Rossen Djagalov begins his book, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*, with a question that many historians and area studies specialists of the Soviet Union face: what is the point of studying a dead political, social, and cultural experiment, about which the rest of the world stopped caring long ago? His answer, also familiar, is that the failures of the Soviet project obscure some of its successes and provide essential context for understanding the contemporary post-Soviet world and key aspects of international relations. Djagalov joins several recent scholars of Soviet foreign relations to examine the meanings of cultural outreach to the Third World. Building on the work of diplomatic historians Constantin Katsakionis, Tobias Rupprecht, Jeremy Friedman, and Samuel Hirst, Djagalov asserts that the project of building relations with the Third World undergirded a revived spirit of socialist internationalism that transcended soft-power motives and Cold War jockeying.

Focusing on African and Asian writers and filmmakers who came to the Soviet Union or who were connected to Soviet-aligned cultural movements, the book's intervention lies in its argument that Soviet authorities connected the postcolonial experience of its own “East” (mostly understood as Central Asia, but occasionally including Azerbaijan and less frequently the rest of the Caucasus) to broader narratives of decolonization and modernization in developing countries. As his title suggests, Djagalov hopes to reframe postcolonial studies by bringing the Second World back into the story of the movement's origins and development. As a literature scholar, rather than a diplomatic historian, he integrates textual analysis of literary works and films into his larger story of “contact zones” between the Second and Third Worlds. While his innovative pairing of text and context is not always successful in *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*, the book convincingly demonstrates, if not the centrality of the Soviet Union for understanding postcolonial literature and film, at least its contribution to some of postcolonialism’s underlying assumptions. As the author frames his research question, his book chal-
lenges the “erasure” of the Cold War context of postcolonial studies (p. 11).

Although the book centers on the post-Stalin era, largely because outreach to developing nations was most prevalent to this period, Djagalov traces its origins back to 1920 when the early Bolshevik government tried to establish a presence within the cultural space of colonized peoples. While many of these attempts remained only talk, the discourse of Soviet anti-imperialism moved far beyond its borders and was highly influential in Asia and Africa. Djagalov’s first chapter, “Entering the Soviet Literary Orbit,” focuses on early attempts to build these relationships and to forge a connection between oppressed peoples of the East and the Bolsheviks’ own “liberated” colonials in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Communist University for Toilers of the East (KUTV) embodied these early designs and brought hundreds of African and Asian writers to Moscow for its literary seminars. Many of the KUTV graduates went on to become the most famous writers in their countries and served to maintain a link between Soviet culture and the Third World.

The establishment of the Popular Front in 1934, however, had disastrous effects on the relationship between the Soviet Union and anticolonial writers’ groups in Asia and Africa. Even KUTV was shut down shortly after this important shift in Soviet foreign policy, enacted because communist parties now saw the benefit of a broad-based anti-fascist alliance. Instead of cultivating young radicals in the proverbial East, the Stalinist regime saw a greater benefit in an alliance with established progressives (mostly in the West). After the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, however, literary internationalism completely dried up and the Bolsheviks disbanded all Soviet institutions created to advance this objective and pulled their support for allied cultural organizations abroad.

After Stalin’s death, the Soviet Union reengaged with writers and intellectuals in Africa and Asia, but conditions had changed since the 1920s. Now, many anticolonial writers inhabited independent nations, rather than being subjects of European empires. After the famed Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955, the Soviet authorities decided to take the initiative and began organizing political and literary conferences that sought to lead the way in promoting internationalism and solidarity. The second chapter of From Internationalism to Postcolonialism focuses on the Afro-Asian Writers Association, which held annual conferences in the Central Asian metropolis of Tashkent, published the journal Lotus and offered the prestigious Lotus Prize to the best African and Asian writers. Djagalov’s exploration of this organization forms the centerpiece of the book.

In a subsequent chapter, Djagalov addresses the actual work of African and Asian writers that took influence from various socialist realist “solidarity” tropes. He proposes to “examine the migration and adaptation of certain topoi and narrative structures from proletarian to postcolonial texts” (p. 113). Within this framework, he looks at three different narrative conventions: first, the “Russian topos” where writers thematized Russia and Russians as revolutionary or anti-imperial points of origin; second, the supply-chain narrative, which takes influence from 1920s Soviet avant-garde literature and cinema, which seeks to connect workers’ exploitation to transnational (post/neo)colonial capitalism; and finally, the railway narrative, based on certain themes more broadly in Russian literature (pre- and postrevolutionary) that positions railroads as a simultaneous symbol of capitalist exploitation and affirmative modernity. Finally, Djagalov brings this chapter back to Central Asia, and explores how these topos also appear in Soviet literature, except as coded critiques of Bolshevik imperialism.

