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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"You Are Not Alone": Angela Davis and the Soviet Dreams of Freedom

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Abstract

In the early 1970s, the plight of a charismatic Black American communist and philosophy professor Angela Davis, put on trial in the United States for her alleged involvement in a courtroom shootout in California, galvanized international public opinion. A massive publicity campaign in support of Angela Davis resonated across the globe and drew in millions of volunteers and sympathizers. The nations of the communist bloc, led by the Soviet Union, were particularly active in rallying their citizens in defense of a jailed American radical. In 1970–1972, Davis became a household name throughout the Soviet Union (but also in East Germany, Cuba, Poland, and other socialist nations). The "Free Angela Davis" campaign was unprecedented in scope and left a lasting mark on the collective memory of the citizens of the Soviet Union and its socialist satellites. Such was the impact of this propaganda juggernaut that decades later the image of Angela Davis remained current as a pop-cultural phenomenon across the former Soviet spaces and a symbol of unrealized and often conflicting aspirations towards freedom.

The year is 2008. At a gigantic outdoor concert, rock musician Garik Sukachev, one of the brightest stars in Russia's musical firmament, performs his enduring megahit from 2002. Sukachev, a grizzled and fashionably disheveled rock-n-roll veteran, knows how to work the crowd. His half-naked torso glistening with sweat and his breathing heavy, he exudes the intensity of someone who would rather drink himself to death than compromise on the principles he deems sacred. To a frenetic and menacingly accelerating backup beat, he dedicates the song to "our black brothers fighting against Apartheid around the world!" Oblivious to the apparent anachronism of the claim, the crowd erupts in a deafening cheer. The camera pans the horizon and zooms in on the jubilant concertgoers; a dizzying panoply of flags go up: Russian national flags; old Soviet flags; American flags; and (one of several incongruent and ahistorical features of the show) a number of Confederate flags. This virtual grand parade of conflicting and even mutually exclusive symbolisms represents a backdrop to what is about to follow – a musical homage to one of the most celebrated figures in the history of Soviet popular culture. To the crowd's elation, Sukachev belts out his perennially popular song about a nonconformist who sticks to his beliefs and

his own originality while rejecting the suffocating demands placed on him by society. The protagonist of the song does not fit in with those who want to bend his will and make him just like everyone else. But his will is unbending – he possesses a "strange courage", and his protest is uncompromising:

> Hey, listen, you'll perish for nothing!
> But his hunger for life was bold and real
> He sported platform shoes and brown bell-bottoms
> And the hairdo "Angela Davis"

The rebel's quest for personal freedom is presented to the audience through the evocation of an iconic figure. The two struggles are collapsed into one in the song's refrain chorus:

> Freedom to Angela Davis!
> Hands off our Angela!
> Give freedom to our Angela!
> Give her freedom, you bitches![1]

Sukachev is a master performer, yet his passion and disdain for conformity strike the listener as genuine. After all, he sings of freedom in a country where, some thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the very concept remains both contested and elusive. It is peculiar that a post-Soviet rock musician chose to evoke freedom (an appeal that visibly galvanizes his audiences) by tapping into the pantheon of the Soviet Union's greats. Or *is* it peculiar? Sukachev, whose politics are vaguely left wing but muddled, was born in 1959 and came of age during the so-called stagnation period of the late USSR. In a recent interview, he described his upbringing as that of a "typical Soviet boy" who grew up spending summers at pioneer camps and reading Soviet classics. The traumatic memories of war, especially as experienced by his family, were particularly "meaningful".[2] Sukachev falls within the age group that anthropologist Alexei Yurchak so aptly described as the "last Soviet generation". Sukachev's and his peers' worldviews had been formed during the waning decades of the Soviet Union, when it seemed that "everything was forever". Even when they transgressed the Soviet system they remained its quintessential products, formed and informed by the values instilled in them since early childhood, exposed daily to what Yurchak calls the "authoritative discourse".[3] Sukachev's evocation of the famous Black communist, someone whose one-time celebrity has diminished considerably in post-Soviet Russia (and who remains only marginally known in the United States), dates him unmistakably as belonging to the "last Soviet generation".

[1]"Svobodu Andzhele Davis", lyrics and music by Garik Sukachev, 2002. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bap8ALfv1ZE; last accessed 5 October 2019.

