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Socialist Federalism as an Alternative to Nationalism: The Leninist Solution to the National Question in Africa and Its Diaspora

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Abstract: Scholarship on the impact of Lenin's thinking and on the Soviet Union's relationships with Africa has emphasized two dimensions: on the one hand, the ideological imprint on and support provided to nationalist and anti-imperialist movements and, on the other, the emulation of communist techniques of authoritarian rule by many postcolonial governments. This paper highlights the neglected receptions of another major communist idea, namely, the 'Leninist solution to the national question', as embodied by the federal political model of the Soviet Union. The paper argues that many actors in different contexts, where the nationalities question had to be tackled with, showed a keen interest in the Leninist solution and in the sui generis federal model of the USSR. These contexts included the post-1945 French Union, as well as postcolonial countries such as Sudan, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. The Leninist alternative to the nation-state and to assimilation assumed a great deal of significance to minority groups. Nevertheless, it was rejected even by Marxist-inspired movements and elites which sought to create a nation-state. The paper uses the approach of cultural transfers to investigate and assess both the appeal and the limits in the reception of the Leninist federalist alternative.

Keywords: Africa; national question; Leninism; Soviet Union; socialism; federalism

1. Introduction

The appeal of Marxism and Communism in Africa is as much important and compelling as it is a complicated chapter of contemporary transnational history. It is important because during the Cold War numerous intellectuals, activists, anti-colonial movements, or regimes, as in Ethiopia and Mozambique, sought to emulate communism, while several countries, from Algeria, to Tanzania, to Burkina Faso, although still inspired by Leninism, Marxism, and the examples of the Soviet Union, China, or Cuba, attempted to carve up their own national paths to socialism. It is a compelling chapter because broader socialist visions, on the one hand, and Marxism–Leninism as a theory and a comprehensive and coherent strategy for achieving national sovereignty and modernization, on the other, made tremendous inroads all over Africa to the extent that one could find only a few governments and parties that did not define themselves as socialist in one ideological version or another and did not seek to implement social or cultural, economic or educational policies inspired by the socialist world. These intense 'cultural transfers' (Middell 2000; Espagne 2013) between Africa and the socialist world compel historians to reassess the 'soft power' (Nye 1990) the socialist countries possessed in the colonial and postcolonial world. At the same time, they point to the necessity to firmly put the spotlight on the African proponents of Marxism, Communism, or African socialism, and on their political and intellectual context, in order to grasp the complexities and interrogate about the rationale behind these cultural transfers from the standpoint of African actors.

Political scientists of the Cold War era did study the appeal of Marxism and Communism in Africa, more often than not, in order to gauge the implications for the West and suggest how this

appeal could be countered and its consequences reversed. On the one side, they focused on the policies the socialist countries devised to wield influence over Africa (Barghoorn 1960, pp. 188–225; Brzezinski 1963; Dawisha 1975; Kanet 1987). On the other side, they mostly concentrated on African heads of states and ruling parties, which embraced socialism or Marxism–Leninism, and sought to understand their motives. According to a major strand of analysis, Third World rulers were primarily interested in importing the techniques of government and social engineering from the Eastern bloc, such as the vanguard party and its mass organizations, in order to consolidate their authoritarian rule, eliminate the opposition, discipline the population, and build the postcolonial nation-state (Marks 2003). In a similar vein, scholars contested the existence of genuine socialist convictions among several self-fashioned African socialists in Mali, Guinea Conakry, Benin, or Zambia, and dismissed their regimes as ‘signpost socialism’, whose aim was to monopolize the national resources and draw foreign aid both from the West and from the East (Amselle 1978; Nugent 2004, p. 246). In 1992, another scholar wrote a piece entitled ‘The Short and Sad Story of Socialism in Benin’, a country whose ruler, Lieutenant Matthieu Kérékou, had since 1974 embraced Marxism–Leninism, to say ‘Goodbye to all that’ (Allen 1992). The deep economic crisis of the socialist countries in the 1980s, the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the USSR, and the triumph of neoliberalism from Egypt to South Africa, vindicated those who dismissed socialism for one reason or another and closed the socialist chapter in twentieth-century African history.

