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Rezension

DE SAINT MARTIN, Monique/ SCARFO GHELLAB, Grazia/ MELLAKH, Kamal (éds.). 2015. Étudier à l'Est. Expériences de diplômés africains. Paris: Karthala. 300 pp. ISBN: 978-2811114633

reviewed by
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Étudier à l'Est. Expériences de diplômés africains is about experiences, biographies and professional trajectories of Africans who studied in the Soviet Union and other East European countries. The book presents results and preliminary findings from the interdisciplinary and comparative research programme ELITAF (*Etudiants et élites africaines formés dans les pays de l'ex-bloc soviétique*), a collaboration of over 80 junior as well as established researchers from universities in France, Russia, Senegal, Congo and Morocco. In line with the basic tenets of ELITAF, the editors Monique de Saint Martin (Paris), Grazia Scarfò Ghellab and Kamal Mellakh (both Casablanca) managed to draw together contributors from several disciplines including history, political science, sociology, anthropology and literary science.
The editors' introduction delivers one of the best entry points to the subject available to date. Tens of thousands of Africans studied in Eastern Europe between the late 1950s and the demise of state socialism in 1989/91, more than 43.500 graduated in the Soviet Union alone. Although there were precursors, like the strongly politicized Soviet educational programmes for foreigners in the 1920s to early 1940s, this form of mobility between Africa and state socialist countries established a fundamentally new form of migration flows and educational globalization. Preceding decolonization, the metropoles had enjoyed a near-monopoly on higher education in their dependencies. Once politically independent, many African states seized the opportunity to recalibrate and diversify their foreign relations. Possibilities to study multiplied as the competing Cold War superpowers and their allies, motivated by their own political and economic objectives, readily offered scholarships to secondary school leavers and young academics. This

dovetailed with the interests of African governments (of a wide spectrum of political colours) which aimed to "produce" the maximum number of qualified persons in the shortest amount of time possible to man the growing state machinery. As long as national universities had limited capacities or did not exist, sending students to wherever possibilities came up was the most pragmatic thing to do. Additionally, African liberation movements, political parties and unions, too, were engaged in the circulation of young men and (significantly less in number) women and welcomed Eastern charm offensives entailing opportunities in higher education. Apart from painting a canvas of the historical context of these exchanges, they sketch what criteria were attached to scholarships and carve out some general lines of the trajectories and living conditions of students.

The seventeen contributions that follow are subdivided into three parts of roughly equal length. The first part (*Étudier en URSS et dans les pays de l'ancien bloc socialiste*) focuses on the institutional framework and conditions in the Soviet Union, Romania and East Germany. The second part (*Des diplômés africains face aux soubresauts de l'histoire*) deals with the intersection of life-courses and historical events and shows how students grappled with political ruptures like coups and revolutions in their home countries, on the one hand, and the implosion of East European state socialism on the other hand. The third part *(Entre deux ou plusieurs mondes. Des expériences contrastées*) illustrates the wide spectrum of personal experiences, reaching from statements of Moroccan students that the time spent studying in the Soviet Union where the best years of their lives to narratives of utter disillusionment. There are, however, more similarities than differences between the individual texts of the separate parts, with many themes appearing in all three sections.

Although some of the articles draw on earlier research (Grazia Scarfò Ghellab, for instance, mentions that first interviews were conducted as early as 1974), the common methodological framework gives the volume a coherent appearance. The contributions are of good to excellent quality. Most of the texts in the second and third parts are based mainly on interviews and lay out case studies based on one to ten persons. These are mostly of common national origin, for instance Morocco, Mali, Congo, Benin and Senegal. Few authors also make use of novels in which former students fictionalized their experiences. In the case of archival sources, as

Anna Sim-Moskovitina and Nikolay Dobronravin point out in the case of Russia, access to documents remains restricted and thus difficult. Still, some contributions, especially in the first part, also rely on archival sources.

The main theme of the book are circulations and mobility in their multi-facetted meanings of geographical, ideological, social and various other kinds of movement, transgression, and border crossings. Overseas education has been a vehicle to attain more knowledge and a degree to facilitate personal advancement, to enter the circle of the educational elite and hence to also gain political and economic influence. As becomes clear, there were many other pathways that differed from the linear and officially preferred version of departure, degree, and return. Some students stayed in the Soviet Union (and later, Russia), or even returned with their spouses; others went to third countries and did or did not return to their country of origin. The expectations before arrival ranged, like retrospective judgements, from enthusiasm to horror. As Constantin Katsakioris points out in his contribution, some African students defected from France because they were eager to study in a socialist country (pp. 81-82), while in Congo, as Régine Tchicaya-Oboa and Patrice Yengo show, Christian parents stood aghast at news that their children were to study in the "godless Soviet Union" (p. 220, all quotes translated by E.B.).

