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# Communism and Africa: From Colonialism to Decolonization through Russian Sources

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The article presents an overview of sources on Africa and global communism that cover the period between 1920s and 1970s and are stored in the central archives of the Russian Federation (RGASPI, RGANI, GARF, RGAE, AVP RF). It also provides information on documentary collections and digitalised sources. Without claiming to be exhaustive, this presentation aims to introduce major collections, to outline possible research directions and to facilitate therefore the study of this vast subject for non-Russian scholars, when work in Russian archives becomes more accessible again.

KEYWORDS: SOVIET UNION; AFRICA; COMMUNISM; ARCHIVES; GLOBAL NETWORK

History of Soviet–African contacts and relationships in between the 1920s and the 1970s, including their important communist dimension, used to be a thorny issue for researchers (Balezin 2002, 45). The works of African authors – poets, writers, politicians – were widely translated into Russian and other languages in the Soviet Union during the period between the late 1950s and 1980s (Gavristova 2016, 7–8), when the decolonization processes encouraged the intensification and diversification of relationships between the USSR and various African countries (Davidson 2002a, 7). Two collections of primary sources were published in the same period, one focused on the Soviet struggle against colonialism<sup>1</sup>, while the second, edited by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs commission charged with publishing Soviet diplomatic documents, contained a wider range of official sources for the years

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<sup>1</sup> *СССР в борьбе против колониализма и неоколониализма, 1960 – март 1986 гг.: документы и материалы, в 2 томах* [SSSR v bor'be protiv kolonializma i neokolonializma, 1960 – mart 1986 gg. : dokumenty i materialy, v 2 tomah], edited by Andrei Gromyko, 1986. Moscow: Politizdat.

1946–1970<sup>2</sup>. As useful as it may appear for scholars, the latter publication is not, however, devoid of shortcomings, such as the absence of proper indications of documents' sources and provenance. These two publications remained the only ones of the sort up until the 1990s and, with few exceptions<sup>3</sup>, the relevant Soviet state archives were firmly closed to foreign scholars during the Soviet era.

The situation changed dramatically following the disintegration of the Soviet Union: in Russia, the period from early-1990s onwards, though featuring a rapid expansion of archive accessibility, was marked by a continuous reduction of educational and research departments focused on the African continent (Gavristova 2016, 6). Nevertheless, thanks to the efforts of Russian scholars working on Africa, particularly within the Centre of African Studies of the Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IVI RAN), several collections of primary sources were published<sup>4</sup>. For those particularly interested in the Communist International and communist activities in Africa, the documentary volume *Comintern and Africa. Documents*<sup>5</sup> will be particularly

<sup>2</sup> *СССР и страны Африки, 1946–1962 гг. : Документы и материалы* [SSSR i strany Afriki, 1946–1962 gg. : Dokumenty i materialy], 2 volumes, 1963. Moscow: Gospolitizdat. *СССР и страны Африки, 1963–1970 гг. : Документы и материалы* [SSSR i strany Afriki, 1963–1970 gg. : Dokumenty i materialy], 2 volumes, 1982. Moscow: Politizdat.

<sup>3</sup> In one of his articles Davidson gives some information on oral testimonies about the Comintern, which he started collecting after 1956: Davidson 2002b, 343–4. Davidson himself was one of those who could work with Comintern documentation before their wider opening in the 1990s.

<sup>4</sup> *Россия и Африка. Документы и материалы. XVIII в. – 1960 г.* [Rossiâ i Afrika. Dokumenty i materialy. XVIII v. – 1960 g.], edited by Apollon Davidson, 2 volumes, 1999. Moscow: IVI RAN. *Россия и Африка. Документы и материалы, 1961–начало 1970-х* [Rossiâ i Afrika. Dokumenty i materialy, 1961–načalo 1970-l], edited by Sergej Mazov and Apollon Davidson, 2021. Moscow: ROSSPEN. *История Африки в документах, 1870–2000* [Istoriâ Afriki v dokumentah, 1870–2000], edited by Apollon Davidson, 3 volumes, 2005–2007. Moscow: Nauka. *История Африки: люди и судьбы. Сборник документов и материалов* [Istoriâ Afriki: lûdi i sud'by. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov], edited by Tat'âna Gavristova, 2016. Yaroslavl: YarGU.