Since the 2000s, however, that is after the post-Cold War triumphalism had also faded out, a new scholarship started productively revisiting the era of socialist aspirations and experiments. Using archives, published sources, or interviews, historians and anthropologists have shed new light on the relationships between Africa and the socialist countries, studying the ideological, political and armed struggles in the continent and revisiting the development projects and their effects. If most authors of the *Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Leffler and Westad 2010) stress the centrality of ideology, those scholars who focus on the Third World side of interaction point to the agency of actors, to the national visions and local constraints, and concentrate on different groups, from youths and guerillas, to artists and, less often, trade unionists (Schmidt 2007; Walraven 2013; Blum 2014; Blum et al. 2016; Alexander and McGregor 2017).

In light of these older and current debates, this paper sets out to revisit this important chapter of history—Africa’s engagement with Marxism and Leninism. It will focus, in particular, on the impact of Lenin’s approach to the national question and on the appeal of the Soviet sui generis federal model in Africa and the African diaspora. Formally structured as a federation of sovereign nation-states (Martin 2001, p. 18), the Soviet Union embodied the polity of free nations committed to build socialism that Lenin had envisioned (Lenin 1964, pp. 143–56). The paper will argue that what was usually called the Leninist approach or the ‘Leninist solution to the national question’, a policy that in reality was elaborated by both Lenin and Stalin after 1917 (Martin 2001), had a significant appeal in several crisis-ridden multiethnic countries. Along with proposing a broad overview, the paper will also advocate for a theoretical and methodological approach that seems particularly appropriate for analyzing this historical chapter. This is the approach of cultural transfers developed by historians Matthias Middell (2000) and Michel Espagne (2013), which has been used widely, although rather restrictively, in European or Eurasian case studies. Africa’s engagement with Marxism and Leninism, I maintain, constitutes a historical chapter that fulfills the criteria set forth by Middell so as to be studied through the prism of cultural transfers—it testifies to the agency of African actors, confirms the crucial role of the carriers of transfers, and shows how locally embedded their considerations were. Likewise, the adaptation of the Leninist solution in different colonial and postcolonial contexts vindicates Espagne’s insistence on the intrinsic value of all re-appropriations.

2. The Leninist Solution in Colonial Contexts

The views of the Soviet leaders and the debates within the Communist International (henceforth Comintern) about national liberation movements in the colonial or semi-dependent world have been

thoroughly examined by scholars. With regards to Africa and the African diaspora, Hakim Adi's *Pan-Africanism and Communism* [Adi \(2013\)](#) and Holger Weiss's *Framing a Radical Atlantic* [Weiss \(2013\)](#) provide the most detailed accounts of Comintern's policies and of the African responses both to the Comintern and to the Soviet Union's international policies during the interwar years. As both studies show, and Adi's title illustrates, many African and African American activists did not consider Pan-Africanism and Communism as conflicting ideologies. Between 1928 and 1933, in particular, when the Comintern actively supported national liberation movements and the Black workers' struggles, leading trade unionists, such as the Trinidadian George Padmore, who attended Comintern schools, to embrace Communism in order to fight both racism and colonialism. Soon, however, reacting to the rise of fascism in Europe, the Soviet Union revised this policy. Moscow entered into an alliance with Britain, France, and the U.S. and, in 1934, severed its support to anticolonial movements, which fought against Western imperialism and sought national independence. From that moment on, and until the mid-1950s, African communists were instructed to militate along with their European comrades under the auspices of the British and French communist parties, not for national independence, but against fascism and for the world revolution. In the aftermath of WWII, the revolution was expected to spread, after China, North Korea, and Vietnam, and after occupation of Eastern Europe by the Red Army in the industrialized West.

