji's trenchant critique of the Arusha Declaration.

The government responded by banning the magazine and the USARF. An article in the state newspaper on the banning was particularly revealing: 'The youth of Tanzania can be as radical and as revolutionary as they wish, provided they do this through the institutionalized organs of the people'; i.e. through the official organs of the party-state. [11] Yet, struggles continued to shake Nyerere's regime. In response to a new set of party guidelines in 1971, workers in state-owned as well as private industries launched a two-year wave of strikes (illegal at the time), expelled managers, and occupied factories—until Nyerere unequivocally condemned the workers and evicted them by force.

The history of these and similar struggles in the 1960s and 1970s reveal three recurring themes. First, there was a marked shift among many young activists away from ideas of African Socialism and toward what they often termed Marxism-Leninism (the term carried a slightly different connotation than Stalin's original formulation). In the thinking of many young African radicals at the time, their Marxism-Leninism was based on the idea that class struggle was necessary both to challenge neo-colonial powers *and* new African ruling classes. Moreover, it was a rejection of the supposedly cultural roots of 'African Socialism' in favor of a more universal path toward socialism that derived from the examples of the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba.

This turn was partially a response to the failures of African Socialist governments to deliver equality and rising living standards—leading many young people to find new inspiration in the China's 'Cultural Revolution' and the Cuban Revolution. But also the increasingly polarizing impact of Cold War interventions in Africa made any attempt to remain on a 'third' path increasingly difficult. The threat of outside intervention, particularly from the West, pushed many Marxists into one or another Communist camp.

As many radicals argued that there were class differences and a class struggle to be waged *within* African countries, they also argued that the model of a single 'mass' party, open to all, was counterproductive. Instead, many promoted a model whereby smaller parties of 'genuine' revolutionaries needed to gain control of the state to set it on a truly Marxist orientation. However, critics of African Socialism generally shared a key belief with those they opposed: that socialism was a top-down, state-centered project—not one truly based on mass democracy in the sense that Marx (and Lenin) had argued. Consequently, they generally hoped to sweep into positions of authority on the back of mass uprisings or through military actions.

The notion that socialism could be orchestrated by small minority 'on behalf' of people was perhaps the cruelest legacy of the collapse of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the rise of the bureaucracy around Stalin. To be clear, by the 1960s, the Soviet Union no longer monopolized concepts of Marxism: China, Cuba, Trotskyism, and hybrid interpretations of Marxism that blended aspects of these and an internationalist Black Power framework all claimed to be following in the footsteps of Lenin and the Bolsheviks of 1917. Thus, the ranks of independent Marxists also expanded sharply in the 1960s—with Issa Shivji in Tanzania, Amady Aly Dieng in Senegal, Ange Diawara in Congo, and the Trotskyist Edwin Madunagu in Nigeria being only a few of the many who became well known

during this period through their writings and organizing.

By the early 1970s, Marxist opposition currents had become strong enough to force African governments to not only attempt to co-opt individuals (which became common practice in Nigeria) but also entire revolutionary movements. Such was the case in Congo-Brazzaville when a group of young military officers took control of the Congolese revolution and suppressed the independent organizing of students and workers in the name of creating a 'Marxist-Leninist' government. Even more devastating was the loss of the 1974 popular revolution in Ethiopia, as power fell to a military junta, the Derg, that coopted the radicalism of the workers strikes and student protests to create a new authoritarian state that also claimed to represent Marxism-Leninism. [12]

Armed Struggles and the Role of the Communist World

The development of oppositional Marxist currents in independent African countries in the 1960s both inspired and were inspired by armed struggles led by avowed Marxists in places still under colonial rule. By the middle of the decade, anti-colonial agitation had shaken off French, Belgian and British rule in most of Africa; but in some parts of the continent, colonial and white-minority regimes remained unwilling to concede anything more than symbolic reforms. This was notably true in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, the settler states of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa—and South Africa's own colony, Southwest Africa (Namibia).

Given the weakness of the domestic Portuguese economy, the rigid, fascist Portuguese dictatorship refused to envision a future without its African colonies—particularly resource-rich Angola. Similarly, the white-minority regimes in Southern Africa were determined to maintain their authority after witnessing the defeat of white settler communities in Kenya and Algeria at the hands of guerrilla movements.

