

From “Backward Villages” to “Speaking of Success”: Representations of African Women through the Lens of *Soviet Woman* during Early Decolonization

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This article explores representations of African women in *Soviet Woman* between 1956 and 1964. This magazine was a medium of socialist outreach aimed at women worldwide. Its approach to developing countries, in particular, entailed not only denouncing imperialism but also presenting the Soviet system as a template for postcolonial advancement in a way that conjures up a civilizing mission. This impression is heightened by exotified representations of African women and idealized depictions of Central Asia women as beneficiaries of the revolutionary dismantling of the Russian Empire and thus models for emulation. Yet, this article demonstrates, in its images and rhetoric, that *Soviet Woman* did not wholesale essentialize African women or render them lower in hierarchical relation to Soviet ones. Rather, amid national liberation movements and rising female global activism, it also presented them as agents in postcolonial development and highlighted commonalities with women everywhere. The portrait of African women that *Soviet Woman* generated thus appears to be more complex than the Soviet representations of African men that scholars have observed.

Keywords: Soviet women, Africa, decolonization, visual representations, cultural outreach, Cold War.

Africans who studied in Soviet universities during the 1950s and 1960s recalled encountering a one-dimensional rendering of their country or entire continent as inhabited solely by the unfortunate, toiling on plantations or in mines for the benefit of (British or American) white men, and living in bleak conditions.¹ According to one account, Guinean students “were embarrassed when [...] a documentary film [...] ignored Conakry and concentrated on some miserable, truly backward villagers making primitive-looking huts from local materials.”² Research on Soviet media representations of Africa and Africans has illuminated several recurring tropes that complement such personal recollections. Among them are the triad “nature, neediness, and backwardness,” and an inexorable association with “imperialism, war, oppression, poverty, exploitation, and neocolonialism.”³ Scholars have also discerned a tendency to categorize African peoples as “ethnographic” (consisting of visual cues like drums) and “enslaved” (signified by chains).⁴

Such depictions were typically gendered male, placing African men on the extreme ends of a spectrum from weak, exploited, and infantilized, to strong but martyred, with the latter encapsulated by Soviet lionization of the Congolese liberation leader Patrice Lumumba after his assassination in 1961.⁵ It is unsurprising then that when relating to male African students, “Soviet institutions struggled to conceive of blackness beyond narrow masculine tropes: emasculation, victimhood, aggression, and disorder.”⁶ African women appeared rarely, or “as victims” to heighten “moral condemnation of racism and imperialism.”⁷

1 William Anti-Taylor, *Moscow Diary* (London: Robert Hale, 1967), 51.

2 Ibid., 107.

3 Catherine Mary Ratcliff, “Seeing Africa—Construction of Africa and International Development in Soviet and Russian Public Discourse” (D.Phil. diss., The University of Edinburgh, 2017), 132 and 170.

4 Hillary Lynd and Thom Loyd, “Histories of Color: Blackness and Africanness in the Soviet Union,” *Slavic Review* 81, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 406.

5 Ibid., 406, and Thomas R. Loyd, “Black in the USSR: African Students, Soviet Empire, and the Politics of Global Education During the Cold War” (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 2021), 158–159.

6 Lynd and Loyd, “Histories of Color,” 409.

7 Ibid., 406.



1. An example of male and female Africans meeting in Moscow, namely, a Malian delegation visiting compatriots studying at the Lumumba University of People's Friendship. Photo by L. Lazarev, *Soviet Woman*, no. 8 (1961), 11

Afrikiečių vyrų ir moterų susitikimo Maskvoje pavyzdys – Malio delegacija lanko Lumumbos tautų draugystės universitete studijuojančius tautiečius. L. Lazarevo nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 8 (1961)

The comparatively limited representations of African women can be attributed to the fact that for the duration of the Cold War, those who visited or lived in the Soviet Union were small in number relative to their male compatriots. For example, at the University of People's Friendship in Moscow, an institution founded in 1960 to host students from Africa, South Asia, and eventually Latin America, the male to female ratio of students from Sub-Saharan Africa in October 1964 was an overwhelming 565 to 50.⁸ As of 1969, less than twelve percent of students from the entire so-called Third World were female.⁹

- 8 *Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Goroda Moskvy* (Central Archive of the City of Moscow; TsGAM), fond 3061, opis 1, delo 268, list 10. William Anti-Taylor, cited above, was among the first African students enrolled in the University of People's Friendship (*Universitet družby narodov*; UDN). Prior to this, foreign students were trained at regular universities in the Soviet Union, largely in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Some African students, therefore, saw the establishment of the UDN as a maneuver to segregate them from Russian ones. Roger E. Kanet, "African Youth: The Target of Soviet African Policy," *Russian Review* 27, no. 2 (April 1968), 169. That said, students from developing countries were not restricted to the UDN or to Moscow. Some, for example, trained at the State University in Moscow, in Leningrad, or in Kiev, the Central Asian University in Tashkent, or the Tashkent Agricultural Institute. Seymour M. Rosen, "Soviet Training Programs for Africa," *U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare Bulletin*, no. 9 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), 2. On female African students in Soviet institutions, see footnote # 12.
- 9 Constantin Katsakioris, "Burden or Allies?: Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes," *Kritika* 18, no. 3 (Summer 2017), 550. Like Katsakioris and others cited throughout, this article will employ historical Soviet parlance of the 1950s and 1960s when addressing countries in Africa. This included "Third World" (*tretii mir*), "developing countries" (*razvivaiushcheisia strany*), and the "East" (Vostok). See, for example, Abigail Kret, "'We Unite with Knowledge': The Peoples' Friendship University and Soviet Education for the Third World," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 33, no. 2 (2013), 239.

Yet as recent studies demonstrate, African women did meet and interact with Soviet citizens, whether at gatherings in the Soviet Union or elsewhere, many in connection with the *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin* (Committee of Soviet Women; KSZh), an organization that operated from 1941 through the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁰ During the Cold War, this Soviet body nurtured links with women around the globe through Soviet affiliates like the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, which co-published *Soviet Woman*, and international organizations like the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), of which it was a leading member.¹¹ It also hosted visiting officials, tourists, and students, and sent Soviet delegations abroad.¹² Nevertheless, combined with general inattention to the subject of foreign women in the Soviet Union, the experiences of African women and messages about them are underrepresented within the otherwise robust scholarship on "Africa and the Soviet Union."¹³

- 10 The Committee was founded in 1941 as the *Anti-Fashistskii Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin* (Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Women) and changed its name during the Thaw, in part to better reflect postwar circumstances. For some recent scholarship on the KSZh, see Elizabeth Banks, "Sewing Machines for Socialism? Gifts of Development and Disagreement between the Soviet and Mozambican Women's Committees, 1963–1987," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41, no. 1 (2021): 27–40, as well as the works cited below by Yulia Gradszkova, Alexis Peri, and Christine Varga-Harris.
- 11 A key work on the WIDF that incorporates research on the KSZh is Yulia Gradszkova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South, and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the 'Whole World'?* (New York: Routledge, 2021).
- 12 The KSZh began sponsoring female students from abroad in 1964, though some *had* studied in the Soviet Union prior to this. This is confirmed by statistics collected by the UDN, and by the rare letter from female students preserved in its archives. See, for instance, the following, written by a female Kenyan student in October 1962: TsGAM, f. 3061, op. 1, d. 1087, ll. 24–25. There are also indications that the KSZh provided support for female foreign students before 1964. See, for example, its correspondence with Gertrude Omog, leader of the Union Démocratique des Femmes Camerounaises (the Democratic Union of Cameroonian Women), who was studying at the Kalinin (now Tver) Medical Institute as early as 1963. On Committee sponsorship of female foreign students in general, and on its support for Omog in particular, see, respectively, *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (po istorii SSSR)* (State Archive of the Russian Federation; GARF), f. R7928, op. 3, d. 15, l. 1, and op. 3, d. 1116, ll. 15–16 and 26. As a final aside, like male students from developing countries, female ones were not restricted to studying in the RSFSR. See, for example, the caption for Image #1 in this article, and the following feature on Ghanaian women studying at the Ferghana Pedagogical Institute in the Uzbek Republic: Sergei Korzinkin, "Girls from Ghana," *Soviet Woman (SW)*, no. 3 (1964), 12–13.
- 13 See, for example, Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955–1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022); Natalia

This article explores the visual images and discourse surrounding African women that appeared in the main publication of the KSZh, *Soviet Woman*, between 1956 and 1964. During this period, the ongoing Cold War drove Nikita Khrushchev to build alliances with new countries taking shape amid liberation movements and structural decolonization, for example, by courting leaders of political persuasions that leaned toward nationalism, capitalism, socialism, and Pan-Africanism, sometimes incorporating elements of each.¹⁴ Soviet aims in Africa were pursued through both governmental bodies and nominally non-governmental organizations like the Africa Department, which was established within the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1958, and the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, created that same year to disseminate information about the Soviet Union and to foster citizen diplomacy.¹⁵ These kinds of cultural outreach were carried out through media ranging from radio broadcasts—including in African languages like Swahili—to publications that highlighted the economic, scientific, and cultural achievements of Soviet peoples, with an emphasis on those in Central Asia and the Caucasus.¹⁶

Soviet Woman was one such publication. This illustrated monthly was printed in about a dozen languages and distributed to more than one hundred countries, and like other Soviet media, institutions and bodies

Telepneva, *Cold War Liberation: The Soviet Union and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, 1961–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Sergey Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR, West Africa and the Congo, 1956–1964* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); and Maxim Matusevich, *No Easy Row for a Russian Hoe: Ideology and Pragmatism in Nigerian-Soviet Relations, 1960–1991* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, Inc., 2003).