Disillusioned with this policy that ignored their aspirations, some leaders and intellectuals of the African diaspora criticized Moscow and the European communist parties and broke away from Communism. Two powerful interventions epitomized this rift. George Padmore, who had become an advisor to Ghanaian Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, published in 1956 his *opus magnum* under the title, *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa*. In this book, Padmore castigated the manipulation of African militants by European communists and warned the Western powers that if they did not grant their African colonies independence, Africans could turn to Communism. At the same, however, he was careful enough not to dismiss the merits of Communism altogether. Despite their paternalism, he maintained, Communists had fought against racism. Contrary to European empires, the Soviet Union had undertaken great efforts to transform the Tsarist Empire into a peaceful federation of bigger and smaller European and Asian nations ([Padmore 1956](#), pp. 290–94).

To be sure, Padmore had hailed and detailed the transition from the Tsarist Empire to the Soviet Union in another major book. Published in 1946, *How Russia Transformed Her Colonial Empire: A Challenge to the Imperialist Powers* was an enthusiastic account of the nationalities policies carried out by the Bolsheviks in the USSR and an appeal to the Western powers to emulate the Soviet example. After he had analyzed in separate chapters, 'How Lenin solved the national question' and 'How the former colonies are being industrialized', he drew the conclusion that 'Socialism unites', whereas 'Imperialism divides' ([Padmore and Pizer 1946](#)). The same year, another former student of the Comintern schools, the Ghanaian Kweku Bankole Awoonor-Renner, wrote a powerful pamphlet entitled *West African Soviet Union*. In it, he also looked at the Soviet Union, not only as a model for state-led economic and social development, but, more importantly, as a political model for uniting Africa into a federate state and for assuring within it the freedom and coexistence of all nations ([Awoonor-Renner 1946](#)). Both Awoonor-Renner and Padmore argued that a federal African polity should come into existence immediately after African countries had gained independence from the European colonial powers. Their writings were strongly influenced by Lenin's thinking, the early Comintern's theses on the national and colonial question, and the very example of the Soviet Union.

Debates on the relevance of the Leninist solution to the national question took place also within the French Empire. As compared to the British Empire, two factors influenced the terms of the debate in the French imperial context. The first one was the existence of the strong French Communist Party (*Parti Communiste Français*, PCF), which sought power in metropolitan France and was active in Africa. Through the establishment of the Communist Study Groups in Africa, the training of *cadres* in France or in the Soviet Union, and support to the African workers' struggles for better working conditions and higher wages, the PCF had managed to win over many Africans to Marxism and

Leninism. The second factor was the French assimilationist ideology and policies which, as Frederick Cooper recently demonstrated (Cooper 2014), was informed to a large extent various African visions of federation or confederation between French-speaking Africa and metropolitan France.

Against this background, the issue of association with France figured prominently in the French–African debates. As the radical economist and witness of these debates Samir Amin has reminded us, the PCF advocated the transformation of the French Union along the lines of the Soviet Union (Amin 2003, p. 23). This idea, however, implied that since the Russians played a leading role within the USSR, the French communists should also assume a dominant role inside the French Union. From that position, they should lead African peoples of the socialist French Union down the path of progress as the Bolsheviks had done in the case of the Asian and Caucasian nations of the Soviet Union (Pervillé 2000; Dozon 2003, pp. 333–40).

For all the adherence of Africans to the idea of equality of rights inside the French Union, the appeal of this political project was at best limited and short-lived. In post-1945 French Algeria, for instance, the Algerian Communist Party (*Parti Communiste Algérien*, PCA), under the leadership of its Moscow-educated general secretary Larbi Bouhali, officially subscribed to this idea. Algerian members of the party visited the Soviet Union in the early 1950s and upon their return to Algeria made public their enthusiasm for both the economic development and the harmonious coexistence of different nations. A member of the PCA, the writer Kateb Yacine, published an account of his impressions from the USSR, and in particular from Uzbekistan, in the Algerian press, highlighting the merits of the Soviet multinational polity and stressing that Soviet rule had eliminated both ‘racism and religious persecutions’ (Yacine 1999, pp. 102–4). Nevertheless, as historian Allison Drew has argued (Drew 2014), the idea to reform the French Union along the lines of the Soviet Union did not hold much currency among Algerian party members. Against the background of French domination and repression, Algerian nationalism grew stronger. The outbreak of the Algerian Revolution in November 1954 swept away any illusion left with regards to the Leninist solution.

