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From paternalism to ethnocentrism: images of Africa in Gorbachev’s Russia

By Charles Quist-Adade

Abstract: An analysis of the content of three publications, Pravda, Izvestiya and Novoe Vremya, from 1985–1992 shows how news coverage of Africa was increasingly marginalised as Gorbachev’s ‘glasnost’ reforms took hold. The stance adopted towards Africa changed from communist paternalism to outright negativity as the continent was used by politicians and journalists as a metaphor for poverty and backwardness. The result was rising racism against Africans living in Russia.

Keywords: communism, glasnost, journalism, media, perestroika, Soviet Union

While the adverse coverage of Africa in the western mass media has often been discussed, what is perhaps less well known is how the media in communist and post-communist Russia, supposedly established on the Marxist-Leninist principles of ‘proletarian internationalism’ and the much-vaunted ‘solidarity with peoples fighting for their spiritual, political and economic liberation’, covered Africa.¹ What follows is an attempt to fill this gap, identifying the common themes in press coverage during the Soviet pre-glasnost era, during glasnost itself and immediately afterwards. The coverage of Africa in three different Soviet publications, Izvestiya (‘News’), Pravda (‘Truth’),...
and Novoe Vremya (‘New Times’), was sampled from 1985, 1987 and 1989–1992. An opinion poll of students and lecturers at various St Petersburg educational establishments was also conducted in March 1991, five months before the aborted coup which led to the end of the seventy-year-old communist regime and the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

According to the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights, twenty to thirty people die each year in racist attacks in Russia today – a far cry from the vaunted internationalism of an earlier era. But what my research demonstrates is how lacking was any fundamental challenge to ethnocentric and racial prejudice during the Soviet period. And the failure to translate slogans of solidarity into genuine anti-racist sentiment meant that, once the communist system passed away, the new Russia was plagued by a rampant and unchallenged racism.

**Pre-glasnost coverage of Africa**

After independence from European colonialism in the 1960s, many African leaders came to see the Soviet system as a more humane alternative to western capitalism. They hoped for a more realistic and balanced media coverage of their continent, especially when, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet Union pitched camp with the non-aligned nations in the demand for ‘a new and more just, balanced and democratic’ international information and communication system under the auspices of the United Nations. However, what they hardly suspected was that media coverage of international news in the first socialist country would follow not only the logic of Cold War politics, but also the ‘basic instincts’ of ethnocentrism.

Historically, the Soviet media and political bureaucracy had painted a rather simplistic, idealistic and exotic picture of Africa. A well-known poster, popular among Soviets before perestroika, summarises it all. It depicts, inside a map of Africa, a muscular African man who has broken a hefty chain fastened around his hands and feet. The inscription on the famous poster reads ‘Svoboda Afrike’ (‘Freedom to Africa’). Ostensibly, this was meant to elicit the sympathy of Soviet citizens for the cause of African freedom. But this mercy-eliciting and paternalistic propaganda was carried out hand-in-hand with subtle and sometimes overt attempts at sowing the seeds of fear and suspicion.

While school children were taught compassion for Africans, poetry and cartoons directed at young people featured the Soviet version of ‘Tarzan’ images of Africa. For example, *The Circus*, a film shot in the 1930s, was meant to demonstrate the superiority of socialism over capitalism, but also highlighted Soviet feelings of paternalism towards Africans. A section of the film includes the statement: ‘In
our country we love all kids. Give birth to children of all shades of colour. They can be black, white, red, even blue, pink . . .’ However, another segment contains the line: ‘Mixed marriage between the black and white races is a racial crime.’

Textbooks used in the lower grades were written to infuse students with compassion for blacks, yet the racist undertones were clear. A textbook published in 1967 used stories of racial abuse of African-Americans, claiming that a Soviet young pioneer saved a young black slave. She was said to have bought the slave for a mere five roubles (the equivalent of US$5) from capitalist ‘sharks’ at a slave auction in the United States. The paternalism is difficult to disguise. A white (Russian) girl, infused with ‘communist compassion’ and fired by the ideals of a Soviet civilising mission, rescues a helpless black victim. A familiar picture is thus drawn: blacks are the objects of infinite white benevolence, which is the ‘white man’s burden’. Other messages were even more explicit. A poem by the popular Soviet poet Chukovsky is one among many examples. One stanza reads, ‘Kids, never on earth must you go to Africa/In Africa, there are gorillas/In Africa, there’s huge crocodiles . . ./They’ll bite you.’ And a popular television cartoon portrays black men as being on the level of beasts of the jungle.