<sup>5</sup> *Коминтерн и Африка: Документы* [Komintern i Afrika: Dokumenty], edited by Apollon Davidson and compiled by Valentin Gorodnov, 2003. Saint-Petersburg: СПб, Aletejâ.

useful. It contains a selection of previously unpublished sources related mostly to Sub-Saharan Africa, and in particular, to South Africa and its communist party, but there are also ECCI documents on the work to be carried out in the countries where no communist parties were operating. The same year a two-volume collection, *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary history*, appeared in English language<sup>6</sup>.

This continuous publishing activity allows access to documentary materials that illustrate different aspects of Soviet-African relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and provide a glance at their most prominent moments. To carry out new in-depth research, access to the archives themselves remains crucial<sup>7</sup>.

## Africa and global communism in the interwar period through Comintern archives

The Moscow archives contain rich documentation on transnational communist networks and activities, starting with the creation of the Comintern in 1919 and continuing through the interwar period. Its voluminous records are kept in the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI) and can provide researchers and general public with valuable data. First, the documentation of the congresses of the Comintern and plenums of the Executive committee of the Communist International (ECCI)<sup>8</sup> includes not only the official ma-

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<sup>6</sup> *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History*, edited by Apollon Davidson, Irina Filatova, Valentin Gorodnov and Sheridan Johns, 2 volumes, 2003. London: Frank Cass Publishers.

<sup>7</sup> This article was written before the beginning of the war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Among its multiple consequences, foremost human losses, this war also entailed a comprehensive reconfiguration of the academic landscape and research, because the archives on the territory of the Russian Federation became almost inaccessible to foreign researchers, at least those from European countries and United States.

<sup>8</sup> In particular, fondy 488-494 and opisi 159-171 of fond 495. In order to facilitate the identification of sources in Russian archives, the transliterations of the Russian

terials and proceedings that have already been partially published and translated<sup>9</sup> but also sources closely illuminating the preparatory work and exchanges among concerned institutional actors<sup>10</sup>. Thus, one could delve into materials for congresses related to the activities of various national communist parties, reports on their work, declarations and letters issued by delegations, projects for resolutions, etc.

Congresses and plenums were top-level and relatively rare communist events that dealt with a wide range of issues. On a regular basis, the questions of colonies and communist activities in Africa were raised by central governing bodies, including (Political) Secretariat of the Executive Committee, its Bureau, and its Political and Small commissions<sup>11</sup>. These units were not specifically concerned with colonial affairs, let alone their African dimension. Nevertheless, given their importance within the Comintern structure and in the decision-making process, their documentation<sup>12</sup> is essential to the assessment of the major inflexions of communist activity in Africa. Some documentation may also be found in the collection of the Organizational department of the ECCI<sup>13</sup>, the purpose of which was to increase the Comintern's influen-

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words “фонд” (fond) and “опись” (opis', pl. opisi) – meaning respectively “collection” and “inventory” – will be used in the present overview of sources.

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of publications of Comintern documents in Russian language, Filippova 2015. For publications in foreign languages, for example, *Second Congress of the Comintern International: Minutes of Proceedings*, 2 volumes, 1977. London-New York: New Park Publications. *To the Masses. Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921*, edited by John Riddell, 2015. Leiden-Boston: Brill.

<sup>10</sup> A part of the documentation concerning the Congresses, but also the activities of the Comintern more broadly, is available at the INCOMKA project workstations in the Library of Congress European Reading room and some of the central archives of several European countries (namely France, Germany and Italy), Makalani 2011, 271. For the description of the INCOMKA project in English and French: <https://www.loc.gov/rr/european/comintern/comintern-article.html> and <http://tristan.u-bourgogne.fr/CGC/prodscientifique/incomka.html> (accessed July 8, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, opisi 1, 3, 4, 6, 18, and 20.

<sup>12</sup> Protocols of the meetings, preparatory materials, letters and circular letters to communist parties, ECCI decisions, information on the situation in various countries, etc.

<sup>13</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, opisi' 25.

ce over the sections in the field of party-building work; the department therefore analyzed incoming information on this topic, supervised this activity within the Comintern sections with the help of special instructors and controlled how carefully the Center's resolutions were followed and implemented (Adibekov, Šahnazarova and Širinâ 1997, 71). These "alignment" practices can be for example seen in directives for instructors or in reports and letters of these emissaries.