However, this was not the case everywhere in the French Empire. Between 1954 and 1956, lawmakers from the overseas territories elected in the French National Assembly that was opposed the independence war led by the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) and the ensuing revolutionary violence. In March 1956, the lawmakers elected under the banner of the PCF joined those of other parties in voting a bill giving the French government ‘special powers’ (*pouvoirs spéciaux*) to suppress the revolution. Aimé Césaire, writer and poet from Martinique, was one of those communist lawmakers. In most biographies of Césaire, this episode has largely passed unremarked. However, it has been recently brought to the surface by David Alliot in his study of Césaire’s relationship with Communism and the PCF (Alliot 2013). Alliot retraces Césaire’s intellectual and political trajectory from surrealism during the interwar years to Communism after 1945 and until October 1956, when he finally resigned from the PCF. During his communist years, Césaire supported the line of the Soviet Union and the PCF on national and colonial questions. He wrote poems hailing Stalin and attended the dictator’s funeral in 1953, while, as mentioned above, voting the extraordinary measures of March 1956. In essence, Aimé Césaire, the celebrated author of a major anticolonial text such as the *Discourse on Colonialism* (Césaire 1955), voted against the ‘divorce’ of Algeria from France and supported the PCF’s line for the transformation of the French Union along the lines of the Soviet Union. Alliot carefully reconstitutes Césaire’s political trajectory from mayor of Fort-de-France to deputy of Martinique in the French National Assembly and sheds light on his conflict with the poet and leading intellectual of the PCF, Louis Aragon. He leaves little doubt that Césaire embraced Communism, among other reasons, to fulfill his political ambitions.

The publications and debates of the first postwar decade testify to the existence of Soviet-inspired alternatives to nationalism. Drawing from Lenin’s and Stalin’s thinking and citing the example of the USSR, these alternatives did not see self-determination and national liberation as opposed to a reformed federal and socialist union, which would ultimately benefit the less developed regions. Free and autonomous countries could thus coexist with the former metropolis within a federal and

socialist union. In such a union, which would actively seek to eliminate disparities, the right to secede could no longer be accepted because secession would be against the interests of the working masses. These socialist versions of nationalism and federalism, which testify to the appeal of the Leninist solution to the national question, have been neglected by scholars. The fact that the Marxist-inspired liberation movements that fought for the independence of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau more recently never envisaged association with Portugal, eventually played a role in this oblivion (Gleijeses 2002; Marcum 2018).

In any case, in late 1956, Aimé Césaire also followed George Padmore's example. In his open *Letter to Maurice Thorez*, the general secretary of the PCF, Césaire publicly resigned from the Party, denounced Stalinism and the Soviet system, and expressed his sympathy for the anti-Soviet and independent socialist movements in Eastern Europe. Just a few months after he had voted for the 'special powers', he denounced the stance of the PCF towards Algeria and decried the exploitation of the colonial question both by the USSR and by the Stalinist PCF (Césaire 1956). During the rest of his life, Césaire drew a veil over his communist past and erased from his collected writings the poems in which he had extolled Stalin and Communism.

3. The Leninist Solution in Postcolonial Contexts

In postcolonial Algeria, the position of the PCA on the issue of national independence before and during the revolution was often castigated as antipatriotic by the government of the FLN. As a consequence, Larbi Bouhali was forced to spend much of his life in exile in France, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia, whereas Kateb Yacine, who was also of Berber origin, was seen with suspicion by the regime for his internationalist proclivities and his advocacy of the Berber cause. The same was true for the prominent Algerian Berber ethnographer and writer Mouloud Mammeri, who visited the Soviet Union several times to attend the conferences of the Afro-Asian Writers' Union and showed a keen interest in the multinational polity of the Soviet Union, eventually with an eye on the situation of the Berbers. The Algerian government, however, pursued a policy of Arabization and firmly denied cultural rights to the Berber community. When a multinational Soviet delegation visited Algeria in 1965 and suggested that the Leninist solution and Soviet model might be suitable to the country, Algerian officials reacted angrily and cut short any discussion (Katsakioris 2014). Even though postcolonial Algeria was a country of socialist orientation that pursued economic development along socialist lines, it was also determined to build a nation-state, much as the European countries had done since the nineteenth century, and saw no contradiction in it. In this sense, the Leninist solution to the national question failed to win over Algerian elites who viewed the nation-state as the precondition of national sovereignty.