During the immediate pre-independence era in Africa, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Soviet political bureaucracy insisted that Africans would be better off by breaking the chains of colonial subjugation and western dependence. But they would be much better off if they chose the Soviet road to socialism. The media were instructed to educate the Soviet masses that racism and ethnic hatred had dissolved as part of the ‘new socialist consciousness’ and that it was only in the ‘nespravdiliviy, dikiy zapad’ (‘unjust, wild West’) that black people were lynched. To show the superiority of socialism over capitalism, Soviet television was saturated with images of homeless, unemployed blacks lining up at soup kitchens or dole offices in London or Washington. Meanwhile, the numerous cases of racially motivated attacks and murders of Africans in the Soviet Union went unreported.

The tone of media reports about the plight of Africans on the African continent and in the diaspora was one of sympathy and solidarity. Deliberate efforts were made to solicit the mercy, goodwill and support of the Soviet citizenry for the ‘defenceless victims of capitalist injustice’ and ‘neo-colonial plunder’. But, even so, during the Cold War years, the Soviet media were saturated with negative images of Africa. Images emanating from the continent predominantly reflected the seamy side of African life. The Soviet media painted a picture of Africa as in permanent crisis, in order to show the negative influence of the western presence there. Africans were often shown as ‘innocent’ victims of western capitalist exploitation and imperialist
‘blackmail’ who needed the express and ‘selfless’ assistance of the ‘socialist-internationalist’ Soviet Union. The USSR, it was proclaimed, ‘has always been on the side of the oppressed nations, giving moral and material aid to the national liberation movements’.

The blame for Africa’s ‘otsalosti’ (‘backwardness’) was, as a rule, placed squarely on the western imperialist and neo-colonialist plunder. Where something positive was shown, it was almost always to demonstrate the ‘positive’ and modernising effects of the Soviet ‘civilising mission’, such as the construction of Soviet-assisted projects in a ‘socialist-oriented’ country.

Another feature of the Soviet press coverage of Africa was a manifestly conscious attempt to inform the Russian audience as to how much assistance the Kremlin was giving African countries. The overall impression was that all African leaders and peoples were united in sharing a common view with, or supporting, the USSR on all international issues. Second, analytical articles woefully failed to produce a complete picture of the African reality. Correspondents failed to provide the reader with information on how opposition parties or groups (which exist in almost every African country) reacted to the policies of the ruling governments. In fact, apart from war-torn countries like Mozambique and Angola, where the press mentioned the rebels, the impression conveyed by reading Pravda and Izvestiya was that there were no opposition groups or parties in most of Africa. This created the false impression that African leaders ruled their countries in absolute harmony with all sections of society. Third, there was an apparent effort by the three publications not to offend the sensibilities of African governments by publishing ‘unpleasant’ information or the ‘bitter truth’ about these regimes, especially information concerning human rights abuses, unless there was evidence that an opposition group was being sponsored by the West to overthrow an African government.

Although the three Soviet publications adopted a friendly and sympathetic tone towards Africa’s many problems, the impression remained that African issues were of secondary importance. Furthermore, sympathy and solidarity were demonstrated at the expense of an all-sided, professional and critical analysis of African problems and issues. With so many short news stories that lacked illustrations and background information, Soviet readers received a confused, muddled, incomplete picture of Africa. Scant attention was paid to cultural and sporting life or development news and most African events were highlighted without any analysis or commentary whatsoever.

Analytical articles remained largely moralising and paternalistic. Journalists who tended to sympathise with Africa consistently leaned towards writing sob stories about famine, AIDS, ‘the debt trap’, crocodiles in the Nile and Egyptian mummies. Some wrote with racist undertones. For example, one-time prominent Izvestiya columnist Alexander...
Bovin noted with ‘concern’ that the continent could have a population explosion by the turn of the century if efforts were made to check the spread of AIDS. To him, AIDS appeared to be playing a positive role in Africa by keeping the population down!

The coverage of Africa was also flawed in other ways. ‘Socialist-oriented’ (that is, pro-Soviet) African countries were given more and better publicity than ‘non-socialist Africa’ (that is, pro-western). Most information about countries like Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Libya and Zimbabwe was more positive than news about Kenya and the Central African Republic, for instance. While ‘socialist-oriented’ African countries were portrayed as trying hard to overcome their internal political and economic crises, albeit with Soviet help, news about ‘capitalist-oriented’ African states was mostly to do with ‘border clashes’, ‘trials of extremists’ and so on. Egypt was covered more frequently than any single ‘non-socialist’ African state – perhaps because of Egypt’s crucial role in the Middle East or perhaps because of growing trade links. And, contrary to the slogan, ‘proletariat of all countries unite’,9 displayed on their mastheads, these publications were elitist in their coverage of the continent. They concentrated on reporting the activities of statesmen, diplomats and big shots, to the exclusion of ordinary peasants and workers in Africa.