[2]"Mne khotelos' sbezhat' na front. Garik Sukachev o voine, Pobede, kino i okopnyh pesnyah", *Lenta.ru* (7 April 2015). Available at: https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/04/07/pobedagarik/; last accessed 5 October 2019.

[3]See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ, 2006).

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Angela Davis as a Soviet Celebrity

While the Soviet Union did not have an evolved celebrity culture in the Western sense, it did have its celebrities.[4] And Angela Yvonne Davis would come to occupy a prominent spot among that hallowed group of wartime heroes, cosmonauts, prominent cultural figures, Olympic athletes, and revolutionary martyrs. Her ascent as a figure of national veneration was swift and dramatic. Not since the Scottsboro campaigns of the 1930s had Soviet citizens been exposed to such an intense and large-scale propaganda effort on behalf of a victim of Western reactionaries.[5] Soon after the infamous courthouse shooting in California and the eventual apprehension of the fugitive Davis in New York, the Soviet Union embarked on an unprecedented "Free Angela Davis" campaign that, within a few short weeks, made Angela Davis a household name across the vast expanse of the country.[6] As early as the autumn of 1970, meetings and signature collections in defense of the "fearless daughter of the Negro people" began to take place – not only in Moscow (Figure 1) and Leningrad, but also in the Soviet republics – in Kirghizia, in Uzbekistan, in Estonia, in Moldavia, and elsewhere.[7] From the beginning, these propaganda events were staged by their organizers as highly performative and emotionally charged. It was not unusual for Soviet media and propaganda outlets to depict the victims and martyrs of Western racism and imperialism in emotive terms. In the 1930s, the Soviets mounted a vociferous campaign in defense of the "Scottsboro boys", put on trial in the Jim Crow United States on trumped-up charges of raping a white woman.[8] In the 1950s, the Soviets rallied to the defense of another prominent African American anti-racist activist, Paul Robeson. During the McCarthy years, Robeson, a close friend and vocal supporter of the Soviet Union, had his passport revoked and was subjected to continuous harassment by US authorities. The Soviets responded to Robeson's McCarthy-era travails by embarking on a boisterous campaign of support that turned Robeson into a subject of national adoration and recipient of the coveted Stalin Prize.[9] Yet, even by these generous standards, the

[4]On Soviet celebrity culture, see Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2011); Erica Fraser, "Yuri Gagarin and Celebrity Masculinity in Soviet Culture", in Philip Muehlenbeck (ed.), *Gender, Sexuality, and the Cold War: A Global Perspective* (Nashville, TN, 2017), pp. 270–290.

[5]On Scottsboro campaigns in the Soviet Union, see Meredith L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of US Racism, 1928–1937* (Lincoln, NE, 2012).

[6]See "Delo Andzhely Davis", *Pravda*, 1 November 1970.

[7]"Ostanovit' Ruku Reaktsii", *Pravda*, 11 December 1970; "Oni Boyatsya Tebya, Andzhela!", *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 20 December 1970; "Ostanovit' Raspravu! Trebuyut Milliony", *Pravda*, 8 January 1971.

[8]Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow*; James Zeigler, *Red Scare Racism and Cold War Black Radicalism* (Jackson, MS, 2015).

[9]Maxim Matusevich, "'Zog Nit Keyn Mol': Paul Robeson's Tragic Love of Russia", in Felipe Espinoza Garrido, Caroline Koegler, Deborah Nyangulu, and Mark U. Stein (eds), *Locating African European Studies: Interventions, Intersections, Conversations* (Abingdon, 2019); James L. Hicks, "Robeson Receives $25,000 Stalin Peace Prize in NYC", *Afro-American*, 3 October 1953; I. Filippov, "Paul Robeson. Borets za Mir i Svobodu", *Pravda*, 25 December 1952; Paul Robeson, "Bor'ba Budet Prodolzhat'sya", *Pravda*, 15 March 1953.

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Figure 1. "Freedom to Angela Davis" factory meeting, Moscow, Soviet Union, 1970.
Source: unknown photographer.

scope and feverish pitch of the Soviet "Free Angela Davis" crusade were unprecedented.

