

Introduction

Perhaps the most frustrating thing about the inexorable cross-influences and echoing that gives the black diaspora its restless logic is the fact that meanings accrue to a sound or a symbol or a person completely independently of the original intention—this is the problem of all communication.

Louis Chude-Sokei, *Dr Satan's Echo Chamber*

There is much to be admired in those who have struggled under the inspiration of Marxism. And no recitation of their courage and sacrifice would be adequate or sufficiently eloquent to capture their awesome achievements—or unhappy failures.

Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: the Making of the Black Radical Tradition*

The presence of Africans in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is very rarely thought of in connection with the experience of exile. Instead, Africans in the GDR are predominantly viewed through the prism of educational and labor migration. This study offers a different approach. Through biographical portrayal, it unfolds the life stories of some members of African liberation movements or freedom fighters who lived in exile in the GDR and, ultimately, remained in reunified Germany, with the main case study being a Malawian activist—Mahoma Mwaungulu—who was eventually expelled from East to West Berlin. Recounting his experiences along with those of some South African exiles, chief among them Asaph Makote Mohlala, a former medical worker for the African National Congress' (ANC) armed wing, the study reconstructs the multiple entanglements between the “Second” and “Third” worlds from the vantage point of the politically displaced within the concrete historical contexts of African decolonization, the struggle against the Malawian Banda dictatorship, and the struggle against South African apartheid. Discursively, it counterposes the competing figures of the political exile and the refugee. Through a close reading of literature on the South African exile experience, it discusses the problems reunified Germany has had in coming to terms with its socialist past, further unearthing the political-economic critique of capitalism that is clearly visible in the lives and struggles of these exiles. The main thesis developed here is that the exiles' own critique of capitalism, developed on African soil in the context of the liberation struggles they participated in, primarily explains the strong attraction of the GDR and the Eastern Bloc to them in a way that goes far beyond anti-colonial solidarity or a purely instrumental search for educational opportunities.

African Freedom Fighters Exiled in East Germany

That the GDR, whose government for the sake of political survival prevented its own people from moving freely across national borders, was also a place where African *freedom fighters* made their home in exile is an image so hard to imagine in contemporary Germany that the title of this study will read for many like a true oxymoron. The reasons for this are manifold: first, a general lack of knowledge about African history and an unreflected-upon Eurocentrism among the population at large; second, a biased, anti-communist view on everything related to the GDR that dominates the public discourse and curricula of Germany's public schools, usually portraying the GDR as a failure *without any revolutionary impetus*, as a country whose history is mostly restricted to the Berlin Wall, the security police, or a handful of nostalgia shows about everyday life there, from which its foreign policies are completely excluded, as another contemporary observer aptly remarked;¹ third, and connected to the former, the striking under-representation of East German intellectuals at universities and in the wider public sphere; and last, but not least, the violent racist outbursts after reunification, which erupted with particular intensity in the former East, turning this part of reunified Germany into a stronghold of rightwing populist movements to this day. Together with the mass repatriation of thousands of African and Asian migrant workers who had lived in the GDR during the 1980s, such phenomena whitened East Germany to such an extent that it should not be considered unusual to hear a young, white German student of anthropology saying that, 25 years after reunification, she simply *cannot imagine* the GDR as a space where *any* Africans lived at all.²

1 The white West German Lukas Heger, then an M.A. student of art, curation and literature, expressed this sentiment during a talk with Peggy Piesche, a famous Afro-German cultural critic born in the GDR, about his project *Utopia falling apart*. See *Red Africa: The legacy of cultural relationships between Africa, the Soviet Union and related countries during the Cold War. Artist Talk: Lukas Heger: Presentation of the Project Space "Utopia Falling Apart."* Part of the program for the exhibition *Things Fall Apart*, Iwalewahauss, University Bayreuth, 26 May 2016, Evening Session, 7–10 pm, https://www.bayreuth-academy-futureafrica.uni-bayreuth.de/en/academy/Archiv_eng/2016/Ausstellung-_Things-fall-Apart_-26_5_-18_9_-im-Iwalewahauss/index.html (accessed 2 October 2023). I thank the organizers for recording the event and providing me with a copy of the audio file (own transcription). For an account of the exhibition *Things Fall Apart*, see Heger 2016.