The national question was a much more urgent issue in Sudan, another multiethnic African country. On the eve of the country's independence from Great Britain in 1956, a civil war broke out between the Arab-dominated northern part and the sub-Saharan, mainly Christian and Animist, southern Sudan, which pushed for autonomy and equal representation in the government. As Khartoum resisted the demands of the South, the only constructive political force in the country remained the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP). Long-established and well-organized under the charismatic secretary general Abdel Khaliq Mahjub, the SCP rejected both Arabization and Islamization. It advocated the recognition of the country's ethnic and religious diversity and defended the rights of all religious communities—Muslims, Christians, and Animists alike (Ismael 2012, pp. 63–68).

One of the advocates of the Leninist approach for resolving the national question in Sudan was Joseph Garang, senior party member and intellectual from southern Sudan. Author of the booklet entitled *The Dilemma of the Southern Intellectual. Is it Justified?* (Garang 2010), Garang evoked Lenin's writings and explicitly referred to peaceful coexistence of 'Russians, Armenians, Georgians, Tatars, Uzbeks, Kazakhs' inside the Soviet Union as a federal model that Sudan should seek to emulate. Furthermore, as the orthodox Marxist-Leninist that he was, he argued that the causes of the Sudanese conflict were neither national, nor cultural, but lay on the economic domination of the country by

an Arab bourgeoisie. After the colonel, Gaafar Nimeiri, seized power in May 1969, the SCP backed his regime in the fight against the Umma Party and the Muslim Brotherhood, and Garang became for a short period of time Minister of Affairs of Southern Sudan. This 'marriage of convenience', however, faced a crisis already in 1970 and ended tragically in July 1971. Following the aborted coup d'état of communist officers, Nimeiri unleashed a wave of repression against the SCP. Among the hundreds of victims of Nimeiri's bloodbath, both Abdel Khaliq Mahjub and Joseph Garang were executed for their alleged implication in the coup. Following a short-lived peace agreement between the North and the South, the civil war resumed. Progressive voices, such as the one of the SCP, were effectively suppressed ([Gresh 1989](#)).

Joseph Garang's text was translated into English and published along with other important sources and essays on the history of the SCP, including with an introduction by Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf in a special issue of the South Atlantic Quarterly under the title 'What's Left of the Left?' [Abusharaf \(2010\)](#). In 2011, the Republic of South Sudan acceded to independence and joined the United Nations. Instead of peace, however, another civil war with ethnic undertones immediately broke out in the newly independent country. As the contributors in this special issue point out, since the 1970s, numerous progressive activists and intellectuals who militated for the peaceful resolution of the national question along Leninist lines were imprisoned, tortured, and executed. Marxism and Leninism, thus, suffered a terrible blow in Sudan. Thanks to the special issue, fragments of the history of the SCP have been retrieved. Among these fragments, the positions of the SCP on the national question and the centrality of Lenin's approach and of the Soviet Union's model figure prominently. These fragments are important because they remind us that the homogenous nation-state was not the unique model of polity that captured the political imagination of actors in postcolonial countries. Leninist and Soviet-inspired alternatives to nationalism did exist, but they were defeated, with their proponents often repressed.