Ordinary Soviets shared newspaper space with prominent cultural and scientific personalities to express their solidarity with the imprisoned activist and to demand her freedom. Most of these appeals were articulated in terms implying an intimate familiarity with Angela Davis; almost invariably the authors addressed Davis by her first name and using the familiar second person *ty* instead of the more formal *vy* pronoun. "We admire the toughness of this remarkable woman, who is a victim of a reactionary plot. Deeply alarmed by Angela's fate, I join my voice with the voices of others demanding an immediate end to the persecution of the communist", wrote a female factory worker from the town of Orsha. "We're proud of Angela Davis's unbendable courage and along with millions of common people demand an end to the shameful kangaroo court", opined a retired couple from Saratov. Two villagers from the Pskov region decried the "handiwork of American reactionaries": "We demand to stop the hand of the executioners!"[10] A self-styled Moscow poet, Yuri Brilliantov, reached out to the editorial office of the *Daily World* with a request to publish his poem dedicated to Angela Davis. The poem is less notable for its literary quality than for an act of peculiar cultural adoption, by which the poet places Angela Davis on the continuum of Soviet experience. He draws parallels between her ordeal and the suffering of the Soviet people at the hands of the Nazis. Notably, Brilliantov declares the American professor to belong metaphorically to his

[10]"Svobodu Andzhele Davis!", *Pravda*, 24 July 1971.

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country's history – a peculiar sentiment, found in other correspondence to Angela Davis from Soviet citizens, and one that firmly established her as "one of us":[11]

> Stand strong, Angela Davis, the daughter of October.
> Angela, you carry a heavy cross.
> Alone, among the vicious beasts.
> Stand strong! You're marching forward.
> Not for yourself, but for the happiness of all people.
>
> It's hard for you Angela.
> Stand strong – It's always hard for real heroes.
> It's hard to take off in a space rocket.
> And it's hard for heroes to walk on the moon.
>
> It used to be very hard for us too,
> When in the snows, hungry, in wintertime,
> With hope and faith in our cause
> We defeated the enemy outside of Moscow.[12]

That "one of us" proprietary take on Angela Davis could be expanded to account for complex Soviet identities. Lily Golden, a well-known Afro-Russian intellectual, published an open letter to Angela Davis in which she claimed a commonality of fate between herself and the famous prisoner.[13] Golden's father was Oliver Golden, a Black American communist who moved to the Soviet Union and settled there permanently in the early 1930s. Drawing on her own African American roots, Golden claimed a special personal bond with Angela Davis and even connected their respective family stories (although she plays loose with the facts: Golden's father did not "die of a Ku Klux Klan beating", as she posits in the letter, for the simple reason that he died of natural causes while in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s).[14] Golden's letter clearly fulfilled an important ideological function as it presented the Soviet Union as a place of racial redemption and a safe space for non-white populations, in contrast to the racist United States: "Whereas the destinies of our ancestors were the same, yours and mine parted. I'm living now in the Soviet Union. My family fled to this country from discrimination in the U.S.. You're now in a U.S. jail." She finalized the epistolary adoption of Angela Davis into the anti-racist Soviet family by signing "Your sister Lily O. Golden".[15]

[11]"Svobodu Andzhele Davis! Narodnyj Fol'klor pro 'Chernuyu Panteru Kommunizma'", *Diletant*, 26 January 2016. Available at: https://diletant.media/articles/27535042/; last accessed 8 January 2024.

[12]Yuri Brilliantov, "Pis'mo Andzhele Devis", 15 May 1972, Davis, Angela: Solidarity letters /Russia/, Box 138, Folder 31, Tamiment Library: The Communist Party of the United States of America Records TAM.132.

[13]Lily Golden, "Blacks in the Soviet Union/Draft for Henry Winston/", 1980s, Box 132, Folder 18, Tamiment Library: The Communist Party of the United States of America Records TAM.132.

[14]See *idem*, *My Long Journey Home*, 1st edn (Chicago, IL, 2002); *idem*, "Black Americans' Uzbek Experiment", *Moscow News*, 20 September 1987; Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2008).

[15]Golden, "Blacks in the Soviet Union /Draft for Henry Winston/".