Thus, while formal colonial rule in most of Africa was coming to an end by the late 1950s, African agitation through petitions, strikes, and peaceful protest in the Portuguese and settler colonies was still met with bloody repression—infamously demonstrated by the massacre of students in Sharpeville, South Africa in March 1960. Similarly, between 1956 and 1959, the leading anti-colonial party in Guinea-Bissau, the *Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde* (PAIGC), focused on the mobilization of urban residents in the capital, culminating in a port strike in 1959. The Portuguese refused to negotiate and instead killed at least fifty of the strikers in Bissau.

Facing the entrenched violence of the regimes, anti-colonial activists in the Portuguese and settler colonies felt that they had few strategic options. Most adopted a two pronged approach in the early 1960s: rural-based guerrilla struggle alongside international diplomatic campaigns. Following the massacre of strikers in Bissau, the small PAIGC, under the leadership of Amílcar Cabral, took refuge in neighboring Guinea-Conakry and began to organize incursions into Guinea-Bissau in order to launch a rural insurgency—a strategy that was adopted at nearly the same time by anti-colonial organizations in Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa.

Although African proponents of armed struggle came from diverse political backgrounds, Marxists were central. The interconnected turn toward Marxism-Leninism and armed struggle by the late 1960s was influenced by a few important factors. First, the Cuban and Vietnamese examples seemed to offer evidence that a small core of radicals could develop a rural army and defeat more powerful militaries in order to bring Marxism to the Third World. Second, Cold War rivalries that pitted the Soviet Union and Cuba, on the one hand, against the United States and South Africa, on the other, were increasingly playing out as 'hot' wars in Africa.



Amilcar Cabral of the PAIGC and Fidel Castro

The United States had already established friendly regimes by violent means—most notably by backing the assassination of Congo’s Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba in 1961 and supporting the rise of General Joseph Mobutu. The continued US alliance with the Portuguese dictatorship (who the US saw as a bulwark against Communism) amounted to support for its colonial wars. Meanwhile, the Cubans had been active in backing leftist forces in central Africa since the early 1960s. By the late 1960s the Soviet Union (often via Cuba) began to seriously back viable armed groups that could gain state power in Southern Africa.

The armed struggles in Portugal’s African colonies, particularly the success of the PAIGC eventually triggered a revolutionary upsurge *in Portugal* that resulted in the overthrow of the dictatorship and the independence of the colonies in 1974-75. In Angola in particular, the new situation brought about direct intervention from competing Cold War powers, as each supported opposing forces vying for control over the new national government. This was more than a proxy war—a massive Cuban force of tens of thousands of troops (brought to Angola by the Soviet Union and equipped with Soviet weapons) fought against South African troops backed by the CIA—as well as against Chinese-supported forces in the north. The Cuban/Soviet intervention eventually secured the hegemony of a faction of the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) behind Aghostino Neto—which remains Angola’s ruling party today. [\[13\]](#)

It is important to note that as with the oppositional Marxist organizations of the 1960s, the self-proclaimed Marxist organizations leading armed struggles in the 1970s were *not* the product of foreign intervention. Quite to the contrary, the Soviet Union usually found itself having to respond to African Marxists who reached out to them (or operated independently). And the Soviet regime’s decision to back these forces was not largely due to ideological agreement. Rather, the Soviets felt more comfortable backing a small core of fighters—with whom they could more easily negotiate—than mass, democratic opposition movements.

Unfortunately, the post-independence records of the PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau, the MPLA in Angola, and FRELIMO in Mozambique are beyond the scope of this piece, but nevertheless followed a familiar pattern: ‘socialism’ as the implementation of policies by a small group of enlightened state leaders coupled with the suppression of popular organizations and demands outside state control. By late 1970s, a number of purportedly ‘Marxist-Leninist’ governments, from Angola to Ethiopia, operated in Africa, but were increasingly divorced from any connection to popular struggle or even any discernable commitment to socialism.

