GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

The Communist University for Toilers of the East (KUTV)

By Rossen Djagalov | September 4, 2020

The following account of the Moscow-based Communist University for Toilers of the East in Moscow (1921-1938) seeks to counter the prevailing tendency among scholars of the Global South to foreshorten the history of their subject. For a long while, Edward Said's magisterial *Orientalism* (1978) was regarded as the point of origin of postcolonial thought. More recently, it has been replaced in this capacity by the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung. Indeed, there is much to recommend these moments: Said's text brought into existence a whole generation of postcolonial scholars in humanities and social science departments at Anglo-American universities. Bandung's resonance was of course much broader: it was there that politicians from twenty-nine newly decolonized states, representing half of the world's population, announced their unity in the struggle against colonialism and their aspiration for a world free of imperial domination, racial injustice, and global inequality. The quarter of a century that followed saw the flourishing of transnational anti-colonial formations "in the spirit of Bandung," whether among states (Non-Aligned Movement and G77) or cultural producers (the Afro-Asian Writers Association, the Third World Filmmakers, etc.) from the Global South.

Anti-colonial internationalism, however, predated the Bandung moment. Its earliest history has already been charted in the pioneering works of Vijay Prashad (2007, 2017), Robert J.C. Young (2001), and Timothy Brennan (2002). At the center of these accounts lies the international Marxist movement, which by the first decades of the twentieth century had developed a powerful analysis of imperialism as a key logic in the workings of global capitalism (Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Rudolf Hilferding, Nikolai Bukharin, Vladimir Lenin, and Leon Trotsky). The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution brought this tradition of anti-colonial thought into the newly-founded Soviet state's actual policies towards "the East." This "East" was a major category for the early Bolsheviks, especially in the years immediately following 1917, when hopes for a "revolution in the East" ran high. Unlike the cultural geography conceptualized by Western Orientalists, however, this East signified a space of oppression and in need of emancipation (Kirasirova 2017). In the first place, the Bolsheviks were concerned with the inner East — the colonial territories of the former Russian empire, especially the Caucasus and Central Asia — which fell under the jurisdiction of the Commissariat of the Nationalities and became subject to the vicissitudes of Soviet nationalities policies. Secondarily — but no less sincerely — the USSR not only denounced imperialism abroad, but was the first (and for a long while, the only) state in the world to devote significant resources to anti-imperial struggles, primarily channelled through the structures of the Third International (Comintern), the (increasingly Soviet-dominated) organization of communist parties worldwide. The gradual assertion of Stalinism did much to compromise and eventually diminish these efforts, initially through Stalin's 1925 declaration of "socialism in a single state," which came to replace Trotsky's hope for a "permanent

revolution," and then in the 1930s, through the partial disinvestment from anti-colonialism for the sake of a Popular-Front alliance with the main imperialist powers of England and France, and ultimately, through the instrumentalization and destruction of the Comintern. Nevertheless, even in this period, Soviet and Comintern support continued to provide common platforms and even some unity among anti-colonial activists worldwide. As Sukarno pointed out in opening the Bandung conference,

I recall in this connection the Conference of the "League Against Imperialism and Colonialism," which was held in Brussels almost thirty years ago. At that Conference many distinguished delegates who are present here today met each other and found new strength in their fight for independence. (Wright 1956, 138)

A Comintern front organization, the League Against Imperialism quickly achieved the status as the main locus of anti-colonial transnationalism after its founding Congress in Brussels in 1927, but just as quickly lost much of its early promise owing to the sectarianism of Comintern's Third Period (1928-34) and was eventually driven out of its Berlin base when the Nazis came to power in 1933 (Petersson 2013). An even earlier Comintern initiative was the 1920 Congress of the People of the East in Baku, which called upon its 1,000+ attendees to lead the "holy war" against imperialism (Ertürk 2017; Riddell 1993, 263). A third key Comintern-affiliated anti-colonial institution during the interwar era—and one to which this essay will be devoted—was the Communist University for Toilers of the East (KUTV). Founded as the Russian Civil War was ending, KUTV was tasked with a dual mandate: to train local cadres for the Soviet Central Asia, the Caucasus, and a few other non-Russian territories of the USSR and to prepare communist revolutionaries for political work in the colonial world. Although this very unusual institution also became the home of the Research Institute for National and Colonial Problems (a Comintern-affiliated area-studies center), its main contribution to mid-twentieth century anti-colonialism were its alumni. The majority of students who attended KUTV would go on to participate in the political struggles for independence that communist parties were waging throughout the three continents while a smaller number became significant figures in their respective national literatures.



