

Racism in Russia

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Amnesty International has condemned Russia's deteriorating human rights record. The number of racist crimes has risen alarmingly since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. There are cases of assaults, some fatal, against foreign students, asylum-seekers, and refugees from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America; members of ethnic groups and migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia, and of the Jewish and Roma communities.

Its 2006 report stated that racist killings and violent attacks against foreigners, visible ethnic minorities and anti-racist campaigners in Russia were 'out of control'.¹

In 2003, members of a neo-Nazi gang set fire to a Moscow university residence inhabited mainly by foreign students. Forty students were killed. The fire services blamed an electrical fault though shortly afterwards two skin-heads were seen running away after attempting a second attack. There was no police investigation.

Africans are at particular risk of being attacked and murdered.² In February 2005, a gang stabbed to death Antoniu Amaru Lima, a 24 year-old medical student from Guinea-Bissau.³ That same year, Kanhem Leon from Cameroon was stabbed to death by a group of youths. In early 2006, a man from Mali was stabbed to death and in March 2007, Liana Sisoko, a nine-year-old girl of Russian and Malian origin, was seriously injured when she was stabbed by two youths. Lamzar Samba, a

28-year-old student from Senegal, was gunned down in April 2007.⁴ In December 2008, an African-American exchange student was stabbed in Volgograd, when a stranger approached him and punched and stabbed him. No suspects have been detained, and a city police spokeswoman said authorities had not ruled out robbery or random violence.⁵

Anti-racism campaigners in Russia are also subjected to intimidation and violence. Nikolai Girenko, an ethnology professor, has often testified as an expert witness in trials for racially motivated attacks and helped put several neo-Nazis in jail. Neo-Nazi groups passed a "death sentence" on Girenko and posted it on the Internet. In June 2004, he was killed by shots fired through his front door. Girenko's murderers have yet to be identified and brought to justice.⁶

Dmitri Krayukhin, head of the anti-racist organisation United Europe, told Amnesty he had received threats to "cut off [his] head." In 2008, there was an attempt to burn down his family home. He has repeatedly been denied protection from the authorities. Photographs and home addresses of Russian human rights activists are regularly published on right-wing websites.

The NGO SOVA, which studies the problem of race-motivated violence, reported no fewer than 262 people injured in racially motivated attacks and 68 fatalities in 2008. According to Amnesty International, 28 people were murdered and 366 assaulted that year.



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However, it acknowledges that the real number of attacks is likely to be much higher since many go unreported out of distrust of the police or fears that they will not take any action. Few perpetrators are ever prosecuted. Even blatantly racist attacks are filed as hooliganism, a charge that carries relatively light sentences.

Background: the Red Mecca

People of African descent have not always lived in fear of racially motivated violence in Russia. According to Maxim Matusevich, a Russian-African academic now based in the United States, the history of the black experience [in Russia] was far less traumatic than in Western Europe and the Americas.⁷ During the first two decades of Communist rule, after the 1917 Revolution, Soviet propaganda attacked western racism as one of the features of life in the capitalist world. The USSR became a mag-

net for black radicals and intellectuals from the Caribbean and North America who were attracted by the promise of racial equality that did not exist in their home countries. These 'refugees from racism' largely found what they were seeking.

They were accorded a warm welcome and the positive experiences of black visitors including the Caribbean writer Claude McKay, the African American poet and writer Langston Hughes, and actor and singer Paul Robeson, influenced others back home. By the mid-1930s, however, the romance with Red Russia had begun to wane. George Padmore and Kenyan Jomo Kenyatta, who had lived in the USSR for a time, became frustrated by the Marxist refusal to treat race as a separate issue from the class struggle and exchanged communism for nationalist and pan-Africanist thinking.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet Union began to compete with the West over



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Africa. The USSR offered generous study grants; many African, Asian, and Latin Americans took advantage of them and went there. By the late 1960s, there were 5,000 African students in the Soviet Union; by 1990, there were 30,000 - around 24% of all foreign students.