In other African contexts as well, opposition movements and intellectuals were inspired by Lenin's writings and policies in order to settle the national question. Like Sudan, Nigeria was also engulfed in a civil war between the secessionist region of Biafra and the rest of the Federal Republic between 1966 and 1970. Biafrans, as Maxim Matusevich has shown, made overtures to the Soviet Union, stressing that Biafra was Nigeria's region that always sought to establish excellent relationships with the socialist countries. The Soviet Union, however, decided to side with the Nigerian Federal Government, and even provided it military hardware to crash the secessionist movement. In view of this decision, Lenin's thinking was evoked both by Moscow and by its Nigerian socialist allies, namely, the Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party (SWAFP), to justify their position against Biafran independence and in support of a united federal polity ([Matusevich 2003](#), pp. 105–33). At the same time, socialist-minded Nigerian intellectuals who opposed Biafra's independence did not refrain from criticizing the Federal Military Government (FMG). On the one hand, the FMG's policy to divide the bigger states into smaller ones, so as to weaken the opposition and separatist movements, strengthened the local chiefs, and fostered and reinforced corruption. On the other hand, this situation was compounded by rampant corruption in the booming oil sector, the uncontrollable flows of petrodollars, and the policies of economic laissez faire that were implemented in the era of the oil boom ([Falola and Heaton 2008](#), pp. 181–208).

It was against this background that several *Naija Marxists*, whose writings Adam Mayer analyzed in his major study ([Mayer 2016](#)), denounced the authoritarian rulers and called for sweeping reforms in order to put Nigeria on a socialist path of development. Among the most ardent critics of the regime included two Marxist historians, who participated in Nigeria's Constitution Drafting Committee between 1975 and 1976. The Soviet-educated Segun Osoba and the British-educated Yusufu Bala Usman made public their own Minority Report, in which they castigated the division of the country in small political units, denounced corruption, and embarked on a nation-wide campaign to convince their compatriots of the relevance of socialism to Nigeria. Ten years later, another Soviet-educated intellectual, the Yoruba archeologist and art historian Omotoso Eluyemi, firmly put his spotlight on the issues of nationalities and federalism. In a booklet he published under the title *Lenin's Thoughts on the*

National Question: Reflections on Nigeria, Eluyemi praised Lenin's policies that guaranteed social justice and the equality of rights between smaller and bigger nations. His conclusion was that the Soviet Union constituted by far the most successful and relevant example of a country that had peacefully resolved the national question ([Siim-Moskovitina and Dobronravin 2015](#)).

Admittedly, the country where various political movements referred to Lenin's theses on the national and colonial question, took their protests to the streets, and waged wars for implementing these projects, was Ethiopia. Proud of having resisted European imperialism, Ethiopia was itself a small multiethnic empire. The Ethiopian imperial state grew bigger in the aftermath of World War II, when the United Nations allowed it to incorporate the former Italian colony of Eritrea within a federation. However, disillusionment with the Emperor Haile Selassie's autocratic rule and with Amhara domination rose in several regions, notably in Eritrea, which embarked on an armed struggle only to be annexed by Ethiopia as a province in 1962. Ethnic conflicts, social and economic problems, and frustration with the regime's unwillingness to reform, as well as an increasing appeal of Communism, set the stage for political radicalization. It was against this background that Ethiopian students, both at home and abroad, turned to Marxism and Leninism to find solutions to the country's problems. Along with call for the redistribution of land to the tillers and radical economic reform, the student movement engaged in a heated debate over the national question. This debate was triggered by an article entitled 'On the question of nationalities in Ethiopia' that Walleign Mekonnen, a student in political sciences at Addis Ababa University and published in November 1969. An ethnic Amhara, Walleign, defended the legitimate right of Eritreans to fight against oppression, but opposed the Eritrean liberation movement, because, as he pointed out, it was led by the bourgeoisie and the local feudal lords. At the same time, he invited all Ethiopians to build 'a genuine national-state ... in which all nationalities participate equally in state affairs' ([Walleign 1969](#)). Liberation, according to Walleign, would not come by replacing Amhara with Eritrean masters, but through building a socialist federation of all ethnic groups, a genuinely egalitarian 'national-state', as he put it, that would ensure the interests of the working masses all over Ethiopia and reform the country along socialist lines. In this respect, Walleign Mekonnen remained faithful to the Leninist solution. Other students, however, opposed his views. They also quoted Lenin's and the Comintern's theses on the national and colonial question to make, however, an opposing argument. In short, they contended that because Eritrea was a colony and because in the near future the conditions for building a socialist Ethiopian federation could not be fulfilled, secession was a legitimate right of Eritreans ([Zewde 2014](#)).