Some of the central Secretariats, established on a regional basis in 1926 to enhance the links between the ECCI and the national parties (*ibid.*, 105), were more specifically concerned with the connections of communist movement and Africa. Thus, if the Political secretariat had an overarching function of supervising regional secretariats activities (*ibid.*, 108-9), the Anglo-American and Latin secretariats<sup>14</sup> dealt with countries such as France, the UK, Belgium or Portugal, and therefore colonial issues were on the agenda. It is also the case of the Eastern department of the ECCI that became a separate secretariat in 1926<sup>15</sup>. It was concerned with communist activities in Morocco, Tunis, Algeria and especially Egypt and South Africa. The last two countries were also in the orbit of the Secretariat of André Marty<sup>16</sup>, established in 1935 when a new restructuring of the Comintern led to the replacement of regional secretariats by so-called secretaries' secretariats.

Besides these sources reflecting the activity of central governing bodies, the RGASPI also contains documentation produced by some communist parties themselves: according to established practice, Comintern sections were used to transferring their materials to Moscow. Concerning Africa, this documentation is relatively limited due to slower pace of development of national communist parties in Africa, the relative remoteness of the continent and intercontinental communications, and some particular features of international communist movement structure<sup>17</sup>. Nevertheless, the collections of the South African and Egyptian

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<sup>14</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, opisi 32 and 72.

<sup>15</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, opisi 154 and 155.

<sup>16</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, opis' 14.

<sup>17</sup> For example, at the beginning the Algerian communist party is integrated into the French one; it becomes a separate organization in 1936.

communist parties<sup>18</sup> can provide researchers with valuable data on their membership, day-to-day activities, or relationship with the Comintern<sup>19</sup>, while the personnel files on individual communists are extremely valuable for a better understanding of personal and professional development<sup>20</sup>.

Another important volume of documentation concerns educational institutions such as the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV), and the sources on other international organisations such as the Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern), the Peasant International (Krestintern), and the League against Imperialism<sup>21</sup>.

Considerable attention was paid in the communist universe to the written word, and many of the aforementioned organizations set up their own periodicals. These press archives are worth analysis and cross-referencing with institutional and other sources. One could therefore think of *The Negro Worker*, the press organ of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, published between 1928 and 1937 and partly available online<sup>22</sup>, of Communist parties' press<sup>23</sup>, or the

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<sup>18</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, opisi 64 and 85. Documentation related to the South-African communist party, as the activity of the party itself, is better known. Part of its archives were recently published thanks to the efforts of the Centre for African Studies of the IVI RAN.

<sup>19</sup> Probably, the documentation produced by the communist parties in western countries and partially transferred to Moscow before the Second world war may also be useful especially with regard to their colonial commissions (French communist party - fond 517; Communist party of Great Britain - fond 495, opisi 100; Belgian Communist Party - fond 495, opisi 93). It should be mentioned that a considerable part of the French documentation of the Comintern was made available to researchers through the project PAPRIK@2F (Portail Archives Politiques Recherches Indexation Komintern et Fonds français) and is accessible online.

<sup>20</sup> RGASPI, fond 495, opisi 210 and 279.

<sup>21</sup> RGASPI, fondy 532, 534, 535 and 542 respectively.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/negro-worker/table.htm> (accessed July 8, 2023). This website presents a table of content for each issue of *The Negro Worker* as well as a selection of scanned full issues of this newspaper.

<sup>23</sup> For example, the press organs of the British and French communist parties, *Daily Worker* and *Humanité* respectively. The latter is available at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb327877302/date&rk=42918;4> (accessed July 8, 2023).



main publication of the Comintern – the *International Press Correspondence*<sup>24</sup>.

## Sources on Africa after WWII: the International department of the CC CPSU and RGANI collections

After the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, some of its former personnel moved to the International department of the Central Committee of the Communist party of the Soviet Union that took over certain functions of the defunct Third International. In particular, this International department<sup>25</sup> assumed responsibility for maintaining and developing links with foreign communist parties. From 1957 onward, this responsibility was shared with the newly created Department for relations with communist and workers' parties, focused specifically on socialist countries. This documentation is kept at the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI) within the large collection of the Apparatus of the CC CPSU<sup>26</sup>.