The Collapse of the Cold War Left and the Seeds of Socialism Revival

Although the Soviet Union had been slow to commit to the financial and diplomatic backing of new African governments in the initial years after independence, by the 1980s, it had developed a number of African client regimes who relied on Soviet support. The collapse of the East Bloc and then the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s dealt a swift blow to these governments, as well as other leftist organizations on the continent who also relied on Soviet patronage. At the same time, African governments on both sides of the Cold War divide had been driven more and more deeply into debt and by the 1980s following the financial crises of the 1970s. They soon faced pressure from

international lenders—notably Western financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—to gut social services, lay off huge swathes of public sector workers, devalue currencies, and privatize national industries in order to receive desperately needed loans to keep their governments operational.

The impact of these ‘structural adjustment programs’ on the vast majority of Africans was devastating. As protests swept Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, Africans too were in revolt, often led by trade unionists that forced an end (at least temporarily) to single-party rule both in regimes allied to both the United States and those allied to the USSR. While these mass upheavals certainly represented a rejection of the decades-long suppression of democratic rights, they were equally spurred by anger over the effects of structural adjustment. But at the time, Marxist ideas in Africa had been largely discredited—both by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the use of ‘Marxism-Leninism’ as a cover for some authoritarian African states. Thus, this moment of great possibilities in Africa at the early 1990s generally deteriorated into a deeper implementation of neoliberalism, a new imperial scramble for African resources, even greater levels of social inequality, civil wars, and the return of single-party rule. [14]

The past twenty-five years, however, have set the stage for revivals of socialist organization in Africa. [15] Despite their contradictions, the legacies of Nkrumah and Nyerere have become touchstones for young activists and workers across the continent who have evoked a return to some form of socialism as an alternative to the horrors of neoliberalism. [16] Similarly, the legacy of Thomas Sankara, the outspoken Marxist leader of Burkina Faso (1983-1987), was invoked by protesters and strikers in the 2011 and 2014 upheavals that finally forced reviled president Blaise Compaoré to resign after 27 years in power. And as Adam Mayer has recently documented, the impact of diverse Nigerian Marxists has carried on into present-day labor and gender organizing—most notably in Nigeria’s nine general strikes in the past twenty years. [17]

The current decade has seen struggles erupt across the continent led by working people against the suppression of democratic rights and the poverty induced by decades of neoliberal economic policies. These movements have put front-and-center the questions of how social equality and an end to imperialism (in all its forms) can truly become realizable. In these struggles, socialist ideas and organizations have space to grow (or emerge) without the weight of the top-down frameworks adopted by African Socialist governments (as well as most of their left-wing opponents) in the past. The ideological influence of Stalin and Mao is no longer, and that has created more space for visions of socialism in Africa based in mass struggle and democratic participation—the same revolutionary principles that made the 1917 Russian Revolution such an inspiring touchstone for Marxists around the globe one hundred years ago.

But the Bolsheviks of 1917 also argued that since imperialism and colonialism were global in nature, socialist states—especially those with minority working classes—could not simply delink from such exploitative relationships. Nor could they rely on the formation of alternative blocs of states that were then forced to compete on an international capitalist market with stronger powers. Such measures could perhaps stave off the collapse of a revolution, but not sustain it without forcing socialist countries to adapt to the demands of capitalist competition.

Instead, the internationalism of the early Comintern insisted that the liberation of the masses of people on opposite ends of the colonial relationship was bound together into a joint struggle against capitalism. In the terms of post-colonial Africa, this has meant that the struggles against capitalism in the imperialist centers and those against ruling classes in Africa need to be fought in tandem through links of solidarity and shared interests. That principle from 1917 is also still critical today.

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Featured Photograph: W. E. B. Du Bois, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Majhemout Diop, Zhou Yang and Mao Dun at the Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Tashkent, October 1958.

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P.S.

Review of African Political Economy

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Footnotes

[1] Michael Löwy argues that the principles of revolution by stages and the bloc of four classes 'became so strongly rooted in the thinking of non-Western communist parties that, after Stalin's dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, they remained accepted theory even by those communists such as Mao and Ho who departed from them in practice.' See Löwy's *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (Haymarket, 2010), p. 83-84.

[2] When Ghana became independent in 1957, Nkrumah linked the goals of the Third World project to his call for the unification of the continent in the form of a 'United States of Africa'—which he promoted by hosting a congress of anti-colonial parties from across Africa in 1958 in Accra.