Fig. 1: KUTV's main building on Pushkin Square (to the left, no longer in existence). Photo by I. N. Pano

Located in central Moscow, near what is today Pushkin Square, KUTV offered a somewhat unusual education to its students. Instead of majors, the students — over 1,000 of them at any one time—were divided by national and linguistic sections, with the major division passing between the inner section (Soviet) and outer (foreign) one. Within the latter, the Chinese section, which over the 1920s grew with the high hopes for the Chinese Communist Party, stood out in size and importance, to the point that it temporarily became a separate university (Sun Yatsen University for the Toilers of China, 1925-1930). Academic disciplines at KUTV ranged from historical materialism and political economy to the history of the revolutionary movement and national and colonial problems, but the more advanced students also worked at other structures of the Commissariat for Nationalities or the Comintern. Graduation rates were low: some matriculants such as the Turkish POWs from WWI, who had joined the Communist Party, had very little formal schooling (Meyer 2018, 211-212); others left Moscow over their disenchantment with the university or the broader Soviet project; and many were re-assigned by the Comintern or recalled by their national communist parties during their studies. Nevertheless, over the decade and a half of its existence (1921-1938), KUTV's outer section educated over a dozen general secretaries of foreign communist parties, most of whom stood at the forefront of the struggle against European or Japanese colonialism; several post-colonial country leaders, as well as hundreds of martyrs for the cause and casualties of Stalin's purges of the Comintern in the late 1930s. Positioned at the avant-garde of anti-colonial struggle, its alumni would go on to populate prisons across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Theirs were extraordinary lives.

Ho Chi Minh (KUTV '23), who led Vietnam in its epic victories against French colonialism and US occupation (1945-1969), may be amongst the best known, but his biography was no more

unusual than that of other graduate of KUTV. Having helped found first the Mexican and, then, the Indian Communist Parties, and famously having argued against Lenin's proposal of a popular anti-colonial front between Communists and nationalist bourgeoisie against imperialism at the Second Congress of the Comintern (1920), the thirty-five-year-old M.N. Roy was much older than the rest of KUTV's inaugural class. Like Sen Katayama, one of the founding figures of the American and then the Japanese Communist Parties, and Qu Qiubai, the future leader of the Chinese Communist Party, Roy in practice served as a tutor and mentor of younger students from his linguistic section during KUTV's early years.

When the Kurd Khalid Bakdash arrived at KUTV in 1933, aged only twenty-one, he was no callow youth either. He had already translated *The Communist Manifesto* into Arabic and served time in prison in French-mandate Syria. Within two years of arriving in Moscow, he would head the Arab delegation to the Seventh Comintern Congress; the following year, he would become General Secretary of the Communist Party of Syria, over which he would preside for the next sixty years, eventually becoming known as "the dean of Arab communism." As the Party's agenda for the next decade was dominated by the struggle against French colonialism, Bakdash brought the Communist Party of Syria into alliance with other Arab nationalist forces. By contrast, during the eight years he ran the Iraqi Communist Party (1941-1949), mostly while also in prison, Yusuf Salman Yusuf (Comrade Fahd, KUTV '37) steered the party clear of bourgeois nationalist parties and into its own tortuous but bloody struggle against British imperialism. When Iraq's British-dominated Hashemite authorities executed Yusuf, his body was left to hang on the gallows, as a warning to the restive population.



Fig. 2: KUTV students from the 1930s. From the personal archive of Shakhbazova, V. K.