The press failed, then, to reflect the much-vaunted ‘principled and consistent’ policy of Soviet support for building independent and viable African societies after centuries of colonial and neo-colonial plunder and subjugation. The paucity of news and analysis of economic and cultural life in African countries did not tally with the Soviet leadership’s proclamation that the USSR stood on the side of Africans in the struggle for a more just international economic and information order. Spared of the necessity for advertisement (during the 1980s), the Soviet press had more space and leeway to concentrate on the problems of war and peace, the anti-armament campaign and other issues posing a real danger to the existence of the human race generally and African and Third World countries in particular. Yet Pravda, Izvestiya and Novoe Vremya hardly touched on the dangers posed to African countries by the arms race, imperialism and neo-colonialism. Although, in 1985, the Soviet press often, and not without justification, charged western imperialism and its transnational corporations for siphoning off African resources (hence the continent’s ‘backwardness’), accusing fingers were pointed at the West less often thereafter. This created the impression that it was not western imperialism and neo-colonialism, but Africans themselves, who were responsible for their ‘backwardness’. This was bound to mislead readers into seeing Africans as lazy hangers-on and parasites and consequently lead to calls on government to cut support to African states.
The media also remained silent on the several cases of racial abuse, beatings and even murders of African students in the Soviet Union. The Soviet tradition of journalistic training instructed that ‘socialism and racism are incompatible’ and that ‘racism has dissolved in the new socialist consciousness’. It was only in the West, it was said, that blacks were lynched.

Glasnost-era coverage of Africa

After a three-year period in which a series of ageing leaders had died in rapid succession, Mikhail Sergeyvich Gorbachev was, in 1985, anointed General-Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – and, hence, the country’s president. The Soviet economy had stagnated since the late 1970s, the arms race with the United States had sapped vital economic resources and the privilege and corruption of the political bureaucracy (or ‘nomenklatura’) alienated the people. The ghost of Joseph Stalin, who had mercilessly repressed dissenters in the past, still haunted the Soviet citizenry.

It was against this backdrop that Gorbachev began his silent glasnost-cum-perestroika revolution in the spring of 1985. Perestroika (‘restructuring’) was the economic plank in Gorbachev’s three-pronged revolution aimed at ‘giving socialism a humane face’. The other planks were glasnost (‘openness’) in the political/ideological sphere and novoe myshlenie (‘new thinking’) in international relations.

When Gorbachev commenced his reforms, his team set out to fashion a brand new foreign policy, which became increasingly western-oriented and pragmatic. The new Soviet planners announced that they were shedding the ideological ballast of their Africa policy. Soviet-African relations, like relations with other parts of the developing world, were now to be based on Lenin’s call for ‘more economics, less political/ideological trivialities’ (my emphasis).

During Gorbachev’s six-year rule, this injunction was followed to the letter as the Kremlin gradually cut aid and support for its allies, the countries of the ‘socialist orientation’. The argument, initiated by Gorbachev himself, was that the Soviet Union had got bogged down in useless ventures in Africa, always giving out and receiving nothing in return for its ideological investments. After Gorbachev raised the issue in a speech in Minsk, the Belorussian capital, during the early years of his reforms, politicians and the media across the political spectrum found a scapegoat in the Kremlin’s Africa policy. For example, a member of the Russian parliament complained in the Literatur newspaper that the former communist leadership ‘wasted precious Soviet resources on peoples who have only begun to call themselves a people, who have just descended from the palm trees, and have only managed to pronounce the word “socialism”’.13
For the two months in 1987 that I reviewed closely, only one news item on Africa was important enough to occupy Pravda’s front page – a telegram sent while aboard an aircraft by the former Ethiopian leader, Mengistu Haile Mariam, to his Soviet counterpart, Gorbachev. Not even the release of African National Congress (ANC) speaker Govan Mbeki (father of the current South African president Thabo Mbeki) was monumental enough to win front page placement in Pravda or Izvestiya, much less to attract an editorial comment. Nearly half of the stories on Africa were briefs of 30–90 words, mostly culled from the main western wire services, the Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France Presse and United Press International. Apart from presenting an incomplete and superficial picture of Africa, the publications ostensibly sought, by using western sources, to absolve themselves from blame for the predominantly negative information. ‘After all, we are not saying so. They say so.’ A graphic example of this blame-shifting approach was Pravda’s coverage of the debate over the origin of AIDS. The initial claim – that the disease was artificially manufactured in a military laboratory in Fort Derricks, US – was vehemently protested against by the American government, with threats of suspending bilateral talks with the USSR. After that, Pravda reverted to the ‘green monkey’ theory, propagated in some western publications, which held that the virus had ‘jumped’ species from African monkeys. Thus, under the heading, ‘It originated . . . it’s not a mutant’, Pravda culled an article from Newsweek which claimed that AIDS originated in Africa. But, unlike Newsweek, which, even if only as a nod to journalistic objectivity, published a rejoinder from a Kenyan journalist to contest the ‘green monkey’ theory, Pravda restricted itself to a thirty-word summary of the Newsweek story. By publishing the article without any commentary or follow-up, Pravda indicated to its readers that, according to Newsweek, the disease originated in Africa.