- 14 By early 1960, the Soviet regime had come to consider Ghana, Guinea, and Mali the most promising countries for spreading Soviet influence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War*, 158. Yet, as Mazov demonstrates, even relations with these countries were not straightforward, nor satisfactory for all involved.
- 15 Prior to 1958, Africa fell under the purview of the European Department; in 1961, the Africa Department was divided into sections for North Africa and for Sub-Saharan Africa. Mazov, 19, 24 and 26.
- 16 Mazov, 16. The first institution to sponsor students from Africa was the Tashkent branch of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, which was centered in Moscow and operated from the 1920s through the Stalinist purges. Decades later, African students of the UDN were encouraged to take advantage of excursions to Central Asia during summer holidays—to study innovations in agriculture and manufacturing that they might transfer to their home countries, and in some cases, to contribute labor to these sectors of the Soviet economy. See, respectively, Kanet, “African Youth,” 163, and Kret, 251.

engaged in cultural outreach, it presented values like egalitarianism, modernity, and internationalism, and declared socialist superiority in areas like living standards.¹⁷ *Soviet Woman* also frequently cast Central Asia as an apt model for socioeconomic transformation in decolonizing countries in Africa and elsewhere.¹⁸

While Soviet media strove to familiarize Africans with the Soviet system, the Khrushchev regime scurried to fill the gaps in Soviet knowledge about Africa due to disinterest and a lack of access to information under Joseph Stalin. That even professionals in fields like foreign intelligence and international relations “knew little about the continent or its people” prompted the creation of the Soviet Africa Institute in Moscow.¹⁹ Led by Ivan Potekhin from its founding in 1959 until his death in 1964, the chief objective of this academic body affiliated with the Soviet Academy of Sciences was to generate information pertinent to delineating positions, strategies, and goals in Africa.²⁰ The KSZh, which reported to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, played a role in these endeavors by nurturing contact with African women, and learning about their circumstances and organizations.²¹ *Soviet Woman*, meanwhile, contributed to the construction of knowledge about Africa—and other developing countries—by publishing facts and figures on independence and decolonization, features on

17 Regarding the role of universities in this enterprise, see, for example, Kret, “‘We Unite with Knowledge.’”

18 On the potential appeal of Soviet models for social and economic transformation to women in decolonizing countries, see, respectively, Christine Varga-Harris, “Between National Tradition and Western Modernization: *Soviet Woman* and Representations of Socialist Gender Equality as a ‘Third Way’ for Developing Countries, 1956–1964,” *Slavic Review* 78, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 758–781, and Oscar Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization: The Political Economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

19 Telepneva, *Cold War Liberation*, 26.

20 Milton D. Morris, “The Soviet Africa Institute and the Development of African Studies,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 11, no. 2 (June 1973): 249–253, and Mazov, 22–24. Efforts to familiarize Soviet citizens with “the Black Continent” included exhibitions of African art and translations of African literary works, as well as gatherings that brought African academics, writers, artists, and film directors to the Soviet Union. See, for example, Mazov, 17, and Masha Kirasirova, *The Eastern International: Arabs, Central Asians, and Jews in the Soviet Union’s Anticolonial Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 185–216.

21 See, for example, GARF, f. R7928, op. 3, d. 20.

foreign culture (including short stories and photographs of artistic work), and articles on exchanges of various kinds. It also made the lives of African women visible.

To be clear, Africa did not predominate in the images and stories of women worldwide that the magazine featured. Given the dearth of Soviet sources on African women uncovered thus far, however, an analysis of *Soviet Woman* provides a fruitful foundation for qualitative comparison with the representations of Africa and African men that personal accounts have revealed and that scholars have observed. This article will demonstrate that in this magazine, as in other Soviet publications that have been studied, ethnographic tropes evoking “backwardness” were standard in depictions of Africa and Africans. These included dirt, huts, and a conflation with nature, as well as ones specific to women like colorful attire and an implicit excess of jewelry, or exotified femininity. Such tropes were accompanied by undertones of curiosity, patronizing awe, and references to the lowly status of African women, for which cultural and religious practices were blamed. At the same time, *Soviet Woman* complicated representations of African women by portraying them as “taking charge” of the development of their country—a motif that also surfaced in other Soviet media during the height of national liberation movements, but to a lesser extent.²² Moreover, by outlining their activities and presenting their voices through interviews or articles that they themselves composed, *Soviet Woman* literally and figuratively fleshed out African women alongside other women featured, acquainting an international readership with their lives just as the KSZh was becoming familiar with them.

All this said, the aim here is not to extricate offensive or questionable renderings of African women from any positive images of them that *Soviet Woman* published; the negative ones cannot be minimized or erased.²³ Rather, this article shows that the magazine created a more complex portrait of African women than other sources did of their male counterparts. To both illuminate and explain this, the texts that accompanied visual images will factor into the analysis, as will ideas and phenomena “outside the picture”—including how the multiethnic character of the Soviet Union shaped

22 See the following analysis of the newspaper *Pravda*: Ratcliff, “Seeing Africa,” 195.

23 Linda Steet, “Gender and Orientalism: *National Geographic*’s Arab Woman,” *The High School Journal* (February – March 1996): 202–203.

Soviet approaches to difference.²⁴ At the backdrop of such considerations is the peculiar place that the Soviet Union occupied in relation to Africa. Although neither a direct colonial power nor a subaltern subject, it *was* a major contestant in the *binary* battle with the West over Africa, or as Catherine Ratcliff aptly indicated, part of a “trinary” consisting of the Soviet bloc, the West, and the “colonized” world.²⁵

Soviet Woman during the turn toward Africa

How *Soviet Woman* presented African women was shaped by its role in cultural outreach and the image of the Soviet self that it sought to project.²⁶ This section will therefore provide an overview of recurring motifs in representations of others, together with a general introduction to the magazine. *Soviet Woman* was directed at women and addressed subjects like motherhood, family, and health, as well as history, economics, and foreign relations; it also included sections on cookery and fashion, book reviews, and fiction. As a conduit for propaganda, it touted the achievements of socialist modernization and accentuated Soviet gender equality, omitting any shortcomings. Of special relevance to readers in the developing world and their sympathizers, it condemned imperialism.

The number of women in Africa who read *Soviet Woman* cannot be verified. Clues about reception, however, can be gleaned from correspondence with members of the KSZh. Letters from African women suggest that in the absence of editions in a language native to their country, they consumed the English or French issue of *Soviet Woman*, sometimes in accord with the familiar language of former colonial administration (e.g., English in Ghana and French in Mali).²⁷ Committee correspondence also indicates that African women found the content of the magazine compelling. As one illustration, in February 1961, four years before her country achieved independence from Britain, the Gambian labor activist Katie Thomas wrote in English to

24 Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 88.

25 Ratcliff, “Seeing Africa,” 60–61.

26 The notion of the Soviet “self” as relational to the “other” in the Global South, is detailed in David C. Engerman, “The Second World’s Third World,” *Kritika* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 183–211.

27 For more on the format, content, and distribution of *Soviet Woman*, see Varga-Harris, “Between National Tradition and Western Modernization,” 763–766, and 776–778.

thank the KSZh for sending her copies of *Soviet Woman*, stating that they “are helping me [...] and I hope in the near future we shall come to know each other personally.”²⁸ The appeal of the magazine is reinforced by another letter to the Committee that Thomas wrote in May 1962. Here she inquired if her subscription had lapsed because she had failed for a spell to receive *Soviet Woman*; in response, she was assured that it would be renewed by June.²⁹

Besides providing her “help”—presumably, in the form of inspiration—and rousing her interest to become acquainted with Soviet women, Thomas might have enjoyed seeing fellow African women reflected on the pages of the magazine. KSZh correspondence indicates that in May 1961, she had been sent an issue of *Soviet Woman* containing photographs of the first Gambian woman to visit the Soviet Union.³⁰ Thomas herself appeared in at least one issue of the magazine, as the author of a brief article published in 1964 that was accompanied by her photograph.³¹

The preponderance of features on African women that appeared in *Soviet Woman* between 1956 and 1964 were published during the early 1960s, which coincided with key moments in the Soviet turn toward Africa. Among them was a declaration of support for revolutions across Africa, alongside a pledge for moral and material assistance, which Khrushchev presented at the United Nations. The year was 1960, which witnessed

28 GARF, f. R7928, op. 3, d. 668, l. 31.

29 Ibid., l. 52 and l. 68.

30 Ibid., l. 38.

31 “Katie B. Thomas—My New Year Wish: Peace and Happiness in Your House,” in the section “Our Interviews,” *SW*, no. 1 (1964), 29. It appears that Thomas had visited the Soviet Union in 1963 for a trade union gathering in Moscow, and while in the capital, had met with *Soviet Woman* editors. That this cannot be fully verified is due to inconsistencies in transliteration among African languages, Russian Cyrillic, and English in the sources used for this study. It is likely that Katie B. Thomas—as per *Soviet Woman*—is one and the same person as Beatrice Ketty Thomas, who appears in the following archival document: GARF f. R7928, op. 4, d. 168, l. 182. Given such confusion, throughout this article, spellings for African names (and organizations) follow those published in *Soviet Woman*, unless other sources indicate that they are incorrect. Such verification has thus far proven possible only for prominent public figures. To offer a sense of variation in spelling across both *Soviet Woman* and the KSZh archive, the woman identified as “Spio Garbravi” in a full-page color photograph that the magazine published in 1961, might be the same person as the “Elisabeth Spio Garbra” discussed in a 1963 article, and the “Elizabeth Spio-Garbra” with whom members of the KSZh corresponded. See, respectively, Unsigned photograph, *SW*, no. 12 (1961), 14; R. Smirnova, “Days Spent in Ghana,” *SW*, no. 10 (1963), 28; and GARF, f. R7928, op. 3, d. 845.

more than a dozen countries on the continent achieving independence and thus acquired the moniker “The Year of Africa.”³² As mentioned above, the Friendship University was founded that same year, and after the January 1961 assassination of Lumumba, was renamed in his honor. Then in April 1961, “African Freedom Day” was introduced in the Soviet press. This holiday, conceived in 1958 at the First Conference of Independent African States in Accra, became “a fixture in the Soviet calendar” for focused reporting on Africa that included depictions of its dynamism and bright future, and proclamations of Soviet solidarity with its peoples.³³

Ethnographic tropes, like those that African students recounted in their memoirs and that scholars discerned in visual media, did not, however, disappear from Soviet press coverage of Africa, and *Soviet Woman* also consistently employed them. Basically, in repeated references to the problems of colonialism and harmful customs, the magazine produced an oversimplified rendering of the entire continent, whether the focus was Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, or Tanganyika (Tanzania). Indeed, regardless of the unique features of a given country—and even when these were discussed—*Soviet Woman* left readers with the impression that Africa was riddled with poverty, widespread illiteracy, shortages in medical services, weak infrastructure, and stunted manufacturing (due to the legacies of colonial exploitation), as well as customs that could negatively affect the dignity and freedom of women (due to precolonial traditions like polygamy). At the same time, the magazine provided concrete examples of how African societies were approaching and overcoming such challenges through the expansion of educational opportunities (for example, with the desegregation of schools), economic advances (in metallurgical works or livestock programs), and construction projects (for hospitals or irrigation systems), sometimes with

32 Jonathan Flatley, “Picturing the World of the Communist Black International,” in *The Wayland Rudd Collection: Exploring Racial Imaginaries in Soviet Visual Culture*, ed. Yevgeniy Fiks (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021), 89.