2 This actually occurred in a class that I gave on the topic at the department of European Ethnology at Humboldt University Berlin in 2015, titled *Verflechtungen aus Postsozialismus und Postkolonialismus: Die DDR und die „3. Welt“ am Beispiel Afrikas* (Entanglements between Postsocialism and Postcolonialism: the GDR and the “Third World,” as seen through the example of Africa). For a German description, see <https://agnes.hu-berlin.de/lupo/rds?state=verpublish&status=init&vmfile=no&publishid=97399&moduleCall=webInfo&publishConfFile=webInfo&publishSubDir=veranstaltung> (accessed 2 October 2023).

The aim of this study is to turn this image radically upside down. It wants to open up the discussion about the GDR to these “inexorable cross-influences and echoing that gives the black diaspora its restless logic” (Chude-Sokei 2013) in a more dialectical and politically challenging way than studies on African migrant workers or students have done so far. Reconstructing the life story of the late Mahoma Mwaungulu, an exiled Malawian freedom fighter who migrated to the GDR in 1960 and lived there for almost two decades before his expulsion to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in 1982, and contrasting it with that of Asaph Mohlala, an exiled South African freedom fighter who more successfully made the eastern part of Berlin his *permanent* home, this study seeks to draw its readers deep into the history of African decolonization, the notable role which the Eastern bloc played therein during the Cold War, and the lives of some Africans who not only lived in exile in the GDR but also remained in Germany after its reunification. Biographical, historical-anthropological, postcolonial as well as postsocialist in its approach, this study joins the growing scholarship in global history and area studies which has found fertile research ground in the entanglements between the so-called Second and Third Worlds. New approaches to topics such as labor migration, development policy, or African liberation movements place the GDR in East–South socio-political relations in a much more nuanced way than earlier research had (e.g. Dallywater/Saunders/Fonseca 2019; Burton 2021; Burton et al. 2021; Schade 2022; Pugach 2022; Schenck 2023; Saunders/Fonseca/Dallywater 2023). By supplementing archival sources from various countries with oral histories, for example, they have been approaching the GDR and the socialist world from more decidedly transnational or globally informed perspectives. A similar widening of analytical frameworks can be observed in research on the global history of socialism or the anti-apartheid struggle (e.g. Mark et al. 2020; Mark/Betts 2022; Betts et al. 2019). As an ethnography created during my studies at Humboldt University’s Department of European Ethnology, however, the present study places stronger emphasis on the contradictory ways in which these entangled histories can be linked to the present and asks why they have generally been overlooked or sidelined in contemporary Germany.

By linking these marginalized pasts to the present, this study also seeks to overcome a certain provincialism and methodological nationalism still characteristic of the German debate when the GDR and the division of Germany during the Cold War are at stake. What is usually left out or downplayed in this debate is the historical relationship between Western Europe’s colonial expansion, specific forms of racism that emerged during this expansion, and the development of capitalism, all of which made international communism a driving force for decolonization, particularly, though not exclusively, in Southern Africa, where the system of apartheid counted on the indulgence and support of Western powers as long

as the existence and presumed dangers posed by the Soviet Union could serve as a pretext for these powers to portray communism as the greater evil while downplaying palpable inequities linked to racism and colonialism. Hence, by placing the experiences and political struggles of two exiles from Southern Africa³ at the center of this study, *capitalism*—as the political-economic motor of the Cold War’s Western powers, dominating the world economy to this day—always remains in sight.

Structure of the Book

The study is divided into four main chapters. As I discuss examples from the rich literature on foreigners in the GDR and on the relationship between the GDR and Africa throughout the whole study, the first chapter, “Exiles,” commences with a sustained reflection on the rather abstract figure of the exile, strongly associated in Germany with the German-Jewish exile of the Nazi period but, as I will show, only rarely applied to African nationals. I also examine how scholars in the humanities, particularly in anthropology as well as in political science and literary studies, use and discuss exile as a key figure of mobility and how they distinguish it from or relate it to the figure of the refugee. Furthermore, I investigate how exile is used in African Studies, giving examples of scholarly approaches to exile in the context of Southern Africa during decolonization and looking at how selected African intellectuals have conceptualized it. The chapter ends with several examples of how German post-reunification scholarship, art and literature have thus far approached the exile of South Africans in the GDR, considered by far the most prominent case of African exile to that now-extinct country.