Even though the archives of the Department charged with socialist countries are mostly concerned with the domestic policies in these countries and their relations with the Soviet Union, they also contain some documentation related to Africa. Produced by the Department

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<sup>24</sup> Published in different languages, International Press Correspondence (IPC), though covering extensively political and social developments in the Soviet Union and European countries, also paid attention to colonial issues. IPC is partly digitalized and can be consulted in its English version at <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/inprecor/index.htm> (accessed July 8, 2023). A more complete collection of French issues is available at [https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ead.html?id=FRMSH021\\_00032&c=FRMSH021\\_00032\\_e0000047&qid=](https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ead.html?id=FRMSH021_00032&c=FRMSH021_00032_e0000047&qid=) (accessed July 8, 2023) and Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli.

<sup>25</sup> Initially called the CC CPSU Department of Foreign Affairs, it changed its name several times during the following decades.

<sup>26</sup> RGANI, fond 5. It is worth mentioning that the electronic inventories of the RGANI collections have been made available to the researchers at: [https://ргани.рф/content22/opi/kendo\\_gpl/Kenju/examples/web/grid/mygrid.html\\_\(accessed July 8, 2023\)](https://ргани.рф/content22/opi/kendo_gpl/Kenju/examples/web/grid/mygrid.html_(accessed%20July%208,%202023)).

itself, the Soviet Ministry for Foreign affairs, the communist parties and other bodies, some sources reflect on cultural, economic and political relations between the countries of the Eastern bloc, such as the Hungarian People's Republic, the GDR, the Socialist Republic of Romania, and the African continent. Others, emanating from the State committee for external economic relations of the Council of the Ministers of the USSR, relate to Soviet economic and technical cooperation with countries of North Africa. Chinese policies towards African countries in the field of economic assistance and cooperation, or cultural exchanges and propaganda are also dealt with in this collection.

However, the biggest part of sources related to Africa are to be found in the archives of the International Department, first the unified entity within the apparatus of the Central Committee, and following the 1957 restructuration, its successor dealing with foreign non-ruling communist parties<sup>27</sup>. Not surprisingly, its heterogeneous documentation, including a big volume of incoming materials, is particularly rich for the period starting from the late 1950s: it mirrors the growing interest of the Soviet Union in the decolonising world, its support for national liberation movements as well as its aspiration to extend its influence in newly independent countries. The evolving situation in different African countries is therefore monitored<sup>28</sup>, as evidenced in a series of sources. The organization's interests concerned primarily the political forces at work, but also economic development, or, for instance, the state of healthcare.

Besides materials sent by and concerned with African communist actors<sup>29</sup>, the International Department records testify of the diversity of links and connections between the Soviet Union and Africa. As eco-

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<sup>27</sup> The documentation is extensive; its presentation here will only give some indications concerning the content of the collections without pretending to be exhaustive.

<sup>28</sup> Namely but not exclusively in Algeria, the Kingdom of Morocco, Somali republic and later Somali Democratic Republic, Guinea, Senegal, Republic of Mali, Sierra Leone, Tanganyika and later United Republic of Tanzania, Ghana, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Federal Republic of Cameroon, Gabon, (People's) Republic of the Congo, Republic of Upper Volta, Northern Rhodesia and later Zambia, Southern Rhodesia, and Angola.

<sup>29</sup> For example, the Communist parties of South Africa, Morocco, and Sudan.

conomic developments were seen as an important field of influence in the context of decolonization and east-west rivalry, economic cooperation with and technical aid to countries like Guinea, Algeria and others<sup>30</sup>, including through the work of Soviet “specialists” on the ground, is reflected in these archives<sup>31</sup>. One can also find considerations on the “forms and methods of propaganda” to be implemented<sup>32</sup>, or on intensification of cultural and scientific links and exchanges with African countries through bilateral agreements<sup>33</sup>, organisation of scientific symposiums and cultural events such as the Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Tashkent (1958), and dissemination of Soviet literature or films in Africa. People were also circulating and the International Department collection contains documentation on numerous Soviet and Eastern bloc countries’ delegations to Africa, for instance that of the Soviet Union to Nigeria for independence celebrations in 1960, Mikoyan’s visit to Ghana and Bulgarian government delegation to the Republic of Guinea, both in 1962. Visits of African communists, political leaders, public figures and writers to the USSR are also covered as well as the stay of African students in Moscow. This is also the case for Africa-related events organized in the Soviet Union by various public organizations (*obšestvennyye organizacii*) that were more generally involved in developing relations with African countries: the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, Soviet Women’s Committee or the