For Russia’s new political bureaucracy and the media, citing Africa as a metaphor for poverty, backwardness and hopelessness became a fad, a way of lambasting the former communist leadership for ‘wasting’ Soviet resources in Africa, a vote-catcher and applause-drawer at political gatherings and in parliament. Hence, one of the early popular slogans, coined by the democrats and given wide dissemination by the press during the heady days of the ‘democratic’ onslaught against communist rule, was, roughly, ‘we’re chasing and shall catch up with Africa’.

One effect of this was that the favourable press, which, for example, the ANC had enjoyed in the pre-glasnost Soviet Union, began to wane. The role of Soviet publications in the strengthening of the international campaign against apartheid was hardly disputable. And the frequent appearance of apartheid stories in the publications itself indicated the Soviet resolve to see the end of the evil system. But press coverage of
the activities of the ANC gradually took on an air of negativity and indifference during the perestroika/glasnost years.

So, by February 1990, when Mandela was freed from twenty-seven years’ incarceration by the apartheid regime, Soviet state television ran a mere thirty-second report on the historic event at the very tail end of the evening newscast. The sports news of the day was considered more newsworthy than the release of the world’s most famous prisoner. The following day, Pravda, the main mouthpiece of the Communist Party, buried the story (a short, unremarkable biographical sketch of Mandela) under a commentary on Soviet-US relations on page five. Izvestiya, the paper of the Soviet parliament, carried nothing at all on Mandela’s release. Instead, it published a report by its southern African correspondent on threats by white South African nationalists to kill Mandela if he were freed.

The extinction of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe also led to the appearance of extreme, right-wing ideologies and nationalistic, anti-Semitic and even fascist ideas hitherto suppressed by the authoritarian system. Their influence in both society and the press grew. In the former Soviet Union, the ideas of the national chauvinists and fascists were aired in mass media and in parliament. Vladimir Zhirinovsky, for example, founder of the Liberal Party and aspiring president, returned from a 1991 visit to the United States to tell Russians that he was appalled by the huge presence of blacks and Asians in New York. According to him, America’s current problems were rooted in the large concentration of ‘coloured’ people in that country and he volunteered his services to President George Bush to cleanse his country.

Neo-fascists were given access to the mainstream media in what seemed to be a calculated attempt by the new leaders to further marginalise Africa. For example, in April 1992, a programme on the state-owned Central Television saw fascists openly express their resentment against Africans and blacks in general. Several participants in the popular Russian TV programme Tema (‘Topic’) did not shy away from racist sentiment. One said that he would emigrate to South Africa should the future president of Russia be a black man. According to him, it was easier to fight blacks in South Africa than in Russia. Russians, he claimed, were too soft. Taking their cue from the mainstream media were the fledgling fascist alternative media. In its February 1992 edition, the St Petersburg Otechestvo described how ‘Black Americans, who earn five dollars per hour wages, could come to our country and pose as millionaires and take liberties with our girls and contaminate the Russian blood’. This was hardly surprising considering the fact that, in their attitude towards blacks, Russia’s new ‘democrats’ differed very little from the motley national chauvinistic and fascist groupings then mushrooming all over the country. Not much earlier, most of the new ‘democrats’ had been communists who
publicly pontificated about the brotherhood of man and racial harmony, while at the same time nurturing and spreading racism, anti-Semitism and ethnic hatred among the Soviet citizenry.