Even if indoctrination and "winning the hearts and minds" of foreign students clearly was an objective of East European countries, political transformations could in no way be predicted. Although the symbolically charged cover image of the volume – showing a heroic procession of African and Soviet students with Soviet and other flags – seems to imply otherwise, the contributions convey a sense of rather "unideological" studies: courses were marked not by political indoctrination, but by the transmission of technical expertise and an emphasis on the practical relevance of training. To be sure, there were difficulties, setbacks and disillusions – especially among those who had come with high hopes of socialism – but for many, the negative sides did not outweigh the positive sides of the stay.

One of the most outstanding achievements of this collection is that it conveys a sense of the students' complex individuality, showing that those young men and women were not just students, but also sons and daughters, lovers and parents, party members and petty traders, dissidents and careerists, workers and adventurers, conformists and revolutionaries, wrestling with foreign languages, East European authorities and African embassies, strange food habits, and own expectations. Daily life and mobility during the stay are examined in several contributions, just like the experience of racism – and strategies of dealing with it. As becomes clear, students' activities and opinions were at times at odds with the interests of sending and receiving states who hoped for the return of qualified, docile cadres.

The biographical trajectory of an Ethiopian militant, named Abdul, serves as the striking example of a scholarship's outcome which pleased neither Soviet nor Ethiopian officials. Carefully contextualized and skilfully sketched by Tassé Abye, Abdul's politicization begins with his involvement in Ethiopia's radical left in late 1960s Addis Ababa. In 1969, Abdul secured a scholarship for the Soviet Union where he got involved in Maoist and Marxist-Leninist study circles of militant foreign students. Some of those students turned full-time revolutionaries and completely abandoned university studies. Abdul, however, was not a full-scale *homo politicus*. He continued with his studies, went to Western Europe during the vacations to make money and enjoyed the "decadent" lifestyle of dancing, drinking and being with his Russian girlfriend: "We wanted to combine amusements, politics and our studies." (p. 135). Eventually, however, Abdul's revolutionary fervour had the decisive impact on his life course: In 1973, he heeded the call to join the underground guerrilla struggle in Ethiopia, first against the imperial regime and then the (self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist) Mengistu regime. In 1984, Abdul abandoned the struggle, left Ethiopia and eventually settled in North America where today, he works in a human rights centre. Trajectories like Abdul's challenge assumptions of top-down indoctrination in the Soviet Union and foreground instead the circulation of radical ideas among (foreign) students.

Political and ideological transformations as intended and unintended outcomes are a re-occurring theme in other texts as well, just like economic aspects. Many of the Africans who studied in the Eastern Bloc, as several contributions strongly suggest, came from fairly modest backgrounds. Many of them did not have the opportunity to study in their countries of origin, or in Western countries. In East European countries, however, they were privileged upon arrival in two important respects. Firstly, foreign students received higher scholarships than their local counterparts. Secondly, they were – in most cases – allowed to travel westwards which enabled them to profit from the slope between Western and East European economies. The cross-border trade and exchange of hard currency as well as petty commerce, i.e., importing or smuggling goods "under the coat" (p. 242), became increasingly widespread. In the 1990s and 2000s, new professionalized commercial networks were knit based upon knowledge and social capital accumulated in Cold War times. Moroccan pharmacists who had studied in the Soviet Union, Kamal Mellakh shows, have established agencies relaying Moroccan students with private universities in Russia (which are comparatively cheap in international comparison). This development led to competition between pharmacists holding Russian degrees, on the one hand, and those holding Moroccan degrees, on the other hand.

As Michèle Leclerc-Olive points out in her contribution, the diversity and, in many cases, contrasting nature of experiences presents a methodological challenge; and the micro-focus in most texts opens rather than closes further enquiries and debates (p. 124). If there is any criticism to be made of this excellent collection, it concerns two minor issues, namely, an almost complete lack of articulation with the Anglophone literature on the topic, and some regional imbalances. First, African countries formerly colonised by France receive most of the attention. Southern and East Africa (with the exception of Ethiopia) are mostly neglected. Secondly, the term "East" mostly refers to the Soviet Union. Given its quantitative importance in extending scholarships, this is understandable, still, East Germany, Romania and Bulgaria receive fairly little attention, while other East European countries are completely neglected. In this area, there still is a whole range of opportunities for future research. Comparative perspectives with overseas students in "the West," but also in China and Cuba, would serve to unpack the notion of the "East" even further to arrive at a more global perspective.

As an excellent piece of research contributing to the establishment of such a global perspective, *Étudier à l'Est* deserves to be read widely by anybody interested in contemporary history, migration, higher education, and relations between Africa and the world. The volume's strongest part is that it successfully highlights Africans' agency during the Cold War in the interstices of superpower competition, economic inequalities, and changing historical constellations, including the world after 1990. The book as a whole enriches and complicates our understanding of migration and social mobility, evoking a strong sense of the complex entanglements of high politics and professional education. Finally, the enquiries into the institutional arrangements for foreign students and the everyday life in socialism(s) serve to de-mystify relations between Africa and Eastern Europe and replace obsolete Cold War narratives with a more balanced, nuanced, but also contradictory picture of overseas education.