33 Ratcliff, “Seeing Africa,” 251–252. On the founding of the holiday, see “History of Africa Day,” *South African History Online*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-africa-day-25-may> (last accessed on February 10, 2025). This article explains that “Africa Freedom Day” (or “African Liberation Day,” or “Africa Day”) was proposed as a day to observe the advancement of the liberation of African peoples at the First Conference of Independent African States, convened in Accra in April 1958. The holiday was ratified on the 15th of that month but in 1963, drifted to the 25th of May to commemorate the formation on *that* date of the Organization of African Unity.

Soviet aid.³⁴ Development assistance was, of course, a tangible feature of Soviet relations with African countries.³⁵ Nevertheless, the conventional image of Africa as “the troubled continent [...] needing to be helped” was less prominent in *Soviet Woman* during the 1950s and 1960s, than it was, for example, in *Pravda*.³⁶

Articles on African *women*, meanwhile, often began in an ethnographic mode with an assemblage of natural landscapes and people that might have been unfamiliar to readers, as if to capture the idyll amid which modernization was occurring in their country. They also seemed to prompt readers to reconsider their perceptions of African women by depicting them not just as exotic but also as participants in postcolonial social advancements. The images that accompanied these articles were sometimes inserted clumsily. Such was the case with the photographs published in a feature composed by Galina Goroshkova, a Soviet academic who had visited Sudan as a guest of Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, a leading member of the Sudanese Women’s Union.³⁷ The subject of one of the photographs is a young black woman wearing what appears to be indigenous clothing and layers of necklaces and earrings, smiling into the camera.³⁸ If her dress, encoded with markers of exotic femininity, was incidental, the caption for the photograph is unquestionably ethnographic: she is *labelled* “A Dinka Girl.”³⁹

34 This synthesis of how *Soviet Woman* detailed both the challenges of decolonization and efforts on the part of African peoples to confront them, is based on the following: Antonina Smolnikova, “Flags Over Accra,” *SW*, no. 12 (1960), 29; Raisa Smirnova, “Nigeria Looks to the Future,” *SW*, no. 4 (1963), 14; Zinaida Tokareva, “In the Young Republic of Togo,” *SW*, no. 7 (1963), 16; and Julia Zotova, “My New Acquaintances,” *SW*, no. 12 (1963), 13.

35 That said, the leaders of postcolonial states sometimes garnered assistance by pitting the Soviet Union and the United States against each other in competition for their allegiance, and implemented aid in tandem with their own economic and political agendas. See, for example, Matusevich, *No Easy Row for a Russian Hoe*, and Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War*.

36 Ratcliff, “Seeing Africa,” 57.

37 Ibrahim would become a prominent Islamic feminist, defender of human rights, and in 1991, president of the WIDE. Gradszkova, *The Women’s International Democratic Federation*, 146–152.

38 Throughout this article, forms of dress that do not appear to resemble standard “ready-to-wear” clothing, but instead seem to be made of fabric employing unique weaving and dying techniques, or to incorporate handiwork like embroidery, will be referred to as “ethnic” or “indigenous” for lack of a better way to convey distinctions in the images being analyzed.

39 Galina Goroshkova, “Visit to the Sudan,” *SW*, no. 9 (1957), 47.



2. A Dinka Girl, *Soviet Woman*, no. 9 (1957), 47

Dinku genties mergina, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 9 (1957)

Photographs like this in *Soviet Woman* bring to mind the kinds of images of peoples in the Third World for which the more extensively researched *National Geographic* is renowned.⁴⁰ Founded in 1888 in conjunction with the creation of the National Geographic Society, this magazine combined “science” and entertainment to make the “outside world” accessible and knowable to its chiefly American, middleclass, and educated readership.⁴¹ *Soviet Woman*, founded during the Second World War, was a state publication, directed largely at a foreign audience, specifically a female one.⁴² Despite their different origins, aims, publishers, and intended readers, a brief comparison of the two magazines is useful for teasing out features of the Soviet one, as well as for showcasing what appears to have been a propensity during the 1950s and 1960s toward representing “others” as

40 Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 38 and 1. For another, more focused study of *National Geographic*, see Linda Steet, *Veils and Daggers: A Century of National Geographic's Representation of the Arab World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

41 Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 35, 38, and 1.

42 On the small domestic audience of *Soviet Woman*, relative to its foreign one, see Alexis Peri, “New Soviet Woman: The Post-World War II Feminine Ideal at Home and Abroad,” *Russian Review* 77, no. 4 (October 2018): 643.

both exotic and “familiar, one of the family of man,” and therefore “knowable to some degree as individuals.”⁴³

Most obviously, both the “scholarly” *National Geographic* and the general interest *Soviet Woman* were produced mostly by individuals who can be classified as white and whose profession compelled them to generate knowledge about their subjects—in the case of the latter, members of the KSZh, journalists, academics, and artists.⁴⁴ Each publication also contributed to Cold War messaging. *National Geographic*, for example, reinforced the wider public image of the United States as “benevolent” toward newly independent nations, as well as “raceless and classless, egalitarian, and generous”—similar to the representation of the Soviet Union that *Soviet Woman* disseminated abroad.⁴⁵ Each magazine can therefore be interpreted more as a reflection of its own society than of the “realities” of the “others” who occupied the “imaginative spaces” of its images and texts, and who were organized by tropes signaling cultural difference.⁴⁶

That said, *National Geographic* and *Soviet Woman* diverged significantly in their portrayal of difference. Notably, “the natural man,” “societies with no historical dynamism of their own,” and “an evolutionary ladder of societies with Africa at the bottom rung and Asia at the middle”—all aspiring “for the top—[...] a modern, Western life style”—were consistent themes in *National Geographic*.⁴⁷ In contrast, *Soviet Woman* did not present the “other” in a state of timelessness, essential, and unchanging, or

43 Lutz and Collins, 116.

44 Due to the absence of precise editorial decisions in the KSZh archives, the intentions of the Soviet authors who contributed to *Soviet Woman* cannot be verified.

45 Lutz and Collins, 35 and 38.

46 Ibid., 2.

47 Ibid., 117. Lutz and Collins attribute this approach to ongoing Anglo-American anxiety about the sexuality of those that *National Geographic* identified as racially different—even as the magazine, paradoxically, sexualized them, especially Black women. Incidentally—if unsurprisingly for a magazine directed at women—nude depictions of others were virtually absent in *Soviet Women*. One rare example is a photograph of a Guinean woman dressed in indigenous attire, standing in front of a hut and breastfeeding. In other ways, the article that accompanied it was fairly typical of *Soviet Woman* in its representation of African women—if especially condescending and infantilizing in tone. It referenced not only “huts,” “muddy paths,” illiteracy, and ignorance in one small Guinean village but also progress around the country since independence in the form of increasing educational opportunities, and the erosion of traditional practices that denigrated women. Yuri Zhukov, “A Copybook in a Hut,” *SW*, no. 2 (1961), 6–7.

categorically lower in hierarchical relation to the Soviet “self.” In short, “The Dinka Girl” did not constitute a pattern of objectifying Black women that was characteristic of *National Geographic*.

This is apparent in the same feature on Sudan that anonymized Dinka women. As indicated, the text of this article was not devoid of ethnographic devices.⁴⁸ For example, Goroshkova remarked on the “lovely and graceful” appearance of the women she had met, casting some as explicitly mysterious—“heavily veiled, with only a slit for the eyes”—and others, in a way that undercut difference among women: carrying “small children and baskets holding books and needlework.”⁴⁹ The implicitly exotic here was amplified by her account of a Muslim wedding ritual that she had attended, restricted to women, with the bride performing an “ancient [...] dance on a little rug woven of reeds to the rhythm of a clay drum”—something Goroshkova claimed to have learned symbolized “readiness for the sacred duty of motherhood.”⁵⁰ Her description thus both embellished the sense of mystery she had constructed around Sudanese women, and made them relatable.

After drawing in readers with scenes that were likely unfamiliar to them, Goroshkova detailed the founding, membership numbers, activities, and reach of the Sudanese Women’s Union (SWU). Besides providing Sudanese women a forum for making contacts and exchanging ideas, she shared, the SWU was producing a monthly publication that expressed demands for female suffrage, equal pay, and family rights; it was also running schools. Introducing other organizations too, including one comprised of women from families “high up in society,” the author made the point that Sudanese women possessed a “strong urge for participation in public life” and were “beginning to make a big contribution to building up their independent state.”⁵¹

Alongside the “exotic” and engagement in postcolonial transformation, another recurring theme in *Soviet Woman* that emerged in this article on Sudan was international cooperation and friendship. This was evinced by commentary on the multinational character of guests at another event that Goroshkova had attended, this one celebrating Sudanese Women.

48 Goroshkova, “Visit to the Sudan,” 47–46.

49 Ibid., 46.

50 Ibid., 46.

51 Ibid., 47.

Among the attendees were women from Egypt, Finland, India, Iraq, and Lebanon—a few of whom appear in a snapshot marking the occasion, in various forms of dress, each identified by name.⁵² Such depictions of groups of women of different backgrounds, in contrast to the photograph of the solitary Dinka girl, was typical in *Soviet Woman*.⁵³ Images featuring an array of women from around the world, emphasizing commonality amid difference at one and the same time, also aligned with established conventions for signaling the “friendship of the peoples” within the multiethnic Soviet Union.



3. Sudanese Women's Week gathering,
Soviet Woman, no. 9 (1957), 46

Sudano „Motery savaitės“ renginys, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 9 (1957)

A two-page color photograph of a dozen or so female farm machine operators attending a conference in Moscow illustrates this motif. The image and the caption that underpinned it presented the participants as united by profession, if from different parts of the Soviet Union. This is indicated by variations in attire—a mixture of “standard” and ethnic dress—and references in the text to the ethnicity or locality of several among them.⁵⁴ Also notable: although half of the women appear to be looking at or toward a blond, presumably Slavic, attendee, half are not, lending the photograph a sense of spontaneity. Moreover, neither she, nor any of the other apparently Caucasian women depicted, dominate the center of the composition. This is not to say that Soviet displays of diversity were wholly stripped of

⁵² Ibid., 47.

⁵³ It is possible that the various peoples *within* Sudan viewed *each other* differently. However, it would require an expert on ethnic relations within the country to fully unpack *Sudanese* perspectives on “The Dinka Girl” and the “Westernized” (in terms of dress) Sudanese woman shown in the group photograph.

⁵⁴ Photograph by L. Danilov and A. Stanovov, *SW*, no. 9 (1964), 10–11.

indicators of a civilizational hierarchy.⁵⁵ For example, when positioning them in relation to their counterparts in the European republics, *Soviet Woman* presented women in the Soviet East (Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Far North and East) with signs that denoted primitiveness (dirt, tents, and ignorance), cast their cultural traditions in reductive ways, and omitted challenges to social change, as it traced a model transformation of their circumstances under socialism.