War, famine, inflation, and frustration triggered popular protests under the leadership of the students, who endeavored to dethrone the Emperor and establish a socialist government. The popular uprising was, however, 'hijacked' by a group of low-ranking officers, known as the DERG (Provisional Military Administrative Committee), which seized power in 1974, executed the Emperor, and entered for some time in an alliance with radical student organizations. The DERG embraced Marxism-Leninism, implemented land reform, and granted linguistic rights and cultural freedom to different ethnic groups. At the same time, it unleashed a wave of Red Terror against political opponents, continued the Emperor's war in Eritrea, waged a defensive struggle to roll back the Somali invasion, and fought protracted wars against separatist movements in the regions of Ogaden and Tigray ([Vaughan 2003](#), pp. 127–53).

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was the organization that emerged as the most important opposition force. The TPLF was also a Marxist and, in particular, a Maoist-inspired liberation movement, which resented DERG's drive to centralization. If during the 1970s the TPLF fought for secession, in the course of the war it changed policy. By the late 1980s, its proclaimed objective was to oust the DERG without dismantling Ethiopia—it intended to preserve the Ethiopian state, on the one hand, yet to address the question of nationalities on the other. Having incorporated in its ranks many leftist students who had been disillusioned with and persecuted by the DERG, the Tigrayan leadership opted for a policy that was in line with the Leninist solution to the national question. Walleign Mekonnen's views served as the ideological underpinning of the TPLF. The final assault against the DERG in 1991 was code-named Operation Walleign after the slain student leader. Walleign's views

also informed the nationalities policy of the post-1991 Ethiopian government, which actually went even further than what Walleign had suggested by enshrining the right of ‘every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia... to self-determination’, including the right to secession in Ethiopia’s Constitution. From the student movement to the civil war and to the post-1991 ethnic federalism, Ethiopia’s history cannot be understood without reference to Lenin’s theses on the national question and to the federal polity of the Soviet Union (Clapham 1992, pp. 105–25; Abbink 2011).

Leninism also inspired liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, and South Africa. In these cases, however, it was the anti-imperialist strand of Lenin’s theory and his ‘guidelines’ for creating a vanguard party that had by far the biggest impact and were seen by the leaders of the movements as the most useful contributions of Leninism. To be sure, the South African Communist Party (SACP) also subscribed to Lenin’s views regarding the national question. The South African writer and prominent SACP member, Alex La Guma, paid a tribute to the Leninist solution and extolled the Soviet federal model in his *Soviet Journey*, the travelogue he wrote following his trips in Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus (La Guma 2017).

Yet, the question of federalism remained particularly problematic in the South African context, not only for the SACP but also the African National Congress (ANC), SACP’s ally against apartheid. One reason for downplaying the issue of socialist federalism was that the apartheid regime had already implemented the plan of autonomous Bantustans inside South Africa. Defending federalism, therefore, looked like subscribing to the policy of Pretoria’s regime. Bantustans were thus denounced as an attempt to fragment the black population and to foster sectional politics. Within this context, both the SACP and the ANC construed South Africa as a ‘colony of special type’, in which colonizers and colonized coexisted within one state. Instead of ethnic-based federalism, they envisioned a unified multi-racial nation (De Braganca and Wallerstein 1982, pp. 95–114; Maré 2017).