While the vast majority of KUTV graduates that I have come across in the Comintern collection at the Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History (RGASPI) remained committed anti-imperialists, not all of them toed the Moscow line. Abandoning official communism was fairly common, as the trajectories of three black thinkers and political activists, Harry Haywood (KUTV ’27), George Padmore, and Kenya’s independence leader Jomo Kenyatta illustrate. Kenyatta abandoned the Comintern networks soon after leaving KUTV, where he had been spent just a few months between 1932 and 1933. The version of pan-Africanism he eventually came to espouse over his fourteen-year presidency of Kenya was shorn of any socialism. By contrast, Padmore remained within the Communist movement for a few more years after his studies, as the editor of *The Negro Worker* and one of the main organizers of the Comintern-affiliated International Trade Union Committee for Black Workers (ITUCBW) before breaking with it in the mid-1930s over his disenchantment with the growing transformation of the Comintern into an arm of Soviet foreign policy and the Soviet reluctance to help Ethiopia, then under attack by fascist Italy (Adi 2013, 179). Padmore’s subsequent work was dedicated to the elaboration of an African socialism, which his most famous mentee, the Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah, went a long way towards implementing.

The African American Haywood, meanwhile, remained loyal to CP USA for three more decades, served in its Politburo, and was central in elaborating the Party’s Black Belt thesis — the idea that African Americans constitute a distinct nation, with a right to self-determination. Haywood left CP USA only in the late 1950s, in protest against Khrushchev’s “revisionism,” and went on to lead a succession of short-lived Maoist groups such as the Provisional Organizing Committee for a Communist Party (POC), League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist). Although written after his break with Soviet communism, Haywood’s memoir, *The Black Bolshevik* (1978), nevertheless exhibits a fondness for Moscow:

> During my stay in the Soviet Union, I encountered only one incident of racial hostility. It was on a Moscow streetcar. Several of us Black students had boarded the car on our way to spend an evening with our friend MacCloud. It was after rush hour and the car was only about half filled with Russian passengers. As usual, we were the object of friendly curiosity. At one stop, a drunken Russian staggered aboard. Seeing us, he uttered (but loud enough for the whole car to hear) something about “black devils in our country!”
>
> A group of outraged Russian passengers seized him and ordered the motorman to stop the car. It was a citizen’s arrest, the first I had ever witnessed. “How dare you, scum, insult people who are the guests of our country!”
>
> What then occurred was an impromptu, on-the-spot meeting, where they debated what to do with the man. I was to see many of this kind of “meeting” during my stay in Russia. It was decided to take the culprit to the police station which, the conductor informed them, was a few blocks ahead. Upon arrival there, they hustled the drunk out of the car and insisted that we Blacks, as the injured parties, come along to make the charges.
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> … The drunk swore that he didn’t meant what he’d said. “I was drunk and angry about

> something else. I swear to you citizens that I have no race prejudice against those Black *gospoda* (gentlemen).
>
> We actually felt sorry for the poor fellow and we accepted his apology. We didn't want to press the matter.
>
> "No," said the commandant, "we'll keep him overnight. Perhaps this will be a lesson to him." (Haywood 1978, 171)

The vignette was echoed in the writings of many other African Americans such as Claude McKay or Langston Hughes, who visited the USSR during the interwar era in their search for political alternatives to the world of Jim Crow they were living in.

Paradoxically, despite offering no literary training, KUTV left a significant mark in the realm of postcolonial letters. Among the students from the three continents KUTV brought to central Moscow, a number had literary talents, which flourished in the cultural maelstrom that was the Soviet capital of the 1920s. The Moscow avant-garde, and in particular the futurist poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky and the theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold, resonated with Nâzım Hikmet (KUTV '24), who would go on to become the best-known literary figure in Turkey before Orhan Pamuk. Hikmet's friend Xiao San (Emi Siao, KUTV '25), meanwhile, would become a poet and the major literary liaison between Russian and Chinese literature in the 1930s. Indeed, KUTV left a particular imprint on Turkish and Chinese literatures: Vâlâ Nureddin (KUTV '25), Nizamettin Nazif, Reşat Fuat Baraner (KUTV '37), and Zeki Baştımar as well as Jiang Guangci and the above-mentioned Qu Quibai to one extent or another participated in the modernization of their country's literary language, drawing partly on their encounter with Soviet literature and culture.

