**The Politics of Educational Assistance from Eastern Europe to the Global South During the Cold War**

**Module: SEES0062: Between the “Second” and the “Third” Worlds: Socialist Modernity and Globalization, 1945-1991**

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In this essay, I will focus on the politics of educational assistance established by socialist countries to aid the global South during the Cold War. I will draw upon the work of other historians to build a historiographical assessment of the political implications of these educational programs and of educational mobility itself. Initially, I will locate these programs in the context of the Cold War, comparing the approaches of different nations, the institutions they founded, and the emergence of an East-South educational axis. I will also assess the reactions of both the West, and of students themselves to those programs. Finally, I will look at the students themselves: their personal experiences, their own political alignments, protests, and organisations, and how different groups of students experienced life in the socialist world, and the legacy of these programs.

During the Khruschev Thaw, the role of soft power became an increasingly important way to gain influence and form alliances, which Jessica Gienow-Hecht and Mark Donfried summarise as the ability “to win hearts and minds and convince people of the ‘right’ ideology”.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this context, educational assistance was seen to be a reliable means of exerting soft power and enhancing socialist influence. After the 1955 Bandung Conference, both the USSR and the USA became engaged in a struggle for influence over the education of the elites of the global South. University education offered the chance for advancement and mobility amongst subjects of post-colonial nations, and education was seen as a foundation of building successful and independent nation states. Tom Griffiths and Euridice Charon Cardona articulate this use of soft power as university education acting as a branch of foreign policy, where educational aid could produce graduates sympathetic to the host country and open to advancing the policy objectives of socialist nations and trading with them.[[2]](#footnote-2) Tobias Rupprecht further adds that this educational policy was a conscious part of the Soviet post-Stalin campaigns to enhance the image of the USSR in the global South and “present their country as a modern and advanced society, free of racism and full of altruistic solidarity”.[[3]](#footnote-3) Rupprecht stresses that the USSR did not necessarily wish to create a new revolutionary class, but rather pragmatically sought to create a new cohort of graduates who could spread a positive message about the USSR and its government within their home countries.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Natalia Tsvetkova however notes that the method the Soviet Union recruited students from less privileged classes in countries of the global south was done to ensure relative loyalty to Marxist-Leninist ideology, with 70 to 80 percent of students coming from lower economic stratas. Where initially the Soviets had sought to gain influence through educating future elites, this was broadened in the later stages of the Cold War as this initial strategy proved unsuccessful. Tsvetkova further argues that the establishment of over 450 educational centres and 67 higher education institutes globally by the Soviet Union helped to educate the poorest citizens with the hope that their education would produce a socialist opposition to the old elite and create new allies.[[5]](#footnote-5) The Higher Education Committee of the Communist Party specifically formed a long-term strategy with this in mind, but these plans of course disintegrated with the dissolution of the USSR. While Tsvetkova explains that these citizens often didn’t become the dominant group in their society, in some cases they did, such as in the case of Syria, Algeria, Afghanistan and Ethiopia, where Soviet strategists themselves concluded that their educational investments in foreign students had paid off. Moreover, even if they did not form an elite, students who had enthusiastically taken up Marxist-Leninist doctrine could be relied upon to disseminate pro-Soviet literature and agitate in favour of the USSR, increasing the reach of Soviet political power.[[6]](#footnote-6) As Rupprecht points out, this was something which alarmed Western observers, who saw a threat inherent to the Soviet expansion of foreign educational assistance, even if this was not necessarily warranted.[[7]](#footnote-7) This became a point of conflict for some developing countries who felt their sovereignty was threatened by Soviet emphasis on ideological education, with Tsvetkova emphasising that Cambodia, Algeria, Ceylon, Morocco, Niger, and Rwanda discontinued their participation in educational exchange programs with the USSR in 1966.[[8]](#footnote-8) Furthermore, even if soft power goals may have been the primary goal of educational assistance, Griffiths and Charon Cardona point out that the Soviet Union genuinely saw this educational aid as a means of furthering the economic development of the global South alongside strengthening the reputation of Communism in those countries through peaceful means.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Reactions in the West to Soviet educational programs ranged from media condemnation to outright counter-intelligence operations. For example, Rupprecht emphasises how the US embassy in Moscow repeatedly tried to contact and recruit foreign students.[[10]](#footnote-10) The journey to the Soviet Union itself was also something intercepted, discouraged, and sabotaged. In his writing on the experiences of African students, Eric Burton emphasises just how fraught the journeys of many of them were, with an extremely complex labyrinth of bus, train, car, and boat routes often necessary to reach Europe, and journeys that could sometimes years, subject to border closures and dead ends.[[11]](#footnote-11) Burton argues that British fears of African student migration to the USSR becoming a pretext for communist infiltration meant that diplomatic and military pressure was exerted to make their journey more difficult, such as when the British ambassador in Khartoum made a deal with the Sudanese authorities to repatriate any transient students without the requisite papers.[[12]](#footnote-12) This then meant that aspiring students had to rely on deception and disguise to transport themselves, often relying on foreign radio, such as that of Radio Moscow and Radio Cairo to receive information about journeys and resources.[[13]](#footnote-13) The phenomenon of ‘scholarship hawkers’, often acting as people smugglers, who sought to facilitate African journeys to Eastern Europe, began to flourish in response to this demand.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, a whole web of counterintelligence and economic entanglements were built along this migration route.