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In some ways, the letters to Angela Davis from ordinary Soviets are more revealing, exactly because they were not commissioned by the authorities and thus captured the popular fascination with Davis and her case. To an extent, they may have mimicked the sentiments readily found in the appeals and public statements by Soviet elites, which appeared in the Soviet press with great regularity. For example, the popular writer Chinghiz Aitmatov published an impassioned appeal to "all Americans", pleading with them to save Angela Davis: "Don't allow for the destruction of Angela!"[16] The imprisoned California professor was the recipient of an emotionally charged letter penned by Valentina Nikolayeva-Tereshkova, the celebrated first female cosmonaut and chairwoman of the Soviet Women's Committee. Even compared with the ardor of other Soviet letters in support of Angela Davis, Tereshkova's message to "dear, courageous sister" stands out as especially emotive. The hearts of millions of Soviet women, Tereshkova wrote, were "beating in unison with yours".[17] Tereshkova, a Kremlin-designated symbol of Soviet womanhood, is explicit in evoking gender solidarity, which she deploys strategically to cast the Soviet Union as simultaneously the epicenter of the global anti-racist struggle and the focal point of international sisterhood.[18]

A more somber tone was struck in a formal plea to US President Richard Nixon by a group of well-known intellectuals, which included such iconic figures of Soviet culture as composers Dmitry Shostakovich and Aram Khachaturyan, ballerina Maya Plisetskaya, and folk dancer Igor Moiseyev.[19] The appeal sought to historicize the Angela Davis trial by connecting it to the history of racism in the United States, but it also evoked Nixon's own legal training and even America's better angels: the "land of Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt" would earn neither laurels nor respect by "lynching the gallant Angela Davis".[20] A group of prominent Soviet scientists, headed by one of the country's most respected nuclear physicists, Pyotr Kapitsa, also published an open letter to Nixon. All fourteen signers identified themselves as members of either the United States Academy of Sciences or the American Academy of Arts and Science, and, in their rendering, Angela Davis was not only a political activist, but also a fellow scientist (in the USSR the term "science" was used to describe all academic disciplines, including philosophy) who should be given a chance to return to work. The petitioning scientists emphasized what they saw as an organic relationship between Davis's political activism and her labors as a scholar.[21] It appears that Davis's training as a philosopher was viewed by Soviet petitioners as a propaganda asset as it indicated that hers was a natural progression

[16]Chinghiz Aitmatov, "Svobodu Andzhele Davis!", *Izvestia*, 31 December 1970.

[17]Valentina Nikolayeva-Tereshkova, "Letter of Support", 1970, Angela Davis Legal Defense Collection, Box 4, Folder 14, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

[18]The Soviet Union expended considerable effort promoting gender solidarity, which, just like anti-racism, served to burnish its ideological credentials, especially in the Global South. See, for example, Yulia Gradskova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the "Whole World"?* (London, 2020).

[19]Frank Prial, "More Russians Send Plea to Nixon on Angela Davis", *New York Times*, 7 January 1971.

[20]"Soviet People's Plea for Angela", n.d., Angela Davis Legal Defense Collection, Box 4, Folder 15, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

[21]"Soviet Scientists Back Miss Davis", *New York Times*, 26 December 1970; "Ot Imeni Sovetskikh Uchenykh", *Pravda*, 26 December 1970.

through studies and research towards Marxism–Leninism. Soviet commentary rarely failed to mention the young activist's academic credentials, presenting her to the public as a brilliant intellectual, educated at the best American, French, and German universities,[22] as someone who "began to demonstrate her brilliant academic abilities at an early age", and whose academic advisor viewed this "cultured and talented woman" as the "best student he ever taught".[23] In his letter, Aitmatov first introduces Angela Davis not as a communist or a political radical, but rather as a "young and talented scholar-philosopher [sic], whose life is now in peril".[24] The reactionaries, explained the leftist French author Martine Monod to Soviet readers, hate Angela Davis not just for the color of her skin, but also for her sharp mind and her association with "universal culture".[25]

Humanizing Angela Davis

The Soviet campaign to save Angela Davis went beyond the routine denunciations of Western perfidy and cruelty. What is remarkable about the Soviet response to the trial in California is not only the extent of saturation coverage, but also an intense focus on the persona of the accused. The Soviet Union did not have much of a tabloid culture, but this specific case yielded a seemingly endless media celebration of Angela Davis's young life and her personal and professional qualities. No biographical detail appeared to be too small or too insignificant, and those details added up to a highly flattering portrait of a young, beautiful, and intrepid activist, who also happened to be a brilliant philosophy professor. And, in some significant ways, the image of a heroic Davis, manufactured and mass produced by a ceaseless propaganda campaign, differed most remarkably from that of a more typical Soviet hero, who was expected to be male, stern, ascetic, sometimes outwardly asexual, and often uniformed – either in military fatigues or in dark-colored workwear.[26] Not so Angela Davis, whose personal courage, according to Soviet commentators, was equaled by her striking good looks. Accustomed to reading the official encomia to foreign Communist apparatchiks, who, with the notable exception of Cuba's Fidel Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara, rarely cut dashing figures, the Soviet readership was now treated to gushing accounts of an attractive Black American woman, whose very survival depended on the Soviet Union's goodwill.