This is evident in a feature introducing readers to individual women from across the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ That it devoted more print space to advancement when discussing those from non-European republics signaled a particularly stunted level of civilization in the locality where *they* were raised, prior to Soviet rule. Complicating this portrayal, however, the same feature emphasized that regardless of nationality, Soviet women “all have much in common—they are free to choose their own futures” and “devote themselves to their [...] callings.”⁵⁷



4. Women gathered for a farm machine operator conference, organized by the magazine *Krest'ianka* (*Peasant Woman*). Photo by L. Danilov and A. Stanovov, with text by Irina Kopchikova, chief editor for *Krest'ianka*, *Soviet Woman*, no. 9 (1964), 10–11

Moterys, susirinkusios į žemės ūkio mašinistų konferenciją, organizuotą žurnalo *Krest'ianka* (*Valstietė*). L. Danilovo ir A. Stanovovo nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 9 (1964)

Soviet Woman also individualized women from the Soviet East by providing biographical details about them and showcasing their agency, at times rendering them heroic. Illustrative is a 1959 article centered on Zainab Omonova, an Uzbek woman whose life had inspired an opera that was being performed at the time at the Bolshoi Theater as part of a festival

55 On civilizational versus racial hierarchies in the Soviet context, see Lynd and Loyd, “Histories of Color,” 412.

56 Unsigned, “Our Young Women,” *SW*, no. 7 (1957), 20–27.

57 *Ibid.*, 21.

of Uzbek art. As the author, Vadim Sokolov, outlined her life, he highlighted her struggle against tradition (exhibited in refusing an arranged marriage in defiance of her parents) and a career trajectory that spanned from picking cotton to becoming team leader of a collective farm and then chair of a village soviet; she was also a recipient of the Order of Lenin. Thus, although her life ended tragically during the Second World War, Sokolov cheerfully concluded that hers was but one of many “stories born under the golden sun of Uzbekistan”—and, implicitly, under the Red Star. Indeed, the Soviet system was credited for the opportunities Omonova enjoyed, with its “new, vital way of living” and “new ethical standards,” which purportedly spared such Muslim women restrictions on their public activities as decreed by customs disallowing women from sitting at a table or walking alongside men.⁵⁸

The conflation of socialism and improvements in the status of women in Central Asia is pronounced in the October 1964 issue of *Soviet Woman*, which devoted several pieces to the region to commemorate the Revolution.⁵⁹ On the first page is a photograph of a young woman identified as Abadan Geldieva, her hair pulled off her face and wearing what appears to be a floral Russian shawl over a kaftan, standing at a blackboard, solving a mathematical problem. The caption declared: “... If we could turn the wheel of Time back forty years, we would not be able to see the lovely face of this girl: a heavy, rough veil would hide her beauty from people’s eyes. This daughter of Central Asia would not be a student, but an illiterate downtrodden slave, having no rights either in society or in her own home.” It then assured Abadan, and implicitly, others like her: “You will solve any problem, for the most difficult of problems has been solved for you and all other women of your land by Soviet power.”⁶⁰

Such assertions belied the realities of Soviet policy in Central Asia, which had mixed results. The hujum, an “attack” on traditional values and structures signified by a mass unveiling campaign that began in 1927 to emancipate Muslim women, encountered not only interest in expanding their

58 Vadim Sokolov, “A Legend of Today,” *SW*, no. 7 (1959), 22–23.

59 The Kirgiz and Kazakh republics also featured in stories of transformation from customs that oppressed women, to opportunities provided by the Soviet system that enabled them to become educated and active in all professions. Forming the backdrop of such pieces, like some on Africa, are lands rich with vast resources that have been exploited or underutilized. See, for example, the following article on the Kirgiz Republic: Nikolai Urzhumsky, “The Women of the Celestial Mountains,” *SW*, no. 1 (1956), 24–27.

60 Photograph by V.N. Nikulin, Untitled, *SW*, no. 10, 1964, 1.

educational and professional prospects but also violent resistance. In subsequent decades, continued misunderstanding of Islam, as well as inattention to family customs and to modernization in the countryside, left a gap between urban “Sovietized” and rural Muslim women. Simply stated, the latter were not able *en masse* to take advantage of new opportunities, due to continuing pressure to conform to parental authority and the persistence of patriarchal social norms, family responsibilities, and reliance on employment in collective farm work.⁶¹

Thus, presenting Geldieva as “any woman” of Central Asia reduced her to an idealized object of benevolence. The triumphal message that the socialist regime had spared her the pitiful fate of her forebears is not surprising. What is curious, though, is the way in which the same man who produced the photograph of Geldieva and wrote its caption, spoke of his *own* awakening in this same 1964 issue of *Soviet Woman*. In an article titled “A Search and a Discovery,” Vladislav Nikulin admitted that the research for this piece on the Turkmen Republic began as a search for the “new” Central Asian woman, whom he envisioned as “Oktyabrina” (a female personification of “the October Revolution”). While the odious implication that “The Central Asian Woman” was a specimen to be discovered echoes throughout, Nikulin focused on his personal misperceptions and subsequent enlightenment. Indeed, the article centered on outlining how his expectations were challenged as he encountered a myriad of suitable subjects, including Bibisara Amanova, a senior geologist working at the oil concern Turkmenneft, one of several women he featured.⁶²

61 For insight into the reception of early Soviet policy in Central Asia, see the following, which is centered on Uzbek women: Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). On the postwar period, see Zamira Abman, *Coerced Liberation: Muslim Women in Soviet Tajikistan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2024). Although Abman focuses on the Tajik republic, she cites similarities across the “Muslim periphery” (e.g., in the Uzbek and Turkmen republics) in state approaches and in the circumstances of rural women. Moreover, like Northrop, she recognizes the coexistence of diverse ethnic groups within each Central Asian republic—a product of the artificial boundaries that the Soviet regime created to encase and govern various peoples. For a sense of variation across the region in Soviet efforts to transform gender relations, see Meltem Sancak and Peter Finke, “Konstitutsiya Buzildi! Gender Relations in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan,” in *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, eds. Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 160–177.

62 Vladislav Nikulin, “A Search and a Discovery,” *SW*, no. 10 (1964), 4–5.

Less problematic are two other articles published in this special October 1964 issue, written by women from Central Asia: a Tajik political activist and an Uzbek architect. The Tajik woman, Salomat Djangirova, traced the trajectory of women from the Soviet East that was standard in *Soviet Woman*—from a life of hardship, exploitation, and violence under the old regime, to the flowering of Dushanbe, concomitant with new opportunities for women as heads of collective farms, educators, and politicians, following the triumph of Soviet power. Throughout her narrative, however, she cast herself much as the aforementioned legendary Omonova was depicted, as a heroic participant in the new order. For example, she described throwing off her veil and forming a women's department (presumably a *zhenotdel'*, a body linked to the Communist Party) to spread the word of the new life come into being.⁶³ Meanwhile, the Uzbek architect, Clara Mirza-Akhmedova, focused on achievements in her field to which she herself was actively contributing, as per the title of her article, "We Are Builders."⁶⁴ Overall then, the October 1964 issue reflected the tendency of *Soviet Woman* to both compress women in the Soviet East into a type, and to individualize and present them as products *and* agents of socialism.

Like the "friendship of the peoples" motif, depictions of women in Central Asia are relevant to this analysis in a number of ways. First, images and texts representing women from this part of the Soviet Union served as a template for portrayals of women from Africa. Indeed, articles that appeared in *Soviet Woman* on Africa, as on Central Asia, typically delineated the challenges of overcoming imperial legacies and cited precolonial customs for undermining the status of women. They also showcased the experiences and activities of individual women, weaving their personal testimonies into larger narratives. This rendered them actors in their own liberation and in the progress of their people.

Representations of women in Central Asia are also significant because *Soviet Woman* tended to juxtapose women from this region with women in Africa. Central Asia had broadly served as an exemplar of postcolonial possibilities since the 1920s, when it was first cast as overcoming the legacies of Russian imperialism through Soviet socioeconomic policies. As

63 Salomat Djangirova, "A Good Life," *SW*, no. 10 (1964), 6–7.

64 Clara Mirza-Akhmedova, "We Are Builders," *SW*, no. 10 (1964), 2–3.

Masha Kirasirova succinctly stated, its transformation positioned the region “as a symbol of economic and cultural progress” as “framed through the comparisons of pre- and postrevolutionary economic and cultural indicators such as production output, agricultural yield, numbers of schools, and general literacy.”⁶⁵

The perceived affinity between Central Asia and Africa, and the notion that new countries in Africa could fashion themselves in the image of Central Asian republics, was intimated in a color photograph that appeared in a 1962 feature on “Africa Day.”⁶⁶ Garnering a full page, the image depicts the Uzbek artist Leilo Salimjanova painting a portrait of her “friend” Ramatoulaye Bangoura, a chemical engineer and member of the Democratic Party of Guinea.⁶⁷ The Soviet woman is wearing a dress that appears to be made of traditional Ikat fabric, her attention focused on the canvas; her Guinean subject is wearing a dress with an abstract pattern and a head covering, gazing downward and smiling serenely. The trope of Central Asia as a model of modernization for peoples of the foreign East forging their own independence is complicated, however, by the composition of the photograph, namely, the placement of the two women.⁶⁸ Although Bangoura is technically in the background, she is nearly in the center of the page and facing the camera. The Uzbek woman, meanwhile, is off to the side, and rendered in profile.

The association between Central Asia and Africa was muddled more generally in *Soviet Woman* by one significant difference in approach to praise for change; in reportage on Africa, grassroots organization often eclipsed the state in discussions of development. This revision of the standard narrative about women from the Soviet East might be attributed to the

65 Masha Kirasirova, “‘Sons of Muslims’ in Moscow: Soviet Central Asian Mediators to the Foreign East, 1955–1962,” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2011): 111. This is not to say that the image of Central Asia as a development model was solely the purview of Soviet foreign policy. As the following study of the Tajik Republic demonstrates, it also served Central Asian elites seeking to advance their own interests: Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

66 “December 1—Africa Day,” *SW*, no. 12 (1962), 2–5. It is unclear why “December 1” was cited for the occasion, given the founding of this holiday outlined above.

67 This image accompanied the article “African People Seek Knowledge,” *SW*, no. 12 (1962), 4.

68 This relationality of the Soviet East and the foreign East was a construct that stretched back to the interwar years, as Masha Kirasirova delineates in *The Eastern International*.

fact that governments in Africa at the time were not entirely known entities—that is, there was uncertainty about the political path that they would follow, and even recognition on the part of the Soviet regime that the socialist model could not be uncritically or identically applied to developing countries.⁶⁹ Returning to the photograph of Salimjanova and Bangoura, what is clear is that the Soviet woman is rendering the African one visible. How *Soviet Woman* did so by applying the various conventions that have been outlined will be elaborated in the next section.



