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The German Democratic Republic (GDR), like its comrades in the Eastern Bloc, promoted itself as a staunchly anti-racist and anti-imperialist country during the Cold War. One of the ways it demonstrated its dedication to these ideals was providing higher education and technical training to engage with countries undergoing decolonization and to showcase the socialist alternative to capitalism. Thousands of African students traveled to East Germany to pursue higher and technical education, build a postcolonial future in their home countries, or simply improve their lives. Yet, despite the claims of anti-racist solidarity, many of them faced racism and racial prejudice during their time in the GDR. While the experiences of African students in the Soviet Union have generally been the paradigm in which we understand Eastern Bloc claims of anti-racism, recent publications on East Germany have expanded our horizons. Sara Pugach’s monograph, *African Students in East Germany, 1949-1975*, is a fantastic addition to the Anglophone literature on African and foreign students in the East.

The book is organized into five chapters that follow thematic and chronological developments within East Germany, Africa, and the Cold War. The overlapping of these contexts is critical to Pugach’s analysis. Drawing on the work of such historians as Odd Arne Westad (*The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* [2005]), Pugach contributes to the historiography that upends our binary understanding of the Cold War as a fight between the United States and the Soviet Union. Instead, through the experiences of African students, we see how local, regional, and transnational political, economic, and social trends influenced these students, their home countries, and East Germany through the first three decades of the Cold War.

Pugach periodizes the book from 1949, when the first cohort of eleven Nigerian students was invited to study in East Germany, to 1975, which
marked a break in the relationship between East Germany and African states with the end of the Hallstein Doctrine, the independence of Portuguese-controlled colonies in Africa, and the Derg-led coup in Ethiopia. The sequence of chapters covers the initial cohort of Nigerian students, the travels of African-origin students to East Germany, the selection process of students by African and German administrators, and mobilization activities by African student groups in East Germany. The final chapter details the intersections of race and gender for African students’ experiences in East German society. The conclusion then sheds light on demographic changes in the African student body following 1975, as well as the shocking episodes of racist violence against Africans and Southeast Asians in Hoyerswerda and Rostock in 1991 and 1992, respectively.

Pugach offers a refreshing contribution to the historiography on foreign students and international education during the Cold War. She builds on the groundbreaking work done by Damian Mac Con Uladh on the day-to-day experiences of African students with their classmates, German society, and socialist administration in their universities. [1] Rather than an analysis of the students’ lives in East Germany, Pugach relates African and German officials’ arrangements for students to study in Germany through bilateral agreements; the ways students, their courses of study, and their host universities were chosen; the minutiae of travel arrangements; and Cold War politics’ influence on each of these elements.

In narrating the logistics of the foreign students, Pugach highlights how East Germany walked a fine line before African independence in negotiating with and providing scholarships for Africans seeking education despite the official standpoint of imperial governments, such as the British in Nigeria and the French in Mali. She demonstrates how African trade unions and labor groups facilitated education in East Germany and how the strictures of travel without passports (thanks to the refusal of imperial governments to provide them) meant that African students had to take long, often circuitous routes across Africa and into Europe before they reached their destination. Once independence was achieved, these treacherous journeys were limited thanks to the recognition of new borders and new regimes for passports and visas.

Pugach underscores how regional and local developments in Africa could benefit or harm African students on their way to, during, and after their studies in East Germany. One disheartening example is a group of Ghanaian students who had been accepted to study in the GDR in 1966. After the coup that overthrew Kwame Nkrumah, the new Ghanaian government worked to realign with the West and refused to send more students to the GDR. These students were then stuck in a veritable limbo where they had missed application deadlines to study at their home universities and no longer had opportunities in the East.