The final two chapters, less successful than those explored earlier, examine cinema within the context of the USSR’s engagement with the Third World. The first of these explores the Tashkent Film Festival. Djagalov freely acknowledges the
challenges of examining cinema within the context of socialist internationalism and postcolonialism: first of all, the idea of “postcolonial” cinema was less established than postcolonial literature. And when it does emerge by the end of the 1960s in the form of Third Cinema, Latin America (and not the Soviet Union) became the site of production and influence. Consequently, the Tashkent festival emerged from the very beginning as a second- or third-tier site of Third World cinema. Djalalov argues that the festival was obscure, with few Soviet viewers even aware of its existence and Tashkent audiences uninterested in attending the screenings. Still, Djalalov argues that the festival was “an important contact zone where its participants … got to know each other and to see each other’s films” (p. 145).

In the final chapter, on “solidarity documentary films,” Djalalov identifies a “Soviet trace” in Latin American documentaries that emerged from a stylistic and narrative kernel emerging from Dutch communist filmmaker Joris Ivens and the Soviet documentarist Roman Karmen. The two chapters on cinema are less developed, largely because the Soviet Union was never able to become a center of film solidarity in quite the same way it was able to do with literature. In some ways, the two chapters on film lack the clear sense of purpose which is present in this broader project.

The author returns in full force with his extended epilogue, which traces the fate of internationalism in literature through the years of Perestroika and in the post-Soviet period. He shows how this process led to the irreversible decline and collapse of many strong area studies departments and institutes, and seems to lament the loss of a Soviet-style cultural politics, as fraught as it was with contradictions and stifling bureaucracies. More troubling, however, are popular attitudes toward cultural production and politics in the developing world: even as the Soviet culture industry contained more than obvious implicit racism, late Soviet and post-Soviet intellectuals now felt comfortable expressing the most overt racism toward Africans and Asians, almost as a reaction to Soviet internationalism. As Julie Hessler and Constantin Katsakioris have shown, however, the Soviet “burden” of the Third World was always fraught with racist implications and, indeed, racist attitudes on the ground. The degree to which this changed in the post-Soviet period is perhaps not as acute as Djalalov might suggest in this epilogue. Nonetheless, he points out, more usefully, that this transition within post-Soviet space coincided with the emergence and mainstreaming of postcolonial studies in the West, subsidized this time by the financial assets of largely private or privatized institutions of higher education. What Djalalov accomplishes is to show how the process of erasing the Soviet context of postcolonialism is implicated (albeit unconsciously) in these simultaneous processes. Ultimately, he hopes this book will “extend the bridge” between Soviet-style internationalism and the postcolonial studies of the contemporary American university (p. 226).

An interesting theme that cuts through From Internationalism to Postcolonialism concerns how Third World intelligentsias understood the Soviet Union’s behavior differently: while Western communists and progressives denounced the USSR for Hungary in 1956, Prague in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1978, African and Asian leftists were more concerned that the discourse of “peaceful coexistence” would undermine the anti-imperial basis of the Soviet alliance. For example, 1978’s significance lay not in the brutal invasion of Afghanistan, but in Egypt’s treachery against the Palestinians when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signed the Camp David Accords. Afterward, Egyptians writers (previously at the forefront of the movement) were no longer invited to the Afro-Asian Writers’ Conference in Tashkent.

This moment of exclusion points to the larger problem of the Afro-Asian Writers Association and Djalalov’s challenge to make the book both about Soviet diplomatic ties with the Third World and
about the USSR’s cultivation of world literature: writers were intimately tied to their own nations of origin, along with the politics of those states, rather than simply being progressive African and Asian writers in their own right. They were consequently made to embody their own states’ political perspectives. Consequently, we got the impression that the association at the center of this book was never about literature to begin with. That said, the *Lotus* journal, and Lotus Prize that went along with it, helped popularize the authors’ work and launched many careers in the Third World. For filmmakers, the Soviet film industry routinely purchased African and Asian films to support the filmmakers and their countries, but never intended to show such copies because they knew audiences would avoid them.

Both of these examples highlight an important point in *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*. Third World writers and filmmakers expected their relationship with the Soviet Union to produce results, above and beyond military and development aid to their countries. They expected the USSR to support a consistent anti-imperial agenda and many of them demanded a voice in articulating that agenda. KUTV students and members of the Afro-Asian Writers Association were not mere receptacles of Soviet ideology, but were outspoken and downright defiant when told to adopt Marxism-Leninism hook, line, and sinker. Djagalov argues that throughout this relationship, Third World writers always insisted on their own ideas, and Soviet authorities generally provided the space for them to voice these ideas. What Third World writers hoped to gain from the Soviet Union was complicated: on the one hand, they needed Soviet publishing resources and networks of readers, but in coming within the Soviet orbit, they also gained entry to the Soviet Republic of Letters that promoted an anticapitalist and anticolonial agenda even if the bureaucratic world of Soviet officialdom that they encountered sometimes undermined this community.

As I hope is obvious in this review, Djagalov’s contribution is immense: at once a work of diplomatic history that situates postcolonial literature within the unexpected framework of socialist internationalism, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism* is also a rehabilitation of Third World writers whose work largely had been forgotten as unexceptional “national allegory.” Djagalov’s command of postcolonial studies and Cold War diplomatic history is impressive, and I hope the book finds its audience within both of these divergent fields.
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