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<sup>30</sup> Mali, Ghana, Kenya, Republic of Upper Volta, Somali republic among others. There are also some sources on economic cooperation of socialist countries with Africa as well as Soviet considerations of the efficiency of such cooperation and problems of coordination of this activity among the countries of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance.

<sup>31</sup> More on Soviet cooperation with African countries can be found in the Russian State Archive of economics (RGAE), for example fond 9480 (opisi 9,12), fond 302 (opis’ 2), fond 339 (opis’ 2, 3), fond 365 (opisi 2, 9), fond 413 (opisi 31,32), fond 70 (opis’ 1), fond 561, 860.

<sup>32</sup> Including radio and television. It is worth mentioning that efforts were made in order to coordinate this influence work directed to African countries by countries of socialist bloc (see fond 5 opis’ 51). At the same time, Soviet authorities were paying close attention to similar activities led by foreign countries, such as the US, former colonial powers and especially China, on the continent.

<sup>33</sup> For example, with Mali, Nigeria and Togo.

Union of the Soviet Societies of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (SSOD), among others<sup>34</sup>.

The RGANI collections also deal with international organizations, activities and events related to Africa, especially those where Soviet actors and interests were involved, such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa<sup>35</sup>, the Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-aligned Countries, and the Organisation of African Unity. The activities of the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO), founded in 1957 in the wake of Bandung Conference and promoting national liberation, decolonization and Afro-Asian solidarity, are also the subject of particular attention. Given the important role played in AAPSO by the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, founded a year earlier and acting "at the fringes of official foreign policy" (Casula 2018, 499), it comes as no surprise that a part of documentation in the CPSU Central Committee's International Department archives is focused on this entity in particular<sup>36</sup>.

## Soviet diplomacy and Africa: AVP RF archives

Official Soviet diplomatic sources, kept in the Archives of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (AVP RF), document the history of Soviet-African relations since the early 1920s: the issue of international communism and propaganda in the colonies was a frequent subject of international diplomatic talks and incidents; while relations between

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<sup>34</sup> The RGANI collections contain some documentation of these organizations sent to the Party organs but their institutional archives are kept at GARF: fonds P5451, P7928, P9576 respectively. On the exchanges between Soviet women's committee and African countries, Smirnova and Rillon 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Also documentation in RGAE, for example fond 9480, opis' 9.

<sup>36</sup> This documentation concerns its work in general terms, that of its representative in the permanent secretariat of AAPSO and activities of the latter, the trips of its members to foreign countries as well as the invitation of other Afro-Asian solidarity organizations representatives to the Soviet Union, its "material and financial help" to "progressive parties and organizations" in Africa, etc. The proper records of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee are however to be found at GARF (fond P9540).

Soviet diplomats and communists beyond Soviet frontiers were often marked by tensions, those actors also had multiple interactions and were implied in joint activities; Soviet diplomacy played an important role in intensification of contacts during decolonisation and subsequently. These archives are subject to a special authorisation for access<sup>37</sup> and there are no inventories available online or in the reading rooms except from a relatively concise, but essential introductory guide to archival organization that covers the period from 1917 to 1962<sup>38</sup>. The researcher would expect there to be potentially rich collections covering the records of the central departments responsible for African countries as well as of Soviet diplomatic representations abroad. Highly relevant materials are also very likely to be found in the documentation of the central departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for the US and Western European countries (the UK, France, Belgium), as well as in the archives of the Secretariat of the Foreign Minister.

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<sup>37</sup> In this respect, it is worth mentioning that a range of diplomatic sources can be found in the collection of the CC CPSU International Department at RGANI.

<sup>38</sup> *Справочник по фондам Архива внешней политики Российской Федерации, 1917-1962* [*Spravočnik po fondam Arhiva vnešnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii, 1917-1962*], 2002. Moscow: Meždunarodnye otnošenîa.

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