The establishment of the People’s Friendship University (UDN) as a specific institution for the instruction of students from the global South demonstrated the Soviet Union’s deep commitment to attracting students from abroad, even if it practically meant separating them from the wider population. As Robert Hornsby notes, the Soviet Union was marked by a deep anxiety around the subversive influence of foreign visitors, and this was marked amongst student populations. As such, the Komsomol was harnessed to monitor the activities of foreign students and ensure their allegiance, which was met with hostility and resentment by many students.[[15]](#footnote-15) Assessing the role of the UDN in securing a Soviet-South alliance, Constantin Katsakioris sees its establishment and eventual refashioning as “Patrice Lumumba University” after Lumumba’s 1961 assassination as a deep act of solidarity between the USSR and the global South, whilst stressing the complexity of judging its success as an institution.[[16]](#footnote-16) Katsakioris draws upon student memoirs to show deep dissent from students who claimed that the institution existed to segregate and indoctrinate foreign students.[[17]](#footnote-17) This is compounded by highlighting how Arab nations specifically protested recruitment of students to the UDN due to the fear of communist indoctrination, despite approving of other means of educational co-operation.[[18]](#footnote-18) Similarly, a *Wall Street Journal* article from 1962 highlights these concerns about segregation and indoctrination, and whilst these sources could be dismissed as propaganda, they do highlight a very real grievance about the status of foreign students in the Soviet Union.[[19]](#footnote-19) Rupprecht adds that the UDN was aware of its reputation in the West as a segregated institution, and launched a counter-offensive of pamphlets and broadcasts to dispute this.[[20]](#footnote-20) Here, the image of the UDN became mired in Cold War sloganeering and propaganda, and the institution itself was deeply problematised politically.