5. Ramatoulaye Bangoura from Guinea and Leilo Salimjanova from the Uzbek Republic. Photo by Vasili Zakharchenko, *Soviet Woman*, no. 12 (1962), 5

Ramatoulaye Bangoura iš Gvinėjos ir Leilo Salimjanova iš Uzbekijos Respublikos. Vasilijaus Zacharčenko nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 12 (1962)

Ethnographic—but not unchanging

A 1960 article in which the academic N. Gavrilov chronicled a recent visit to Guinea, and the photographs published alongside it, encapsulate the range of visual and discursive representations of Africa and African women that appeared in *Soviet Woman* during the first decade or so of decolonization in Africa. It exotified them, it cited legacies of colonialism for underdevelopment, it alluded to precolonial traditions impeding the advancement

69 See, for example, Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War* and Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development*.

of women, it outlined socioeconomic indicators of change, and it introduced readers to individual women transforming their countries. One of the photographs depicts the wife of a village leader with two children, wearing indigenous dress, a head covering, and some jewelry. Another captures a group of young women dressed in what appear to be pinafores, foraging for gold. Drawing on feminine ethnographic tropes, the caption for the first stated: “The Malinke women share the weakness of all women for jewellery. Every African woman wears beads, bracelets, and earrings.”⁷⁰ Adornments of *self-fashioning* were thereby appropriated to classify an entire people—and gender.⁷¹ The caption for the second photograph intimated that Guinea was “backward” by assuring with condescending optimism that the kind of hard labor described would soon be mechanized.



6. Wife of the Dubola [sic? perhaps Dabola] village committee chairman. Photo by A. Gavrilov, *Soviet Woman*, no. 8 (1960), 35

Dabolos kaimo komiteto pirmininko žmona. A. Gavrilovo nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 8 (1960)



7. Women digging and panning for gold in the Niger Valley in Guinea. Photo by A. Gavrilov, *Soviet Woman*, no. 8 (1960), 35

Moterys aukso ieškotojos Gvinėjoje, Nigerio slėnyje. A. Gavrilovo nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 8 (1960)

These images, together with a third of a one-story building housing a technical school for women, evoke a rural setting. Thus, while elusive about racial difference, *Soviet Woman* habitually intimated that “urban”

⁷⁰ N. Gavrilov, “In Independent Guinea,” *SW*, no. 8 (1960), 35.

⁷¹ Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 54–55.

trumped “rural” in the civilizational hierarchy, as did the latter in pairings like “darkness-light,” “past-future,” and “backward-modern.” African countries were placed somewhere in the middle of the trajectories that these paradigms signified, as per the term ascribed to those throughout the Global South in the 1950s and 1960s, in the Soviet Union as elsewhere: “developing” (*razvivaiushcheisia*).⁷² The Soviet Union itself was just becoming fully urbanized, but by casting the country as modern (the ideal), *Soviet Woman* suggested that it was a model of civilization.

The text of this article on Guinea mirrors the images, while also creating a more complex depiction of the country. Gavrilov set an ethnographic tone with a picturesque scene—a market in Kindia, filled with produce and women in colorful attire. He stated:

One young beauty was skillfully weaving her way through the crowd with a great tray of fruit balanced on the bright turban she wore on her head. Her arms swung freely, her throat was as slender and graceful as the neck of a black swan. Her shoulders and breast were covered with a vest of simple snow-white material with a woven pattern of flowers. Her big eyes with their blue-tinged whites looked out upon the world trustingly and lovingly.⁷³

Then, abruptly shifting from this eroticizing and infantilizing description, Gavrilov added that Guinean women were publicly active and politically outspoken proponents of independence. His characterization of the “young beauty” he had introduced further altered as he recounted his subsequent observations in the form of an inner monologue: “But wait, was that a portrait of President Sekou Touré [...] on the back of her blouse? It was,” he confirmed, adding: “As we learned later, this was more than [...] fashion. It was a vivid expression of national pride [...] in the country’s independence and freedom.”⁷⁴

72 On this tendency in both Western imagery and Russian terminology, see, respectively, Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 113, and Tobias Rupprecht, *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11.

73 Gavrilov, “In Independent Guinea,” 34.

74 *Ibid.*, 34.

Given that Gavrillov claimed to have seen women throughout Guinea wearing shirts emblazoned with the faces of African liberation leaders, the absence of a photograph of the “new” Guinean woman is peculiar. Relative to the reductive images that *were* published, though, the portrait of Guinea that emerges in the article is multidimensional, if presented through a conventional narrative of “awakening”—both of Guinean women and of Soviet perceptions of them. Basically, Gavrillov guided the reader from colonial times through recent developments in Guinea like a ban on child marriage and initiatives undertaken, largely by women, to build village schools. He also introduced some notable individuals, among them, M’Balía Camara, whose dedication to anticolonial activities with the Democratic Party of Guinea had led to her assassination.⁷⁵

Also typical of *Soviet Woman*, Gavrillov did not portray Guinea in a state of timelessness, but rather evoked Marxian ideas about historical development to incriminate *imperialism* for ongoing social and economic problems. Similarly, he did not categorically essentialize Guinean women or place them “beneath” their Soviet counterparts based on perceived, innate qualities, or even in accordance with the kinds of ethnographic tropes that he himself employed; if anything, precolonial *customs* were cited for the lingering low status of women. To be sure, Gavrillov made a spectacle of his subjects by rendering them alluringly strange and beautiful; in other ways, however, he presented them as inspiring individuals.⁷⁶

One of the two articles that appeared in the same 1962 “Africa Day” feature depicting Bangoura sitting for her portrait, followed a template similar to this piece on Guinea. Written by the Soviet journalist Vasilii Zakharchenko, based on a visit to Mali two years after it had achieved independence, the text is flanked by two images that respectively intimate an ethnographic object and modern subject. On the left is a photograph of a Malian woman in flowery traditional dress, balancing a bowl of fruit on her head as she looks into the camera with what appears to be a tentative smile. The woman in the photograph on the right also seems to be wearing ethnic attire, but in contrast, is facing away from the camera, towards a memorial erected in honor of people who had died fighting for liberation. However

75 Ibid., 34–35.

76 On the use of such ethnographic devices in Western representations, see Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 90 and 93.

the reader might have felt about the aesthetics of either image, the caption for the first is inarguably reductive, *labelling* the woman in the photograph “A young resident of Bamako,” while that for the second individualizes its subject by *naming* her Adrienne Traore, the first female journalist in Mali.⁷⁷ The contrast these photographs conjures up is mirrored in the article, which incorporated ethnographic markers like drums, and civilizational ones like illiteracy, but largely underscored change in Mali since independence in the form of increasing educational opportunities for women, and new laws affording them more rights (e.g. consent in marriage).



8. “A Young Resident of Bamako.”
Photo by Vasili Zakharchenko, *Soviet Woman*, no. 12 (1962), 2

Jaunoji Bamako gyventojai. Vasilijaus Zacharčenko nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 12 (1962)



Adrienne Traore, the first woman journalist in the Mali Republic, at the monument to those who gave their lives for the liberation of their country

9. Malian journalist Adrienne Traore. Photo by Vasili Zakharchenko, *Soviet Woman*, no. 12 (1962), 3

Malio žurnalistė Adrienne Traore. Vasilijaus Zacharčenko nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 12 (1962)

77 Vasili Zakharchenko, “In the Mali Republic,” *SW*, no. 12 (1962), 2–3.

The other article in the 1962 “Africa Day” feature is titled “African People Seek Knowledge” and follows the same framework as the one by Zakharchenko, for example, referencing the detrimental impact of colonialism on economic development and society, and enumerating signs of change. Notably, however, it is comprised of three short pieces written by African women, attendees of the Seminar on Education for Afro-Asian Women that the KSZh had hosted in Tashkent that September: the aforementioned Ramatoulaye Bangoura from Guinea, Sophia Doku from Ghana, a Member of Parliament and leading activist in the National Council of Ghana Women, and Omoyele Gadagbe from Togo, a childcare specialist. Thus, beyond the patronizing title of the article, the reader learned from African women themselves the ways in which they were contributing to progress in their country. For instance, Gadagbe highlighted initiatives toward eradicating illiteracy undertaken by the Union of Women of Togo, which was providing basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, as well as special courses in the native Ewe language.⁷⁸

The images accompanying these texts, meanwhile, are a departure from the ones that appeared in the article that Zakharchenko had written for the “Africa Day” feature (the exotic Bamako resident and the pioneering journalist Traore); they consist of two small photographs of Doku and Gadagbe, in the style of professional headshots. As such, they also diverge in style from the photograph of the third of the African authors, Bangoura. The latter, a lyrical composition that connected the Guinean woman in friendship with the Uzbek one painting her, was more typical of how *Soviet Woman* depicted foreign women in general: in pairs with Soviet women or in groups with others, in a way that underscored commonality among them.

***Soviet Woman* and sameness amid difference**

Indeed, more frequently than it represented women from Central Asia and Africa bonded by experiences of colonialism, *Soviet Woman* presented all women as united through motherhood. This universalizing theme is evident in a two-page color photograph featuring a Russian woman and a Congolese visitor to Moscow, respectively, Ludmila Trifonova and Bernadette Tshiteya,

78 Omoyele Gadagbe, “African People Seek Knowledge,” *SW*, no. 12 (1962), 3–4.

facing each other with their children in their arms. Published in March 1961, at a time of political turmoil and territorial conflict in Congo, the caption declared that the Congolese people who had suffered under colonialism were now fighting for freedom. It concluded assuring that someday the Congolese mother and child would “have a life as free and happy as that of” the Muscovite one.⁷⁹ While presenting Soviet life as aspirational, the combination of the text and image evoked a common concern for children binding together all women, regardless of their individual circumstances.



10. Ludmila Trifonova and Bernadette Tshiteya. Photo by A. Stanovov, *Soviet Woman*, no. 3 (1961), front inner cover-1

Ludmila Trifonova ir Bernadette Tshiteya, A. Stanovovo nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 3 (1961)

In highlighting the universality of women as mothers, *Soviet Woman* followed the aforementioned postwar trend of celebrating diversity across the “family of man”—or, in this case, what might be called “The Motherhood of Man.”⁸⁰ Contrasting “white” and “black” and implying “sameness” all at once, the photograph of Trifonov and Tshiteya suggests that women, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or circumstances, are fellow travelers. How this was manifested in actual encounters between Soviet women, as well

79 *SW*, no. 3 (1961), inner cover to page 1. On official Soviet involvement in Congo at this time and the broader context of the crisis, see Mazov, 157–226.