Young people from newly independent nations went in search of educational opportunities rather than racial equality. They were placed in universities all throughout the country. Initially, the students were well received, due both to propaganda efforts and the natural curiosity they inspired as foreigners. The foreign students received bigger grants than their Soviet counterparts and had greater freedom. Yet, they also complained of the monotonous diet, poor living conditions and restrictions. At times they clashed with the system and came to symbolize Westernisation and foreign influences. Despite the attempts of the Communist system to suppress the country's home-grown racism and officially inspired xenophobia, there were incidents of racial discrimination and attacks in the 1960s and 1970s.

The situation became much worse with perestroika (restructuring) in 1987. In the economic crisis that accompanied the transition from socialism to capitalism, Africans became the focus of popular discontent and resentment. The collapse of the Soviet Union and a background of wars in the Caucasus brought latent racism to the surface among Russia's youth. A January 2007 law against foreign workers in Russian markets, presented by President Vladimir Putin, has been perceived as legitimizing this anti-foreigner sentiment. Organised groups appear to be inciting violence with impunity.

Many foreign students still come to Russia, but the number stands at half the 1991 figure. About 15,000 are African, but must finance themselves like ordinary Russians. They face not the paternalistic internationalism of Soviet times, but an openly hostile ethnic supremacism. Some have abandoned their studies, but others have attempted to bring about change. With funding from African embassies, groups of black students visited Moscow schools to explain African culture and

challenge racial stereotypes. In November 2008, some 600 people took to the streets of St Petersburg to demonstrate against racism. Staged for the fifth consecutive year, the “March Against Hatred” was held to raise awareness of the rising racial violence in the country and to honour the memory of Nikolai Girenko.

Little Hope of Improvement

It seems Russia lacks the will to protect the rights of the growing population of African descent.⁸ According to the SOVA report of July 2009, the level of racist and neo-Nazi attacks remains high. Right-wing extremists exploit the current economic downturn and rising unemployment, making “immigrants” scapegoats for socio-economic ills.

Amnesty has called on the Russians to establish a plan of action to tackle the whole issue, not only of the attacks, but racism and discrimination in all its aspects. Its 2007 report advised Russian authorities to end the classification of race-hate crimes as hooliganism and to address the inadequate police response to racist attacks.⁹ It urged the government to work more closely with anti-racist campaigns.

Indeed, some believe the greatest threats for anti-racism campaigners come not from neo-Nazi groups but from the authorities themselves.¹⁰ However, most of Amnesty’s recommendations to the Russian authorities remain unimplemented and in 2009 it noted that although Government officials have spoken out against racism, racist attacks continue to be reported on an almost daily basis.¹¹

Notes:

1- Amnesty notes that Russia’s poor record on combating racism tarnishes its image abroad and raises questions about its international status. Russia holds a number of high-profile positions. In 2006, it chaired the G8 group of industrialized nations, and also the committee of ministers at the Council of Europe, seen by many as Europe’s human rights watchdog. 2006 Amnesty Report: *Russian Federation: Violent racism out of control* (AI Index: EUR 46/022/2006).

http://www.amnesty.ca/resource_centre/reports/view.php?load=arcview&article=3465&c=Resource+Centre+Reports. 2009 Amnesty Report: <http://thereport.amnesty.org/en/regions/europe-central-asia/russia>. See also <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1068160.html>.

2- Recent research by the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy suggests nearly 60% of Africans living in Moscow have been physically assaulted. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8230158.stm>.

3- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4559566.stm>; <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1067333.html>; *Amnesty International Report* (October 2007): <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/russia/report-2007>.

4- <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1067619.html>.

5- http://seattletimes.nwsour.com/html/nationworld/2008507382_russviolence13.html.

6- <http://www.newstatesman.com/human-rights/2008/11/russia-girenko-rights-racism>; <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/sarahall/5596867/March-against-hatred-racism-in-Russia/>; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4969296.stm>.

7- Matusevich, Maxim. “An Exotic Subversive: Africa, Africans and the Soviet everyday.” *Race & Class*, 2008: 49 (4), 57-81, and ‘Journeys of Hope: African Diaspora and the Soviet Society,’ *African Diaspora*, 1 2008: 53-85.

8- <http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4208/>.

9- *Amnesty International Report* (2007).

10- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/4737468.stm>.

11- <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1069289.html>.