The education of future socialist elites was however a specific goal of the foundation of the People’s Friendship University, which was received by Western powers as a blatant attempt to buy influence.[[21]](#footnote-21) Ideological education was part of the curriculum at the UDN, but as Griffiths and Charon Cardona point out, most foreign students in the Soviet Union attended mainstream universities, and these students tended to come from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds.[[22]](#footnote-22) Nonetheless, the UDN remained a potent symbol of the Soviet commitment to providing free education to the global South, and the political ambitions of Soviet educational assistance. In contrast to narratives around indoctrination and substandard education, Abigail Kret portrays the UDN as a unique institution where debates around modernity, empire, and global development emerged. Kret sees the UDN as a way for the Soviet Union to present an alternative form of modernity and globalisation, beyond hegemonic Western narratives. Kret rejects the notion that students were mere cogs in a machine, and argues that foreign students brought a sense of modernity, internationalism and cosmopolitanism to the USSR, which encouraged and excited Soviet students, and generated a distinct culture of non-conformity.[[23]](#footnote-23) Maxim Matusevich further assesses the extent to which UDN education was ideology-driven, and concludes that the reality wasn’t straightforward – many, if not most, students were not committed socialists, and he argues that the propaganda value of having an institution specifically devoted to the free education of people from the global South was greater than any real indoctrination could ever have been.[[24]](#footnote-24) Rupprecht also looks at the politics of students and concludes Latin Americans often did have an easier time adjusting compared to other nationalities given that they were more likely to profess socialist or communist beliefs compared to other national groups.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The question of funding was a further political issue for socialist countries beyond the Soviet Union who lacked the resources to sponsor large amounts of students for free. In many socialist countries, aid was seen as a matter of direct assistance to the global south, but in the Yugoslav case, educational mobility eventually came to be seen as a source of income from self-funded students and a possible resolution for Yugoslavia’s economic crises, as outlined by Peter Wright. He argues that the commercialisation of educational assistance due to the financial strain of providing scholarships ended up undermining international solidarity between Yugoslavia and the global South, as the increasing preference for self-financing international students further entrenched educational inequality.[[26]](#footnote-26) Similar attempts to try and commercialise educational projects were seen in the GDR, where East German industrial projects in Tanzania helped fund scholarships for Tanzanian students,[[27]](#footnote-27) and Mozambique, where prospective students often had to work to receive a GDR education.[[28]](#footnote-28) However, Yugoslavia took this to a whole new level under the market socialist model, where developmental assistance in education became a commercial project involving government-aligned firms offering sponsorship in exchange for labour or future labour.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Changing relationships between the global South and the East also had a strong effect on student mobility. Katsakioris describes how loyalty towards the Soviet Union amongst Arab students shifted according to how much Moscow supported nationalist movements in the Arab world.[[30]](#footnote-30) Here, anti-imperialism fuelled student solidarity, and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood posed a challenge to the Arab-Soviet educational axis as Arab nationalist governments faltered. Lan You also assesses the position of Chinese students in the Soviet Union over the course of the Sino-Soviet split, and the way they had to adjust their roles and participation on Soviet life under the pressure of the Chinese government and embassy. Students were encouraged to participate in anti-revisionist Marxist struggle, ultimately resulting in 69 Chinese students clashing with the police in Moscow in 1966, before being required to return home.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The effects of the students upon the host nations were also manifold, as was the influence of the host nation on the students. Steffi Marung sees a distinct “Soviet-African” identity as something that emerged amidst the intellectual engagements of educational exchanges as a synthesis disrupting traditional Cold War geographies. She sees it as excessively simplistic to reduce the movement of people to East-West conflict, with educational exchanges being the result of new emerging decolonial identities as much as they were the result of traditional Cold War conflict.[[32]](#footnote-32) To Marung, the exchange of ideas and peoples between the East and South were much more than a cynical response to intranational conflicts, but an organic and dynamic proliferation of thought. Particularly, Soviet debates about modernity and development, and a distinct Soviet post-coloniality that formed in the Asian republics, found strong resonance amongst students and thinkers in the developing world.[[33]](#footnote-33) Matusevich builds upon this by highlighting the modernising force represented by Africans in the Soviet Union, and the new cultural syntheses created by cultural exchange, intermarriage, and migration routes.[[34]](#footnote-34) Furthermore, Marung looks at debates in Africa and the Black Atlantic around the nature of the Soviet-African relationship, and whether or not this was a positive developmental model or a colonising force.[[35]](#footnote-35) Therefore xposure to the Soviet Union and its internal practice of socialism enlivened ideological debate in the global South, and vice verssa