More glasnost, more ‘gloss-over-nost’

Since the Gorbachev revolution affected the ideological premises on which the Soviet Union conducted its international relations, it was not surprising that the coverage of Africa in the state-sponsored press would also change. And because ethnocentric blood is thicker than ideological water, ethnocentric interests informed the ideological stances of the former superpower’s press. The further Gorbachev’s glasnost-cum-perestroika revolution advanced, the more the press marginalised Africa. And the more ethnocentric and racist a press is, the more likely it is to perpetuate both the ‘Tarzan’ image of Africa and the ‘coup-famine syndrome’ as the dominant African realities. This, in effect, will influence or reinforce audiences’ views or opinions of Africa and Africans.

The main stereotypes employed by Soviet journalists to describe issues involving Africans underwent drastic changes. In 1985, Soviet journalists had attributed Africa’s problems to ‘birthmarks of capitalism’, ‘imperialist intrigues and exploitation’, ‘hostile bourgeois propaganda’, ‘US expansionist policies’, ‘plots against Africa’ and so on. But, by 1990, these stereotypes disappeared from the lexicon of Soviet journalists, while terms like ‘solidarity’, ‘disinterested aid’, ‘proletarian internationalism’, ‘socialist solidarity’ and ‘socialist fraternity’, which had still been employed in 1987 to describe Soviet-African relations, disappeared in later years. In their place, new terms such as ‘universal human values’, ‘global cooperation’, ‘de-ideologisation of inter-state relations’ came to be used. At the same time, Africa began to be increasingly described as ‘cherny kontinent’ (the ‘dark continent’). Sometimes, Soviet journalists appeared to have difficulty deciding how to refer to Africans. Thus, Africans are variously called ‘negro’ or ‘cherny’, although the former term is offensive. In Russia, North Africans are perceived differently from Africans south of the Sahara, who are described specifically as ‘temnokozhny’ (‘dark-skinned’). What is more, there appears in the Soviet/Russian mind to be much in common between North Africans and the former Soviet citizens in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

As the Marxist-Leninist state ideology fell asunder with the rise of ‘new thinking’, Soviet journalists, like the rest of the intelligentsia, appeared to be groping for a different vision of the world as a whole. Thus, the old image of Africans had to be recast to suit the new ‘non-ideological’ vision. Coverage of Africa did no more than merely catalogue the familiar banes and woes of the continent – the world’s
highest infant mortality and adult morbidity rates, the threats of population explosion, AIDS and famine, ad infinitum. While, in the past, such reports would surely have been spiced with accusations of ‘western complicity’ or ‘international finance capital pillage’, reports during the period under review did not look for external culprits. Most articles put the blame on Africans themselves. For instance, Pravda, in an article captioned, ‘We are Africans in a European home’, pointed out that Africans wasted ‘solid’ amounts of western credits through bad management and corruption and that tiny Belgium produced more goods than the whole of Africa taken together. Characteristically, the journalist glossed over other objective factors like the lopsided international economic order, which is skewed against most developing countries, or the fact that the Belgian farmer receives more than the African farmer for the same amount of work.

When the question of Africa’s marginalisation by the new Russian media was raised, a common reply was that domestic problems had pulled the media’s focus away from the continent. But coverage of foreign news did not fall during the six Gorbachevian perestroika years. On the contrary, more countries and regions that had previously been left out of the orbit of Soviet press coverage suddenly came to be covered regularly. Coverage of the countries of Southeast Asia, the so-called ‘tigers’, more than trebled. In fact, foreign news in general had been very much restricted before glasnost.

But the real reason for the growing marginalisation of Africa may be found in the boomerang effect of decades of paternalistic communist propaganda, which portrayed the USSR as a big-hearted ‘big brother’ lavishing ‘free and disinterested’ assistance, in line with Marxist-Leninist humanitarianism, on ‘poor and defenceless peoples of the developing world struggling against capitalist subjugation and neo-colonialist blackmail’. It is easy to understand why, when Russia suddenly found itself in economic turmoil, Africa became the convenient whipping horse, the scapegoat. Little wonder that, in the wake of the demise of communism, the small number of African students in Russia were subjected to hysterical hate campaigns, daily beatings and even murder by fascist groups. But the new marginalisation – Africa has always been marginalised and trivialised by the Soviet media – also has something to do with the ‘new’ Eurocentrism initially engendered by Gorbachev’s ‘new thinking’. ‘New thinking’, which claimed to have its roots in ‘universal human values’, turned out, for the political bureaucracy and new media, to be rabid Eurocentrism and even racism.

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