80 Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 168–171. This kind of “fellow-travelling mentality” and sense of commonality, concomitant with interest in learning about and recognizing those who are unfamiliar, was in evidence at the 1955 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *The Family of Man*, which toured globally—including in the Soviet Union, where it was shown during the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow. The exhibit, intended to show the “oneness of mankind,” consisted of hundreds of photographs from nearly seventy countries, “arranged thematically to illustrate birth, love, family, work, play, grief, war, faith, death, and, at the end, childhood again.” Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 219, 216, and 217, respectively. Thanks to Amy L. Wood for alerting me to this work.

as through correspondence among them, has been analyzed elsewhere.⁸¹ For its part, *Soviet Woman* connected women virtually through news from around the globe demonstrating sisterhood and solidarity in struggles for social justice and world peace. A feature on labor activism, for example, included short pieces on countries as diverse as South Africa, Italy, Canada, and Belgium.⁸² Another, on the World Congress for General Disarmament and Peace, held in Moscow in 1962, suggested a shared striving for peace among women through a column of seemingly random headshots of attendees, identified in order from top to bottom as being from Ghana, Japan, the Soviet Union, China, Mexico, the United States, and Indonesia.⁸³

Returning to African women, specifically, in addition to placing them alongside their Soviet counterparts, *Soviet Woman* often presented them as part of a trio in the form of a “racial rainbow” in which “black, white, and yellow” corresponded to African, Caucasian, and Asian. This “three race model of mankind” has been attributed to a 1950 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization statement that upheld the category of race even as it rejected a hierarchy of races.⁸⁴ In the Soviet Union, which abhorred racial classification, the idea of the world divided into “Black,” “White,” and “Yellow” nevertheless persisted.⁸⁵ As Quinn Slobodian noted, this “meant that markers of race were ever present even as the meaningfulness of race in establishing hierarchies of human ability was disavowed.”⁸⁶

81 See, for example, Christine Varga-Harris, “Soviet Women and Internationalism in Socialist Travel Itineraries in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Diplomatic History* 46, no. 3 (June 2022): 486–504. For letters exchanged between members of the KSZh and some of the African women referenced in this article, specifically, Spio-Gabra (already noted), Hannah Kudjoe, Fatou Cissé Aribot, and Ma Bamba (noted below), see, respectively, GARF, f. R7928, op. 3, d. 845, d. 669, d. 475, and d. 256. For an analysis of correspondence between Soviet women and women in Africa and South Asia, see Christine Varga-Harris, “Socialist Internationalism Writ Small: Friendship and Sisterhood in Correspondence between Women in the Soviet Union and the Decolonizing World, 1950s–1960s,” in *Socialist Internationalism and the Gritty Politics of the Particular: Second-Third World Spaces in the Cold War*, ed. Kristin Roth-Ey (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 97–118.

82 *SW*, no. 5 (1959): 26–27.

83 Unsigned, *SW*, no. 9 (1962), 1.

84 Quinn Slobodian, “Socialist Chromatism: Race, Racism, and the Racial Rainbow in East Germany,” in *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World*, ed. Quinn Slobodian (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015), 27.

85 *Ibid.*, 23–39. See also Lynd and Loyd, “Histories of Color.”

86 Slobodian, “Socialist Chromatism,” 30.



11. "We are not raising our sons for war."
Drawing by Nina Vatolina, *Soviet Woman*,
no. 11 (1959), 5

„Mes auginame savo sūnus ne karui.“ Ninos
Vatolinos piešinys, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 11
(1959)

So, it was in *Soviet Woman* where visual imagery accentuated both diversity and universality. Difference was indicated by phenotypic, ethnic, and sartorial tropes that were especially exaggerated in artistic drawings. Commonality was evinced by composition (placing women face-to-face or arm-in-arm) and captions that conjured up the intertwined themes of motherhood, peace, and solidarity. Illustrative is a drawing by the celebrated Russian poster artist Nina Vatolina, created for the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution, which was reproduced in the November 1959 issue of *Soviet Woman*.⁸⁷ Taking up an entire page, it depicts three women representing Africa, Europe, and Asia, holding up infants.⁸⁸ The White woman clearly dominates the foreground. However, she is technically not the center of the image, for the trio is arranged in a circle, nor does she command the attention of the others in a way that positions her as a leading figure. That is to say, whiteness is not centered to evoke a racial hierarchy—a convention that has been discerned in groupings of women representing different races in Soviet ephemera like stamps and postcards.⁸⁹ Rather, each

87 N. Vatolina, *My Plakatisty* (Moscow: Sovetskii Khudozhnik, 1969), 47–48.

88 Drawing by Nina Vatolina, *SW*, no. 11 (1959), 4.

89 Kate Baldwin, "Gender and Racial Formation in Soviet Propaganda," in *The Wayland Rudd Collection*, 121–122.

woman is focused on her child, in keeping with the caption “We are not raising our sons for war.”



12. “We Do Not Want War.” Drawing by A.N. Varnavitskaya, *Soviet Woman*, no. 5 (1958), 24-25

„Mes nenorime karo.“ A. N. Varnavickajos piešinys, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 5 (1958)

Curiously, Vatolina composed this drawing with the assistance of a Korean model, and was inspired by a personal interest in conveying the spirit of peace.⁹⁰ Although the artist does not elaborate on her rationale for the former, her experience of the Second World War suggests the sincerity of the message of her work (sparing children the horrors of war), a sentiment that was replicated in many other images that appeared in *Soviet Woman*. For example, the notion that women as mothers are bound together by an aversion to war is also explicit in a sketch spanning two pages, indicating women of different countries and races, with a few white doves (symbolizing peace) and children sprinkled in, undergirded by the caption “We Do Not Want War.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Vatolina, 47–48.

⁹¹ Drawing by A.N. Varnavitskaya, *SW*, no. 5 (1958), 24–25. The photograph spanning the front and back covers of the March 1962 issue of *Soviet Woman* conveyed the same sentiment. The caption explains that the women pictured were delegates to the 5th World Trade Union Congress who had visited the editorial offices of the magazine. The visitors have their arms raised or are holding hands, smiling, or singing (as per the caption) “Children of different peoples, the vision of peace unites us.” Photograph by G. Zelma and A. Stanovov, *SW*, no. 3 (1962), front and back cover.

There are indications that the allusions to peace and racial harmony that *Soviet Woman* projected resonated with women in decolonizing countries. For example, the aforementioned drawing by Vatolina was reproduced on the back page of the program for the Afro-Asian Woman's Conference held in Cairo in April 1960, a gathering attended by members of the KSZh.⁹² In addition, ethnographic tropes were used in a magazine published by the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization. One issue that it sent to the Committee contained a drawing of two women identifiable by phenotypic racial differences as an "African" woman and an "Asian" one. The "black" woman is rendered with bare feet and wearing only jewelry and a skirt sewn from flags of different countries. The "Asian" one is dressed in a shirt also comprised of flags, and wears wide-legged black pants and black flats.⁹³ Fully unpacking such images would require rigorous comparative study of publications produced and disseminated by African (and Asian) women. *Soviet Woman* does, however, provide clues as to how women from developing countries viewed themselves in relation to Soviet women, namely, their own words.

African women representing themselves

As *Soviet Woman* made the initiatives and achievements of African women known to an international readership and reinforced commonality among all women through a shared interest in child welfare, the status of women, social justice, and peace, it also at times afforded "others" print space to make themselves known. In some instances, their voices were presented through interview material incorporated into articles composed by Soviet authors, and in others, through articles that African women wrote expressly for the magazine—as in the case of the pieces that Bangoura, Doku, and Gadagbe contributed to the 1962 "Africa Day" feature discussed above.

92 GARF, f. R7928, op. 3, d. 395, l. 42a. This program was archived among a variety of materials related to KSZh participation in the Cairo conference.

93 GARF, f. R7928, op. 3, d. 395, l. 157–170. Cartoonish drawings can, of course, carry a variety of signs. For instance, Soviet artists sometimes depicted Black African anti-communist elites in the nude, with exaggerated features and displays of "tribal" culture, or as puppets of Western imperialism. They also presented the "idealized muscular bodies" of Black revolutionaries "breaking chains and smashing shackles"—conjuring up Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels summoning workers to rise up—to contrast with images of European colonizers as "feeble, scrawny, repulsive, and of advanced age." See Yevgeniy Fiks, "Sorting Through the Wayland Rudd Collection," in *The Wayland Rudd Collection*, 69–70.

The layers that comprised representations of African women in *Soviet Woman* are evident in a feature by Raisa Smirnova, an academic who had visited Ghana and subsequently hosted some of the women she had met in the Soviet Union.⁹⁴ Among them were Elisabeth Spio Garbra, the aforementioned Sophia Doku, and Annie Jaga. As in other Soviet accounts of meeting African women, Smirnova began in the ethnographic mode. She described Garbra as having “clever eyes the colour of ripe black cherries,” and Doku as wearing shawls of *kente* cloth, head kerchiefs, and beads and bracelets—the “pride of Ghana’s craftsmen.”⁹⁵ As suggested, descriptions like these may have served the rhetorical function of piquing the curiosity of readers unfamiliar with African women, as a prelude to showcasing their activism, which in this case was gleaned from the subjects of the article.

To elaborate, Smirnova segued into a more substantive portrait of Garbra by stating: “It was not just the beauty of her face that struck me. I was fascinated by the beauty of her character, by her faith in the happy future of her people.”⁹⁶ From speaking with her, Smirnova claimed to have learned that Garbra was contributing to this future as a schoolteacher and as an independence and disarmament activist. From Doku, who might already have been known to readers from the “Africa Day” feature published the previous year, the author had become familiar with various initiatives of the National Council of Ghana Women that were expanding employment opportunities for women and introducing gender equality into economic production. From Jaga, a member of the Supreme Court of Ghana, Smirnova had been made aware of revisions in Ghanaian law aimed at improving the position of women (e.g. regarding inheritance rights).⁹⁷

94 R. Smirnova, “Days Spent in Ghana,” *SW*, no. 10 (1963), 28–29. Smirnova was on the staff of the KSZh for several years before enrolling in the Soviet Africa Institute to study African women and family life, an endeavor in which African women provided her assistance. Committee correspondence suggests that Margaret Martei, wife of a leading member of the leftist Ghanaian Convention People’s Party, had agreed to help Smirnova with her research to reciprocate Soviet donations of shoes and clothing that she had requested. GARF, f. R7928, op. 3, d. 845, l. 16.

95 Smirnova, “Days Spent in Ghana,” 28–29.

96 *Ibid.*, 28–29.

97 *Ibid.*, 29.