The Portuguese colonies offer another illustration of the limits in the reception of the Leninist solution in the context of national liberation struggles and civil wars. In Mozambique, after years of anticolonial struggle, the Marxist-inspired FRELIMO (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*) seized power in 1975, shortly after the fall of the authoritarian Estado Novo regime in Portugal. Two years later, FRELIMO officially declared itself a Marxist–Leninist party and pushed through its plans both to transform the country in socialist lines and to build a nation-state. Yet, as Michel Cahen has pointed out, FRELIMO’s policies of nation-building had little respect for the country’s ethnic and linguistic diversity and were at odds with Leninism (Cahen 1993). Similarly, in Angola the MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*) that came to power in 1975 with Cuban and Soviet support, proclaiming its adherence to Marxism–Leninism in 1977, pursued a policy of nation-building which, among many other reasons, alienated ethnic groups. As Christine Hatzky has argued, the racially-mixed MPLA elites found in Cuba not only military support, but also a model of a racially and culturally mixed Afro-Latin nation that corresponded to their own identity and fitted in their narrative of nation-building far better than the federal Soviet Union (Hatzky 2015).

4. Conclusions

Scholars who study African socialism and the African left, and focus on the transfer, adaptation, and impact of ideas or models from the socialist countries, have arguably put their spotlight on two major topics. First, on the cultural transfers related to the organization of the revolutionary movement, the vanguard party, the one-party-state, and its mass organizations. These transfers bore the clear imprint of Leninism and drew from the example and experience of the USSR or other socialist countries. Second, they have extensively analyzed the writings and discourse of African nationalists and Marxists and pointed to their recurrent references to Lenin’s theory and, in particular, to Lenin’s famous take on imperialism (Ottaway and Ottaway 1981).

This paper, however, sought to demonstrate that the impact of Leninism cannot be reduced to anti-imperialism, national independence, or the adoption of a socialist path to economic and social development. Leninism also informed the views of actors in Africa and the African diaspora on such

burning issues, such as the national question both within empires and within multi-ethnic postcolonial countries. As for empires, even though nationalism and anti-imperialism effectively swept away alternative political visions, the Leninist solution to the national question and the example of the Soviet Union held some currency among leftist intellectuals and actors in the British and French Empires between 1945 and 1956. The author of an incisive critique of colonialism, Aimé Césaire, subscribed to the view that the French Empire should not be dissolved but, instead, transformed along the lines of the Soviet Union. Such positions point to the existence of a blend of socialist and nationalist ideas which should be taken into account, along with the impassioned debates about how to reconfigure the French Union into a federal or confederal polity that Frederick Cooper has brought to the surface. During these debates, as Cooper showed, prominent politicians came up with their blueprints for a rather loose and surely liberal French–African confederation. The socialist alternative, on the opposite side, did not put into question the necessity of strong unitary institutions that would foster political unity, economic development, and modernization in socialist lines. If the examples of the USSR and eventually those of Yugoslavia were important for Césaire, the intellectual underpinning of this socialist vision of the national cause was the Leninist solution to the national question. In this respect, between anti-imperialism and the vision of a socialist federal polity, there was absolutely no contradiction.

Later, however, in the context of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and of the anticolonial struggles in the Portuguese colonies, this strand of Leninism became less meaningful to African actors. No doubt, Leninism remained the major reference for anti-imperialist and internationalist thinking, but national liberation and nation-building required other theoretical sources and practical examples. Among these, Cuba appeared in the eyes of many actors as a useful model, as it combined socialism, anti-imperialism, and the building of a nation-state. Still, the Leninist solution to the national question remained more meaningful in countries facing sharp tensions between national and religious groups, those engulfed in civil wars, and those trying to settle their own nationalities question. In these contexts, however, as the cases of Sudan and Ethiopia suggest, the carriers of the cultural transfer were not the ruling elites, but opposition movements, leftist intellectuals, and minorities.

After 1991, Leninism paid the heavy price of the economic and political bankruptcy and of the subsequent dissolution of the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia, and the Leninist solution ceased to be a reference for settling the national question. Even worse, the wars in Yugoslavia, the Caucasus, and more recently in Ukraine have cast a heavy shadow over the political and intellectual history of socialist federalism. This oblivion should, however, not diminish the historical importance of the Leninist solution to the national question across countries and continents throughout the twentieth century. It is the historians' task to recover these Leninist-inspired visions and highlight their significance in the numerous contexts where nationalist violence and conflicts had to be opposed.

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