“Exiles” is followed by the longest chapter of all, “Mahoma Mwaungulu: ethnography of an intra-German expulsion,” which acts as the empirical core of this study. In opening this chapter, I explain how a chance encounter with Mwaungulu aroused my interest in exile, motivated me to write this study, and why I believe that his life story, leading from colonial Africa to the GDR and, ultimately, the FRG—via such diverse countries as Malawi, Uganda, Ghana, Tanzania, and even Cuba—is worth such an elaborate reconstruction. Then, I outline my biographical encounters with Mwaungulu in Berlin during the early 2000s as well as my methodological approach and sources, including a variety of interviews, archived material,

³ I am aware of Malawi’s distinct geographical position between Central, Eastern and Southern Africa. If I sometimes nevertheless refer to Malawi only as part of Southern Africa, I do so for both pragmatic and geopolitical reasons.

films and newspaper articles. Being the life story of a highly politicized African of Marxist-Leninist convictions, in which several of those “unhappy failures” lamented by Cedric J. Robinson (2000: xxvii) accumulate, this part also includes two relatively long subchapters: one about The Socialist League of Malawi (LESOMA), a largely forgotten opposition movement in exile, which Mwaungulu became the representative of in the GDR, and another about Mwaungulu’s unfinished PhD thesis on Malawi’s economic development, which he almost completed at one of the GDR’s most prestigious universities. Moreover, a dominant theme running through Mwaungulu’s life story with respect to the GDR that is spotlighted here is how the more widely known exile of South Africans constantly superimposed itself over Mwaungulu’s exile as a member of the deterritorialized Malawian opposition, thereby transferring onto the fragmentary image of the African exile community in the GDR portrayed in this study the very same logics already existing in Southern Africa, where the struggle against the military and economic power of the South African apartheid regime overshadowed all other political struggles.

The third chapter, “Asaph Makote Mohlala: ‘I had to fight my way back,’” is shorter than the one on Mwaungulu, for the exiled South African freedom fighter Mohlala only arrived in the GDR in 1984, after Mwaungulu had already been expelled to West Berlin, and lived in the GDR for a much shorter period of time. Whereas Mwaungulu’s life story illuminates the first stage of African decolonization and offers unique insights into the GDR of the 1960s and 1970s, Mohlala’s covers the exile experiences of a younger freedom fighter, who left apartheid South Africa in the mid 1970s and became a member of the ANC. He first came to the GDR as a medical student in Quedlinburg, a small rural town, via Crimea in the Soviet Union and Angola in southwestern Africa, before finally settling in East Berlin during the tumultuous period of the GDR’s dissolution and subsequent German reunification. Besides providing detailed insights into the GDR’s medical training program for foreigners in the 1980s, Mohlala’s life story powerfully illustrates what it meant to be a member of the ANC’s armed wing, *Umkonotho we Sizwe* (MK), against the backdrop of the ANC’s difficulties in finding a safe haven on the African continent for its exiled army and, on an individual scale, of Mohlala’s difficulties in securing such a political sanctuary for himself in the GDR.

Read together as a larger global-historical tale, these two life stories couple the beginning of Africa’s decolonization with its virtual ending—marked by the fall of apartheid in South Africa—via recounting the experiences of exile that two male Africans underwent in the GDR, including their marriages to East German women. Their exile experiences did not stop there, however, as Mwaungulu and Mohlala—one through his expulsion from the GDR, the other through German reunification—both eventually ended up living in the FRG. This raises questions about how such life stories can be connected to more recent forms of South–North migration, to

which I come in the fourth and final part: “African exiles and the awkward figure of the refugee.” Here I reconnect to the introductory chapter, “Exiles,” and discuss on the theoretical as well as the empirical levels the tense relationship between the exile and its notorious twin figure, the refugee, by giving space to Jeannette Selby, another freedom fighter from South Africa who spent most of her life in exile. Selby, whom I first introduce in “Exiles” through my reading of a work of popular German literature, belongs to the same generation of exiles as Mwaungulu—the two actually knew each other—and lived in the GDR from 1961 onwards. Like her younger compatriot Mohlala, Selby continues to live in Berlin, unlike Mwaungulu, who passed away in 2004. During the time that so-called refugee protests were taking place in the very heart of Berlin in the 2010s, I regularly met and conversed with Selby, who shared her own opinions about the protests, largely involving Africans from sub-Saharan countries who, having previously lived as migrant workers in Libya, had fled the Libyan civil war to Europe via the Mediterranean. The prominent role which this relatively small group of Black Africans played in the Berlin protests gave renewed popularity to the figure of the poverty-stricken refugee from Africa. Firmly anchored in the racist imagination of the West, this is also a figure which, as my conversation with Selby reveals, former African exiles from the GDR have had to deal with while continuing their lives in a reunified Germany.