13 A, B, C. From top to bottom, Elisabeth Spio-Gabra, Sophia Doku (with Yadgar Nasriddinova), and Annie Jaga, in *Soviet Woman*, no. 10 (1963), 28

Iš viršaus į apačią: Elisabeth Spio-Gabra, Sophia Doku (su Yadgar Nasriddinova) ir Annie Jaga, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 10 (1963)

Throughout, Smirnova quoted her Ghanaian acquaintances, who seemed to drive the story. By her own account, she first met Garbra, who then told her she must meet Doku and learn about *her* activities, too, who in turn, said the same of Jaga. The photographs accompanying this article, meanwhile, convey professionalism and amity through a blend of business-like and traditional dress (including shawls presumably of the *kente* cloth referenced) and smiling faces. Jaga, for example, is pictured at a session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, shaking hands with an unnamed woman. Conjuring up the connection between Central Asia and Africa that *Soviet Woman* habitually presented, Doku is depicted with Yadgar Nasriddinova, head of the Uzbek Supreme Soviet, whose hand is encircling the arm of the Ghanaian politician.⁹⁸

Incorporating the voices of foreign women, as Smirnova did by drawing on conversations with Ghanaian women, was typical in the articles that *Soviet Woman* regularly published on events held at the House of Friendship with Foreign Peoples in Moscow. One such article from 1964 included general comments on a gathering to mark “African Women’s Day,” alongside excerpts from a speech delivered by one of the guests, A. Osman, wife of the then Sudanese Ambassador to the Soviet Union. But for a few statements from visitors to the Friendship House, the introductory section was largely dominated by commentary from Soviet women, who declared solidarity with African women fighting for national independence or to overcome the legacies of colonialism; among them were members of the Soviet Africa Institute and the KSZh. Osman, in turn, not only advocated friendship and peace but also highlighted the role of African women in liberation struggles and social progress. The photograph published with her speech shows Osman in a veil, reading her speech, with Committee member Maria Kovrigina standing by her side; both are smiling.⁹⁹

98 Ibid., 28. The Supreme Soviet was nominally the highest legislative organ in the Uzbek Republic, but largely served to approve decisions meted out by the republican Communist Party, which was connected to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union centered in Moscow.

99 A. Baranova, “African Women’s Day,” *SW*, no. 10 (1964), 14. Although this piece was published in October, African Women’s Day appears to be a holiday celebrated on July 31st. See the following brief history: <https://au.int/en/africa-womens-day-2021> (last accessed February 10, 2025).



14. A. Osman and Maria Kovrigina at an African Women's Day gathering at the Moscow "Friendship House", *Soviet Woman*, no. 10 (1964), 14

A. Osman ir Marija Kovrigina „Afrikos moters dienos“ renginyje Maskvos Draugystės namuose, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 10 (1964)

In articles that they wrote for publication in *Soviet Woman*, like in the speech that Osman delivered, African women delineated their personal experiences and circumstances, highlighted shared concerns with women everywhere, and outlined their aspirations, activities, and accomplishments. Suggesting that these authors had some say in choosing their subject matter, one such piece written by the Ghanaian activist Hannah Kudjoe began as follows: “You ask about my country. Well, I will tell you a little bit about it, mostly about its women and children.”¹⁰⁰ Kudjoe proceeded to inform readers about the status of women and children in Ghana, and the development plan her country was pursuing. When addressing the latter, she cited a range of fields and professions in which women were contributing, casting them as “awakening” to a “new life.” She also spoke about the National Council of Ghana Women and its “struggle against colonial aggression in Africa,” its solidarity with all African women “who endorse the fight for independence,” and its striving for peace. Kudjoe concluded by lauding improvements in nurseries and kindergartens in Ghana. The photograph that appeared with her article shows her surrounded by Soviet children during a visit to a Moscow nursery, holding hands with two of them. Indicating that the nurturing role of women supersedes race, the image tapped into the theme of universal motherhood.

100 Hannah Kudjoe [sic], “The Bright Future of Ghanaian Women,” *SW*, no. 3 (1962), 25.

Kudjoe was a major figure in the Ghanaian independence movement, and after its success in 1957, she continued her activism, advocating for women and children in various capacities, including at the time her article appeared in *Soviet Woman*, in the Ghanaian Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare.¹⁰¹ Her article can therefore be interpreted as a genuine reflection of her sense of self and of her fellow Ghanaian activists.¹⁰² Also significant here, it reflected well on the Soviet Union; towards the end, she asserted: “Your achievements guide us in improving our own nurseries and kindergartens.”¹⁰³



15. Hannah Kudjoe surrounded by Moscow children. Photo by G. Zelma, *Soviet Woman*, no. 4 (1962), 25

Hannah Kudjoe, apsupta Maskvos vaikų. G. Zelmós nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 4 (1962)

By affording African women—and others from around the world—print space to discuss their initiatives and accomplishments, *Soviet Woman* implied that Soviet women were interested in and supported their counterparts in developing countries, and shared their concerns. That women from abroad also exhibited interest in the Soviet Union and praised its people and system more explicitly bolstered the Soviet image that the magazine sought to project. For instance, like Kudjoe, in her piece in the 1962 “Africa Day”

101 Jean Allman, “The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe: Nationalism, Feminism, and the Tyrannies of History,” *Journal of Women’s History* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 13–35.

102 The same can be said of the following, written by a Guinean woman who was a leading member of the Union of Women of West Africa: Fatou Cissé Aribot, “The Role of Women in Modern Society,” *SW*, no. 1 (1963), 8, 34–35.

103 Kudjoe [sic], “The Bright Future of Ghanaian Women,” 25.

feature “African People Seek Knowledge,” Gadagbe verified the relevance of the socialist model, in this case that of the Soviet East; she stated that Togo was facing the kinds of problems that the Uzbek Republic had confronted decades ago, and thus saw the Soviet Union as an “inspiration.”¹⁰⁴ As another example, Osman had not only talked about Sudanese women in her speech at the House of Friendship but also expressed her admiration for Soviet women.¹⁰⁵

In such ways, the voices of African women both contributed to their self-representation and reinforced the representation of the *Soviet* self that *Soviet Woman* was disseminating—as worldly, friendly, helpful, modern, and progressive, qualities that were implied across the vastly greater quantity of reportage by *Soviet* journalists, academics, and artists. For instance, while writing about his trip to Mali, Zakharchenko alluded to the appeal of the Soviet system by noting interest among Malians on subjects ranging from Soviet women, work and family life, to industry, agriculture, and space travel.¹⁰⁶ In recounting her trip to Sudan, Goroshkova implicitly cast the Soviet Union as a global leader by sharing that during a visit to a female college, students made a point of showing her the Soviet flag displayed among others in one classroom.¹⁰⁷

Exemplifying the chorus of voices that *Soviet Woman* presented was a feature published in 1956 titled “Guests from Africa.”¹⁰⁸ The visitors at the heart of the piece had arrived in the Soviet Union by invitation of an Uzbek delegate they had met at a WIDF meeting in Peking. The author, Lyudmila Pavlova, showcased the celebrity welcome their Soviet hosts had extended to them by noting “large throngs of people” calling out to greet them, seeking to embrace them, and presenting them with bouquets of flowers—all to the reported delight of the visitors¹⁰⁹.

She also relayed their positive impressions of the places and people they had encountered, quoting exclamations of appreciation from the guests for the enthusiasm with which they had been received, thereby conveying the message that the Soviet people were friendly and inclusive.

104 Omoyele Gadagbe, “African People Seek Knowledge,” *SW*, no. 12 (1962), 3–4.

105 Baranova, “African Women’s Day,” 14.

106 Zakharchenko, “In the Mali Republic,” 2–3.

107 Goroshkova, “Visit to the Sudan,” 47.

108 Lyudmila Pavlova, “Guests from Africa,” *SW*, no. 8 (1956), 5–9.

109 *Ibid.*, 7.



16. Prominently featured here is Ouassila Djaballah, from Tunisia. Photo by L. Danilov, *Soviet Woman*, no. 8 (1956), 6-7

Pirmame plane – Ouassila Djaballah iš Tuniso. L. Danilovo nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 8 (1956)



17. Reception for “Guests from Africa”. Photo by L. Danilov, *Soviet Woman*, no. 8 (1956), 8

Priėmimas „Svečiai iš Afrikos“. L. Danilovo nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 8 (1956)

Along the way, Pavlova recounted what appear to have been candid moments indicating mutual curiosity and pleasure in the company of others, beyond “meeting and greeting” in rote diplomatic fashion—from questions about work and popular culture, to dinner receptions filled with singing and dancing. At the sendoff for the visitors, she claimed, a Soviet government official had begged one woman, Ma Bamba from Ivory Coast, to dance for them all, and she “willingly complied with a Negro folk dance,” as captured in one photograph.¹¹⁰ This particular scene is discomfiting because, intended or not, it renders Bamba an object of curiosity. In fact, the

110 Ibid., 8. The term “Negro” rarely appeared in *Soviet Woman*, and its usage was generally in decline in the postwar Soviet Union. See Lynd and Loyd, “Histories of Color,” 394–395.

entire feature can be read as making a spectacle of African women by overemphasizing how welcoming their Soviet hosts were. Yet Bamba was quoted as remarking on their “open, generous hearts,” adding: “We used to feel almost isolated from the rest of the world, but now we know that Soviet women think of us, they want us to be happy.”¹¹¹



18. Binta Diop, from Senegal, and a Soviet student in Tashkent, Farida Yenalieva, “warmly embracing each other”. Photo by L. Danilov, *Soviet Woman*, no. 8 (1956), 9

Binta Diop iš Senegalo ir sovietų studentė Farida Jenalijeva iš Taškento „šiltai apsikabina“. L. Danilovo nuotrauka, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 8 (1956)

Soviet Woman also channeled the novelty of this early encounter with African women into an opportunity to learn about them; the concluding section of the feature, subtitled “What Our Friends Told Us,” included excerpts from speeches that three of the “Guests from Africa” had delivered to various audiences during their visit. Alongside customary statements of gratitude and references to nurturing friendship and peace, each author provided a few details about her activities, goals, and opinions. For instance, Bamba, identified as a nurse, declared it her aim to achieve equality for African women, something she herself was working toward by organizing women in her country; Binta Diop talked a bit about the Senegal Women’s Union, of which she was a leading member; and Justine Ranivosoa, a teacher from Madagascar, voiced her hatred—“like all women in all other lands”—for “colonialism and foreign oppression.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ Pavlova, “Guests from Africa,” 7.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

In his study of a broad swathe of images depicting African-Americans as well as Africans, Yevgeniy Fiks underscored the following inherent contradiction in Soviet propaganda: promoting internationalism while propagating racial stereotypes.¹¹³ This incongruity is not absent in *Soviet Woman*. However, factoring into the analysis of visual images any accompanying discourse (from captions to lengthy articles), the overall portrait of African women that emerges from the pages of the magazine is multifaceted and convoluted. In some instances, *Soviet Woman* dramatically cast them as ethnographic types from underdeveloped lands plagued by the ravages of colonialism, and in others—as individuals participating in liberation movements or transforming their country after independence, identified by name, profession, and the organizations, political parties, or government bodies in which they were active. Understating the role of newly formed African governments in national progress, the magazine at times emphasized the initiatives of women whom it portrayed as largely in charge of their own fate, taking advantage of their changing circumstances to build their future. In other instances, it traced the endeavors of African women in a way that echoed the trajectory of Soviet women, particularly those in Central Asia.