Another key argument from Pugach is that African students were not East German pawns in the Cold War game. African students were often organized into national-based groups once at university. They used these organizations and the threat of East German embarrassment in the international press to push universities to deal with the racism they encountered as well as to improve their living conditions. Moreover, African students leveraged their position as examples of East German largesse to African countries to challenge their home countries’ policies. Instead of amenable groups that organized and performed Independence Day celebrations for German audiences, these groups became sites of subversion and dissent. Examples include how Guinean students came together to protest their home countries’ treatment of dissenters after a coup, and Biafran students fought to develop their national student group during the Biafran Civil War, despite the Eastern Bloc’s dedication to supporting the Nigerian state in the conflict.
The book shines in chapter 5, which focuses on gender and race in the African student experience throughout the 1950s to the 1970s. Pugach addresses instances of racism and racial prejudice against African students throughout the monograph, but her analysis of the intersections of race and gender is strongest here. Readers learn how traditional and patriarchal attitudes in African countries and the legacies of colonial repression of female education hampered attempts to educate African women in the GDR. Zambia stands out as an example of how the state tried to remedy these legacies by seeking out and placing Zambian women in educational institutions throughout the Eastern Bloc. However, she underscores that Zambia still restricted women to education in such “nurturing” professions as midwifery and nursing. Pugach reveals how traditional gender roles limited the role women would play in postcolonial society. Additionally, she explores how East German women often diminished the femininity of their African counterparts, characterizing them as slovenly or aggressive.

Furthermore, Pugach explores how interracial relationships, primarily between German women and African men, exposed the tensions between East German declarations of solidarity and the reality for African students. The GDR routinely denied racism as a specter of the Nazi past and relegated that past to its Western neighbor, the Federal Republic of Germany. However, this understanding toward racism meant that incidents of racism were often ignored. East German officials explained the situation away as Africans misunderstanding German curiosity about foreigners or blaming the Africans themselves for unpleasant interactions. For example, following dustups between African students and their East German counterparts in Rostock, African student leaders were reminded to emphasize the moral imperative of Africans to behave and not drink to excess to avoid future conflict. Additionally, German women who dated—or, in the East German state’s worst-case scenario, got pregnant by African men—were deemed the immoral foil to the moral improvement of African men in East Germany. Yet, despite ambivalent feelings about interracial relationships, East Germany, unlike West Germany, maintained that these mixed-race children were citizens and wanted them to remain in East Germany. Overall, Pugach illustrates the complex and often-fraught relationship between racial thinking, racism, and African presence in East Germany.

The book has many strengths, including Pugach’s rich archival base. She draws on a wealth of German archival sources, including the Lebensläufe (curriculum vitae) of African students at the University of Leipzig, archival holdings from the Endangered Archives Project, and in-person interviews with Africans who were students in the GDR and with some former students’ children. Occasionally, Pugach connects to the issues and historiographies of race and African students in the Soviet Union and an episode in the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, highlighting the transnational nature of African student migration and education during the Cold War. Still, there are places where one would like to see more detail of these connections. For example, the historic student protests in Moscow and Leningrad in 1963 following the murder of Ghanaian student Edmund Asare-Addo are alluded to as influential to East German fear of public discontent and Western media coverage of African protest, but how did African students in East Germany respond to this episode? Were they aware of it? If so, was it through the national groups? Did they connect their own experiences with racial prejudice and racism with those of students in the Soviet Union or Bulgaria?

Furthermore, examples from East German students or non-African foreign students could have better supported Pugach’s discussion of racial prejudice against African students. On the one hand, we learn of how East German officials saw African “immorality,” such as drinking and cavorting with women, often through the lens of Black
male promiscuity and danger for white women dating back to the German Reich. On the other hand, promiscuity and drinking were generally frowned upon in the 1950s and 1960s in East Germany as contradictions to socialist morality. How were Vietnamese or East German students who broke these social strictures described and punished compared to their African classmates? Comparisons such as these could help us understand not only the longevity of certain anti-Black racial stereotypes but also the ways other foreigners could be othered and racialized.

However, these shortcomings do not undermine Pugach’s considerable contribution to the historiographies of foreign students in East Germany, transnational migration, and the Cold War. Her monograph should join the work of Mac Con Uladh as an essential reference point for understanding the experiences of African students in the GDR and the political and economic currents of the Cold War that transcended great power oppositions and helped to shape the lives of the thousands of Africans who studied in the GDR as well as the post-reunification Germany that still struggles with issues of racial prejudice in the face of its claims to a multicultural German state.

Note


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