

“Red Africa” at the Calvert 22 Foundation

What the communists left in Africa

Decades of cultural exchange between Soviets and Africans achieved surprisingly little, making an examination of the era a nostalgia-fest



THE map of Africa, as every British schoolchild once learnt, was splashed with red. There were limits, of course: it wasn't, like India, entirely red, and the hulking mass of the continent's western territory, especially, was almost totally blue—the imperial colour of the pesky French. But it was pleasing, nonetheless, for children of the British Empire gazing upon the Crown's imperial possessions to see a continent that, for a large part, still stood and saluted to the sound of "God Save the King".

It didn't last. By the end of the 1960s, almost all of what had once been British Africa—and French, German, Belgian, and Italian—was independent: starting with Sudan, in 1956, shortly followed by Ghana, formerly the Gold Coast, in 1957. (Portugal's former colonies were a different matter: Mozambique and Angola took decades of armed struggle to win liberation.) However, long after the British had folded their flags and rolled up their maps much of Africa did in fact remain red: Russian red.

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This is the subject of "Red Africa", a season of eclectic artistic works curated by London's Calvert 22 Foundation exploring the cultural influence of the Soviet Union and related countries—Cuba, Yugoslavia, and even North Korea—in Africa from the end of empire to the end of the cold war. The season's centrepiece, "Things Fall Apart", is an interdisciplinary showcase of film, photography, propaganda and public

art, and it sheds fascinating light on a relationship that has, in the West at least,

been overlooked and largely forgotten in the years since the cold war drew to a close.

Almost no country in the newly independent continent was untouched by socialist ideas in the post-colonial period. The first generation of nationalist leaders were almost all this way inclined: Léopold Senghor, the first president of Senegal, claimed that Africa's traditional tribal communalism made socialism "natural" to the continent. In geopolitics, many African leaders snubbed the West and looked East: to his Western critics, the great crime of Patrice Lumumba, the revered father of Congolese nationalism who was assassinated in 1961, was his decision to ally the Congo with the Soviet Union during the country's crisis of 1960-1965.

The Soviets embraced all this wholeheartedly: the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, founded in 1960 to provide education for students from developing nations, was renamed the Patrice Lumumba University. It was instrumental in the development of networks of socialist solidarity across the continent: a generation of Africans were offered generous bursaries for education, artistic as well as academic and vocational, often forming close and long-lasting ties with their patrons in Moscow, Kiev, Havana and elsewhere. Some remained in their adopted countries; others returned to Africa as artists, writers and politicians.

This was "soft power" in action: the spread of the Soviets' self-declared values of internationalism, universalism and anti-racism. But then, in the 1990s, the curtain fell on the cold war, and all things socialist suddenly fell apart. The Soviets withdrew from the continent; the Cubans packed their bags (military and medical) too. Only the North Koreans, as the exhibition reveals, remained: to this day Pyongyang's strange state-owned Mansudae Art Studio continues to produce Socialist Realist artworks, such as the African Renaissance monument in Senegal, for African state clients. In Ethiopia, Kenya and elsewhere across Africa are public spaces containing monumental anti-colonial memorials and independence statues, donated to the newly independent African republics by the Pyongyang regime entirely free of charge until as late as 2000.

The exhibition makes much of these relationships. The story it tells is one in which the historic notion of socialist friendship ran deep in Soviet (and Eastern European, Cuban and North Korean) dealings with Africa. It wasn't simply geopolitical calculation, the exhibition suggests, that inspired engagement with the continent: communist affection for Africa was genuine.

A series of about 200 Soviet propaganda images, some dating back to the first half of the 20th century, provides some of the evidence for this. There are images of African leaders, like Lumumba, portrayed as grand and dignified statesmen, alongside striking evocations of brotherly solidarity between Europeans and Africans: in some posters men, women, and children of different races are depicted marching happily together, arm-in-arm, against their colonial oppressors.

But it is not entirely convincing. The representation of Africans in the posters suggests also the ambivalence of the Soviets towards their African "brothers": many contain stereotypically racist imagery, with more than a hint of objectification. And as the collection's curator, Yevgeniy Fiks, admits, propaganda like this—celebrating the fraternal love of Africans and Soviets—was often motivated by a desire for moral one-upmanship over America. The extent to which they serve as evidence of genuine affection and warmth on the part of Soviet artists is unclear. Similarly, the exhibition presents a series of formal and informal photographs from the state visits of Yugoslavian president Josip Broz Tito to Africa between 1954 to 1979 as evidence of the friendships shared by African publics and Eastern European communists. Behind-the-scene snapshots show African crowds eagerly awaiting Tito's arrival; throwaway film reel captures young schoolchildren gathering along dusty streets clutching paper flags with visible anticipation. But, again, the evidence here is partial and fragmentary: what the photographs document, above all, are political friendships, the scenes staged and choreographed with a keen diplomatic eye (Tito was kingpin of the Non-Aligned Movement, eager to establish his credential as an international statesman through these visits).

"Things Fall Apart" is not really, in the end, about Africa. Its primary purpose is to document the efforts of communist states to expand their ideological and cultural reach across what was then known as the "Third World". For this reason, there is little socialist-influenced African art on display: the most prominent work is instead of outside origin. This absence suggests that the cultural influence of these communist states was, in the long run, limited. For example, as Polly Savage of the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies points out, today in Mozambique there is almost no market for the iconography of Socialist Realism—the style in which a whole generation of the country's artists were trained—despite mass provision of bursaries for African students and the large-scale sponsorship of liberationist art and cinema during the country's war of independence.

Western art and culture, by contrast, left a far deeper mark across the continent, and without enjoying as much by way of official state sponsorship. (The CIA did at times use culture to pull countries towards the American orbit in a way that would have been familiar to the Soviets—the Berlin-based Congress for Cultural Freedom being a prime example—but the impact in Africa seems to have been limited.) The legacy of western cultural influence across the continent is everywhere: West African Highlife music, which exploded in the independence era and is a joyous mix of American jazz, swing and indigenous rhythms, continues to be heard and played across the region. The west African tours of James Brown, the godfather of American soul, in the early 1970s left far more of a cultural legacy than any of Tito's regal processions: without Brown, there would probably be no Afrobeat. As for socialism in Africa, it is primarily the politics—often in the form of state-led development—that has lasted. Much less of the cultural legacy survives. Most art exhibitions show a cultural moment as a link in a chain of influence leading up to today. Socialist culture in Africa's failure to thrive makes "Red Africa", in contrast, an exercise in nostalgia for a movement that simply stopped.

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