As a medium of cultural outreach, it is unsurprising that *Soviet Woman* displayed the socialist system as a feasible template for advancement, and Soviet women as models for gender equality. Yet compositional variation meant that whiteness was not always centered. Meanwhile, presenting women from around the globe, and encouraging and applauding those in developing countries, reflected positively on the Soviet Union, rendering it friendly, globally engaged, and socially progressive. Indeed, recognizing the activities and accomplishments of African women indirectly affirmed Soviet solidarity with national liberation movements and decolonization. Publishing their words had the same effect—particularly, when they expressed interest in the Soviet system, cited the Soviet people as inspirational, or confirmed the potential of the socialist model for transforming lives.

African women were also incorporated into visual images in *Soviet Woman* that conveyed commonality among all women through shared

interests, despite differences. In practical terms, this intersectional approach bore success in Soviet collaboration with women across the globe in advocating for the rights of women and children.¹¹⁴ Commenting on the efficacy of this kind of strategy, Chandra Mohanty stated: “[...] the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances.”¹¹⁵

How might the variety of representations of African women that appeared in *Soviet Woman*—from anonymous, ethnographic phenotypes to individuals “just like us”—be explained in the absence of specific editorial directives? It could be that portraying diversity on the pages of a magazine might simply have been less threatening than confronting difference in the form of foreigners living in the Soviet Union for extended periods. Bluntly stated, the African women depicted in *Soviet Woman* were not marrying into families in the Soviet Union, nor inspiring nonconformity within the Soviet liberal intelligentsia, as some male students had, to the ire of citizens and the state, sometimes with violent consequences.¹¹⁶ Perhaps sisterhood—conveyed in photographs of women side-by-side and face-to-face, smiling or embracing each other—was somehow easier than “brotherhood.”

It is also possible that *Soviet Woman* had a wider berth for representing others than did policymakers or more officious Soviet publications. As shown, in its visual images and discourse alike, the magazine employed “ethnographic” tropes, conveyed appreciation for diversity, and conjured up universality among women all at once. *Soviet Woman* eluded standard categories and messages in other ways, too. Illustrative is a pair of articles about Africa published alongside each other, spanning two pages in the

114 See, for example, Gradszkova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation*, and Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). The latter focuses on the Bulgarian equivalent of the KSZh, but incorporates Soviet women in its broad focus on cooperation among women of the “Second” and “Third” Worlds.

115 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

116 Katsakioris, “The Soviet-South Encounter,” 134–165; Maxim Matusevich, “Expanding the Boundaries of the Black Atlantic: African Students as Soviet Moderns,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2012): 325–350; and Julie Hessler, “Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics and the Cold War,” *Cahiers du Monde russe* 47, nos. 1–2 (January to June 2006): 33–63.



19. "Under African Skies". Drawing by M. Birstein, *Soviet Woman*, no. 11 (1961), 32 [partial image from a drawing that spans pages 32–33]

Po Afrikos dangumi. M. Birsteino piešinys, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 11 (1961)



20. "Vigilance in Mali". Drawing by M. Birstein, *Soviet Woman*, no. 11 (1961), 33

Budėjimas Malyje. M. Birsteino piešinys, *Soviet Woman*, nr. 11 (1961)

November 1961 issue. In order of appearance from left to right, the first of these is titled "Under African Skies" and includes two vibrantly colored drawings by the author, the artist M. Birstein, inspired by a visit to Africa. One, titled "By the Ocean," depicts a quotidian scene in independent Guinea, with a group of women and children in the foreground. The women are smiling and conversing; all are wearing bright indigenous clothing and one is balancing a tray of fruit on her head. In the background is an ocean, and off to one side—scaffolding and a crane. The other illustration, titled "Vigilance Post," portrays two African women in Mali, which had more recently gained its independence, in 1960; armed with rifles, the artist explained that they were working to secure the liberation of their country by guarding defense posts.¹¹⁷ One is wearing an armband representing the flag of the

117 M. Birstein [author and artist], "Under African Skies," *SW*, no. 11 (1961), 32–33. Incidentally, such militant representations of African women appear to have been more typical of the 1970s. Baldwin, 122–123.

Mali Federation¹¹⁸. Although unconventional for portraits of African women in *Soviet Woman*, the second drawing strikes quite a contrast not only to the first two, which suggest standard ethnographic and modernization narratives, but also to imagery presenting African men as enslaved, backward, or infantilized.

The second article published in this November 1961 issue, opposite “Under African Skies,” is titled “We Can Already Speak of Our Success.” It detailed the work and achievements of the Union of Togo Women, and was signed by the vice president and two other members of this organization, all of whom are pictured in individual headshots.¹¹⁹ Together with the multiplicity of images in *Soviet Woman* addressed above, this concluding assortment suggests that there is much more to be learned about the role of gender in defining the range of the possible in Soviet representations of African women—and of women elsewhere during decolonization.

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118 Thanks to Louise Thurin for identifying the tricolor (green, yellow and red) and *Kangana* mask (invoking the creation of the world) of the flag used by the Mali Federation during its brief existence from 1959 to 1960.

119 Eunice V. Adabunu, Ohin Bibiome, and Lyly Johnson, “We Can Already Speak of Success,” *SW*, no. 11 (1961), 33.

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Santrauka

Nuo „atsilikusių kaimų“ iki „kalbų apie sėkmę“: Afrikos moterų vaizdavimas žurnale *Soviet Woman* ankstyvuoju dekolonizacijos laikotarpiu

Christine Varga-Harris

Reikšminiai žodžiai: leidinys *Soviet Woman*, Afrika, dekolonizacija, vizualinės reprezentacijos, kultūros sklaida, Šaltasis karas.

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas Afrikos moterų vaizdavimas pagrindiniame Sovietų Sąjungos moterų komiteto leidinyje *Soviet Woman* 1956–1964 metais. Šis iliustruotas mėnraštis buvo platinamas daugiau nei 100 šalių. Kaip ir kiti sovietinės kultūros sklaidos ruporai, jis skelbė tokias vertybes kaip egalitarizmas bei internacionalizmas ir reklamavo socializmo privalumus. Žurnalas taip pat publikavo vaizdus ir pasakojimus apie viso pasaulio moteris, tarp jų ir afrikietes. Kadangi tarp gausių Sovietų Sąjungai ir Afrikai skirtų mokslinių studijų yra nedaug tokių, kurių pagrindinis tyrimų objektas – afrikietės moterys, *Soviet Woman* tampa šaltiniu, leidžiančiu palyginti Afrikos moterų įvaizdžius su Afrikos vyrų įvaizdžiais, kuriuos pavyko rasti kituose leidiniuose. Panašiai kaip, pavyzdžiui, laikraštyje *Pravda*, šiame žurnale dažnai buvo naudojami standartiniai etnografiniai tropai, kai kurie jų – neabejotinai įžeidžiantys. Tačiau žurnale *Soviet Woman* afrikietės vaizduotos sudėtingiau, pateikiant jas kaip aktyvias nacionalinio išsivadavimo judėjimo ir postkolonijinės pertvarkos dalyves. Taigi išskylantis bendras vaizdas yra daugialypis ir tikriausiai labiau niuansuotas nei Afrikos vyrų įvaizdis, kurį galima susidaryti iš kitų šaltinių. Straipsnyje tai atskleidžiama į analizę įtraukiant vaizdus lydėjusius tekstus ir atsižvelgiant į: 1) Sovietų Sąjungos daugiatautiškumo vaidmenį formuojant sovietų požiūrius į skirtybes; 2) tarptautines tendencijas, pabrėžiančias bendrystę tarp skirtumų; 3) pačių Afrikos moterų balsus.

Pirmiausia, žurnale kartais lygiagrečiai būdavo vaizduojamos Vidurinės Azijos ir Afrikos moterys, siekiant pabrėžti, kad Afrikos, kaip ir Vidurinės Azijos, tautos galėtų įveikti imperinį palikimą ir žalingus ikikolonijinius papročius, besivadovaudamos socialistiniu modeliu. Tačiau čia pasakota ir apie konkrečių Vidurinės Azijos ir Afrikos

moterų patirtį ir veiklą, pateikiant jas kaip savo pačių išsivadavimo bei visuomenės pažangos produktus ir veikėjas. Vis dėlto šie du naratyvai iš esmės skyrėsi: sovietų atveju valstybė buvo šlovinama už tai, kad suteikė tokias galimybes, o Afrikos atveju pokyčiai buvo aiškinami kaip kylantys iš apačios.

Antra, *Soviet Woman* afrikietės dažniausiai būdavo pristatomos kartu su kitų šalių moterimis, šitaip vaizduojant visų moterų įvairovę ir vienybę, grindžiamą bendru susidomėjimu motinyste ir taika. Skirtumus iliustravo fenotipiniai ir etniniai tropai, kurie būdavo ypač pabrėžiami meniniuose piešiniuose. Bendrumas atsiskleisdavo įvairiose kompozicinėse variacijose (pavyzdžiui, susikibusios rankomis moterys), kuriose baltoji rasė ne visada būdavo dėmesio centre, o afrikietės nebuvo griežtai nustumiamos į antrą planą dėl savo matomų įgimtų savybių ar netgi vadovaujantis paties žurnalo naudojamais stereotipais.

Trečia, žurnale *Soviet Woman* Afrikos moterims retkarčiais buvo suteikiama galimybė papasakoti apie save interviu arba pačių parašytų straipsnių forma ir pakomentuoti sovietinę sistemą. Vis dėlto, suteikus joms erdvės aptarti savo padėtį, iniciatyvas ir pasiekimus, būdavo išreiškiamas sovietų domėjimasis besivystančiomis šalimis bei parama joms ir netiesiogiai teigiamas solidarumas su nacionalinio išsivadavimo judėjimais ir dekolonizacija. Kartu su domėjimosi Sovietų Sąjunga išraiškomis tai stipri-
no *sovietiško* įvaizdį, kurį siekta perteikti *Soviet Woman*, suprantamą kaip pasaulietiš-
kumas, draugiškumas, paslaugumas ir progresyvumas.