Despite the different languages spoken by students, and ultimately their different biographical trajectories, anti-colonial solidarities were forged in KUTV's dormitories. Thus, upon hearing the (false) rumour of his friend Emi's death, Hikmet wrote a narrative poem, *Giaconda and Si-Ya-U* (1929), which culminates in Emi's heroic death at the hands European imperialists against whom he had led Chinese people. Hikmet himself looms large in the Palestinian writer Najati Sidqi's autobiography:

> Each national group had its own activities. The most active was the Turkish group, which was headed by the poet Nâzim Hikmet. He was a young man of twenty-five when I met him, tall with blond hair and blue eyes and a ruddy complexion. Constantly moving and full of energy, he used to wear golf pants and a jacket almost fully buttoned up and would stand among the Turkish students declaiming revolutionary poems he had composed. The students would then move on to a comic performance ridiculing the Turkish sultans. Someone would ride around on a broomstick, saluting the people left and right, while his classmates would recite the sultan's anthem in a derisive way.
>
> When he asked me my name, I told him that my university name was Mustafa Kamil. A shudder passed through him and he said, "What?! Mustafa Kemal? Who gave you this name, who?" I told him that it was Mustafa Kamil, the Egyptian nationalist leader, not Mustafa Kemal. He still did not like the name, as he said it caused confusion between "freedom" and "despotism," and suggested that it be changed to Mustafa Sa'di to honor

> the Persian poet. This was how ties of friendship were established between Nâzim Hikmet and me. He invited me to visit the Turkish students often and even insisted that I join their group and attend their meetings, since both our peoples until the recent past had been living under the same despotism. (quoted in Tamari 2008, 88)

Sidqi (KUTV ’28), the author of these lines (as well as of many short stories, novellas, and works of literary criticism), himself became an embodiment of the internationalism he ascribes to Hikmet. He had been taught Russian and was sent to KUTV by Jewish socialists in Jerusalem. After graduating, he fought with the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, specializing in disseminating propaganda among Moroccan soldiers fighting with the Nationalist forces. After the Republic’s defeat, Sidqi moved on to Paris, where he edited an Arabic-language Comintern publication of the late 1930s, *The Arab East*, before being assigned back to the Palestinian Communist Party. Even after leaving the Communist movement following one of its multiple zig-zags under Stalin (in this case, the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact)—a common occurrence among many KUTV graduates—Sidqi remained sympathetic to the left and the USSR, taking the translation of Russian literature, especially Maxim Gorky, Anton Chekhov and Alexander Pushkin, whom he introduced to Arab audiences.

KUTV came to an end during the Great Terror of 1937-38, together with many Comintern institutions and cadres. A sizeable proportion of its faculty and Moscow-based alumni was arrested and even executed, dealing a major blow to Soviet expertise and living connections with the (semi-)colonial world (Ravandi-Fadai). In the second wave of Soviet engagement with the (post-)colonial world, which started with Bandung and the post-Stalin Thaw and would last until 1991, over two hundred thousand students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America would receive their education at Soviet universities as part of Soviet development aid (Weaver 2021; Katsakioris 2017, 540). One of these universities, the Moscow-based Patrice Lumumba People’s Friendship University, was in fact specifically devoted to training students from the three continents. Unlike the communist revolutionaries of KUTV, who waged national liberation and social struggles in the mid-twentieth century, the doctors, engineers, chemists (and, more rarely, writers and filmmakers) who graduated from Soviet institutions in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s were meant to provide the expertise necessary for developing the new, postcolonial states. By that point, however, the USSR had lost its interwar-era role as the epicentre for anti-colonial internationalism. While its Cold War with the Western bloc did set the broader parameters for the struggle against (neo)colonialism, that struggle was now being led by the colonized themselves and co-ordinated at sites like Bandung.



Fig. 3: One of the surviving KUTV buildings, now a company headquarters with no indication of its past. Photo by the author, 2019.

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