[3] Former ROAPE editor Jitendra Mohan's 'Nkrumah and Nkrumaism,' in *Socialist Register* (1967) remains an important assessment of the Nkrumah era, as does Jeffrey Ahlman's recent *Living with Nkrumahism* (2017).

[4] US funders required the dam project to be greatly scaled back and required concessions: US companies would not process alumina from Ghana, but bring in their own supplies from Jamaica, ending the dream of a fully integrated national aluminum industry; the Ghanaian government was required to provide electricity at deeply discounted rates to the new US plants; and Nkrumah had to agree to tone down his anti-imperial rhetoric before the Kennedy administration would sign on. See Stephan Miescher, 'Nkrumah's Baby': the Akosombo Dam and the Dream of Development in Ghana, 1952-1966' (2014).

[5] Issa Shivji's 'Mwalimu and Marx in Contestation: Dialogue or Diatribe?' (2017) provides an excellent introduction to Nyerere's political relationship to Marxism as well as his Marxist critics. Recent works by Priya Lal and Leander Schneider have been valuable for understanding the relationship between Ujamaa in theory and in practice.

[6] To be clear, the problems and limitations outlined in the above section were not specific to 'African Socialist' governments. They were equally common among new African regimes who openly rejected any association with socialism.

[7] Excellent works on the importance of Nkrumah and Nyerere's message for Black activists in the United States include Kevin Gaines' *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* and Seth Markle's *A Motorcycle on Hell Run: Tanzania, Black Power, and the Uncertain Future of Pan-Africanism, 1964-1974*.

[8] On this period of the Congolese Revolution see Matt Swagler and Héloïse Kiriakou, 'Autonomous Youth Organizations' Conquest of Political Power in Congo-Brazzaville, 1963-1968' (2016) as well as the work of Jérôme Ollandet, Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, and Françoise Blum. Pedro Monaville has published important work on the actions of students and the Marxist left in neighboring Congo-Kinshasa during the same period.

[9] In addition to Abdoulaye Bathily's groundbreaking analysis of 1968 in Senegal, recent research on 1968 has been published by Omar Gueye, Françoise Blum, Pascal Bianchini, Burleigh Hendrickson, and Matt Swagler.

[10] Similarly inspired by *Iskra*, a weekly paper named *The Spark* was established under Nkrumah in Ghana the early 1960s.

[11] Quoted in Andrew Ivaska, *Cultured States: Youth, Gender, and Modern Style in 1960s Dar Es Salaam* (2011), p 170. See Ivaska's work and Shivji's 'Mwalimu and Marx' for more on the tensions between radical students and the TANU government.

[12] It is equally important to note that strong Communist Parties in opposition, such as in South Africa and Sudan, were violently repressed in the 1950s and 1970s, respectively.

[13] Piero Gleijeses and Odd Arne Westad have recently provided important overviews of Cuban and Soviet interventions in Africa, respectively.

[14] Lee Wengraf's *Extracing Profit: Imperialism, Neoliberalism and the New Scramble for Africa*, is essential reading on both the recent form of foreign exploitation in Africa, imperial competition between the US and China, and African resistance to both local and international ruling classes.

[15] Good resources are Leo Zeilig's edited volume, *Class Struggle and Resistance in Africa* (2009) and Zeilig and Peter Dwyer's *African Struggles: Today Social Movements Since Independence* (2012).

[16] This is particularly evident, for example, in the recent organizing of the bus drivers union in Tanzania, but also new activist groups like the Tanzanian Socialist Forum, who are drawing on Africa's multiple traditions of revolutionary Marxism. See also Noosim Naimasiah's 'Azimio la Elimu: A reflection on education for self-reliance': <https://www.pambazuka.org/education/azimio-la-elimu-reflection-education-self-reliance>. Also see the forthcoming special issue from ROAPE's workshop in Dar es Salaam.

[17] See Adam Mayer, *Naija Marxisms: Revolutionary Thought in Nigeria* (2016). The same could be said for the small core of revolutionary Marxists in Tunisia and Egypt in the 2011 revolutions.