The role of students as agents of dissent is explored in depth by Sara Pugach. She highlights the role of organisations representing students from specific nations organised within the Nationale Hochschulgruppen (NHG), and argues that these national clubs in the NHG took on a subversive role which troubled the Sozialistiches Einheits Partei (SED) and the Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ), where students could express grievances and opposition to the policies of the GDR and their living conditions.[[36]](#footnote-36) Pugach makes the convincing case that African students were in a unique position where they had less risk of punishment, as they were in a situation where the GDR needed them more than they needed it, due to the FDR’s advance in Africa and the fact that student exchanges were one of the limited ways the GDR could gain soft power and form alliances with the recipient countries of generous West German aid.[[37]](#footnote-37) Moreover, Burton points out many points of conflict and resistance amongst African students in socialist countries, pointing to protests amongst African students, such as those in China in 1962 where students led hunger strikes and sit ins after a fellow African was beaten, leading to only 22 out of 118 students remaining in China. Similarly, protests in Kiev in 1962, Moscow in 1963, and Baku in 1965, were caused by the deaths of African students in racialised circumstances. Indeed, the December 1963 protest in Red Square was the first unsanctioned protest in decades and demonstrated the explosive power of dissent amongst foreign students.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Burton clarifies the strong disciplinary methods of control applied to foreign students to maintain their loyalty, often including surveillance by the Stasi, including expulsion in the case of insubordination. The GDR was more open to the heterodox socialism often espoused by Tanzanian students than the Soviet Union, but nonetheless the apparatus of the state was used to stifle dissent, particularly in fear of a Maoist fifth column.[[39]](#footnote-39) In this environment, allegiance was rewarded, and additional scholarships could be gained for being seen as a model student. Where unions for students from Nigeria and Ethiopia were often deeply fractured and politicised, the Tanzanian student’s union remained relatively apolitical, in part due to the Tanzanian government’s success in enforcing ideological discipline amongst students. Burton also explains that in East Germany, tensions between socialists and nationalists amongst Iraqi and Syrian students frequently erupted, something fairly unique amongst most cohorts of international students.[[40]](#footnote-40) Julia Sittman builds on this further – highlighting how the apparatus of the Iraqi state ended up extending itself amongst loyal students to persecute those perceived to be dissidents.[[41]](#footnote-41) To a large extent, Iraqi communist students had broad protection from the Stasi and the government of the GDR, showing that educational programs could act as a form of refuge, but this was contingent on their loyalty. However, as anti-communist persecution intensified in Iraq, the apparatus of the Ba’athist state extended to East Germany, with fellow Iraqi students policing the political engagements of communist students.[[42]](#footnote-42) Restrictions were often stifling and the cause of disaffection, with Martina Schenk explaining that rather than engaging in organised protests, many Angolan students in the GDR protested their treatment through letter writing and forming their own networks, due to the difficulty of protest in these conditions.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Tsvetkova further argues that in the case of the Soviet Union, many students did engage in anti-Soviet agitation, including those from officially socialist countries. She highlights the fact that in 165 students were expelled on ideological grounds from universities in the USSR in 1956, a total of 10 percent of the total foreign student population at the time.[[44]](#footnote-44) Rupprecht also highlights the Soviet problem with the “ultra-leftist” views common amongst Latin American students, fearing the Maoist ideological threat they posed, with many students organising and attending Maoist meetings, prompting further and deeper Komsomol student policing and surveillance.[[45]](#footnote-45) Here, foreign students further became stigmatised as the messengers of dangerous foreign ideas, even if they did not directly challenge Soviet authority. Katsakioris also focuses on the pan-African organisations set up by African students in the Soviet Union which at times had explicitly anti-Soviet beliefs, often espousing pan-Africanist, Maoist, or pro-Yugoslav views. The influence of African student groups often spread to Africans in other socialist countries like East Germany, showing the rich intellectual networks formed between migrants in socialist countries, and the universality of many of their grievances – particularly on the issue of racism.[[46]](#footnote-46) Mass protest sometimes broke out after severe incidences of racism, such as when a Ghanaian student was beaten to death in 1963, sparking demonstrations in Red Square. Julie Hessler details how this incident highlighted the subordinate position of Africans living in the Soviet Union, who were constantly under surveillance and suspicion based on racist assumptions and subject to intimidation and public harassment. Furthermore, the blatant racism experienced clashed with the official Soviet denial of the problem, with authorities dismissing the harassment of African students as incidental and maintaining the impossibility of racism in the Soviet Union.[[47]](#footnote-47) This clash of official propaganda and lived experience served to make outbursts of anger through demonstrations inevitable, and effectively forced students to politicise. As Burton notes, “students from the global South were politicised and politicising agents who forcefully resisted ideological patronage”.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Burton’s work also uncovers the interesting phenomenon of African students in the Eastern Bloc defecting to the West, with West German media reporting in 1962 on a new kind of refugee – that of the African student in the GDR seeking to move to the West.[[49]](#footnote-49) African students from all over the Eastern Bloc began to move West in search of better conditions, often using Yugoslavia as a way to fly to Western Europe, or to cross over in Berlin itself. This was often the result of disappointment with their education and living conditions, including racism and the lack of any ability to organise officially without sanction, although to Western surprise, some did return to the Eastern Bloc when they couldn’t access higher education in the West.[[50]](#footnote-50) Rupprecht however emphasises that Latin American students in the Soviet Union were free to travel across the USSR and often went to Western Europe for seasonal work in the summer, but tended to come back with smuggled Western goods to trade, forming a new economic network along a South-East-West axis.[[51]](#footnote-51) Migration was not always permanent, but the opportunity for study evidently provided new routes of mobility for those from the global South.

Christine Hatzky’s work on Cuba’s educational aid opens the field further to the question of South-South co-operation. She emphasises many Cubans were themselves the descendants of enslaved people, giving Cuba a unique role as a socialist country, and prompting Fidel Castro to describe his country as a “Latin-African” nation. The provision of aid by people from a developing country who in many cases had Black faces enhanced the solidarity of Cuban aid to Africa and distinguished Cuban missions from paternalistic European socialist initiatives. Cuba could provide the basic needs ordinary people in countries like Angola struggled with, where the USSR often fell short, in a new and pragmatic form of South-South collaboration. Here, socialist countries of the global South could empower each other rather than rely on the patronage of European countries who had limited real understanding of their developmental challenges. Military aid to Angola during its Civil War and struggle against apartheid South Africa was massive, but civilian aid complemented this on a large scale, with over 500,000 Cubans being involved in Angolan aid efforts between 1975 and 1991.[[52]](#footnote-52) Hatzky argues that the strength of Cuban aid efforts was their simplicity and focus on basic literacy and training within the host country, using expertise learnt from Cuba’s own successful mass literacy campaign.[[53]](#footnote-53) This was coupled with educational programs for foreign students within Cuba, but the focus on exporting teachers was particularly unique. The focus of the Eastern Bloc on higher education had many shortfalls, with Elizabeth Banks explaining how in Mozambique, the Organisation for the Mozambican Woman became disillusioned with Soviet promises of scholarships when so few women in Mozambique could read.[[54]](#footnote-54) Here, the assistance of Cuba was clearly more practical in its scope.

Finally, the legacy of socialist education programs and the impact of returnees must be considered. Tanja Muller argues that students from Mozambique who had participated in East German educational initiatives did indeed adopt the ideas they were exposed to, forming identities based on mutual solidarity between the two countries. This emotional connection to socialism ran deep, as did the new identities that were formed and the sense of personal empowerment achieved, and even when Mozambique’s socialist project failed, the former students retained their deep affection for their educational institutes and the GDR.[[55]](#footnote-55) Likewise, Katsakioris notes while students educated in the Eastern Bloc were often marginalised, many of them did often rise to prominence in their home countries and fondness for the countries they studied in.[[56]](#footnote-56) Rupprecht also explains how the largely leftist Latin American students maintained a network abroad through alumni assosciations and remembered their time abroad enthusiastically,[[57]](#footnote-57) and Katsakioris also details the extent to which alumni associations endured in the Arab world, even amongst students with no leftist loyalties.[[58]](#footnote-58) Nonetheless, the national origins and ideological affiliations of students played a huge role in how they remembered their study and maintained its legacy.

However, Tassé Abye doubts the cultural endurance of these programs, using the example of Ethiopian elites trained in the USSR, many of whom did end up in very senior government positions. Abye points to the unwillingness of former students to join any alumni programs, the disappearance of Russian language learning programs, and the dissipation of any Soviet cultural links, to argue that returnees have mostly shaken off the cultural ties they formed in the Soviet Union. Moreover, Ethiopians trained in East Germany lack the enthusiasm for German culture of those trained in the West – merely saying they “studied in Germany”, rather than detailing their location and institution in interviews. This contrasts with the legacy of Cuban iconography in Ethiopia and the fondness for Cuba remaining amongst Ethiopians trained there, showing the emotive link of South-South cooperation to be stronger than the East-South axis.[[59]](#footnote-59) Furthermore, a deep ambivalence towards the Soviet-educated elites existed amongst the local population as countries decolonised and sought to elevate locally educated elites, and Abye particularly emphasises the preference for Western and locally educated politicians.[[60]](#footnote-60) Katsakioris also highlights how even though students were often successfully educated, Soviet diplomas never carried the weight of western ones, and how in contrast to those educated in the West, students educated in the Soviet Union rarely wished to stay in or return to the USSR.[[61]](#footnote-61)

In sum, the educational exchanges and assistance provided by the Eastern Bloc to the global South may have been forged with political and strategic intentions, but the results of these programs turned out to be incredibly complex. The available literature shows that the role of students themselves and their human complexity make it impossible to reduce Cold War educational assistance to mere ideology. Instead, these students created an intricate network of cultural, intellectual, personal, and political ties and syntheses between the East and the South, beyond borders or institutions.

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