The image of Angela Davis presented to the Soviet public combined a variety of features and attributes that made it both attractive and unusually human. By the early 1970s, for millions of Soviets, the reigning Marxist–Leninist ideology had long since become associated with a cast of aging party functionaries, but now there was a chance to rejuvenate the stale ideals, to make communism young again: "She is a

[22]Phillip Bonosky, "Inkvizitory i Andzhela", *Izvestia*, 21 January 1971.

[23]T. Kolesnichenko, "Za Tvoi Zavtrashnii Den', Andzhela!", *Pravda*, 26 January 1971; "Oni Boyatsya Andzhely", *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 19 January 1971.

[24]Aitmatov, "Svobodu Andzhele Davis!".

[25]Martine Monod, "Oni Boyatsya Tebya, Andzhela!", *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 20 December 1970.

[26]"V Sovetskii Komitet Solidarnosti s Amerikanskoi Patriotkoi Andzheloi Davis. Amerikanskomu Posol'stvu v SSSR, g. Moskva", 1970, Box 263, Folder 3, Tamiment Library: The Communist Party of the United States of America Records, New York University.

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Negro woman. She is remarkably beautiful. She has a PhD in Philosophy. And one more thing – she is a communist."[27] And she was young. Angela Davis's youth also turned out to be a natural propaganda asset – as if her youth and beauty served to redeem the increasingly gerontocratic Soviet elites and even, as recently noted by historian Yana Skorobogatov, to salvage the stagnating socialist experiment.[28] Most Soviet accounts of the trial emphasized the youth of the accused, who was routinely described as a "young communist".[29] In the opinion of a *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* author, the "young heroine" deserved nothing less than a million roses for her upcoming birthday, the largest bouquet ever presented to a person.[30] The call for "Roses for Angela" was picked up by the popular band Yalla from Uzbekistan, who produced an award-winning hit, "A Song for Angela", which contained the following refrain:

> Angela, you young and delicate girl,
> Born for Love and Happiness […]
> A black girl on trial for her red convictions!
> You challenged the America of the powerful.
> And on your birthday the whole planet responded to you
> With millions of red roses.[31]

Her twenty-seventh birthday, which the "courageous but delicate young woman" spent in jail,[32] occasioned an outpouring of effusive congratulatory statements, some of them in poetic form, shaming the United States and often juxtaposing Angela Davis's youth and outward fragility with her unbending will:

> What are you, America?
> Are you measured in dollars?
> Are you bought for dollars?
> Are you ruined for dollars?
> Are you black or white?
> Are you cowardly or brave?
> You're predatory, you're star-spangled.
> You're young and formidable!
> You're formidable – in handcuffs
> On your thin black wrists.[33]

[27]Phillip Bonosky, "Yeye Imya – Sovest'", *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 7 March 1971.

[28]Yana Skorobogatov, "Our Friend Angela: Soviet Schoolchildren, a Letter-Writing Campaign, and the Legend of Angela Davis", *The Drift*, 2 (21 October 2020). Available at: https://www.thedriftmag.com/our-friend-angela/; last accessed 8 January 2024.

[29]"Svobodu Andzhele Davis!", *Izvestia*, 19 December 1970; "Ostanovit' Raspravu! Trebuyut Milliony".

[30]V. Kabanov, "Million Roz dlya Andzhely!", *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 22 January 1971.

[31]A. Khodzhaev, "A Vy Pomnite Andzhelu Davis?", *Novosti Uzbekistana*, 26 January 2016. Available at: https://nuz.uz/kolumnisty/10427-a-vy-pomnite-andzhelu-devis.html; last accessed 8 January 2024.

[32]Boris Orekhov, "Rozy dlya Andzhely", *Pravda*, 1 March 1971.

[33]Iraida Ulyanova, "Sud", *Sovetskaya Moldavia*, 12 January 1971.

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This emerging genre of Angela Davis-inspired poetry was not limited to your run-of-the-mill amateurs; it also tempted some of the Soviet Union's better-known literati. The poet Yekaterina Sheveleva, author of popular song lyrics, extolled Angela Davis in a widely distributed poem:

> Angela Davis, America's daughter
> Your intelligence is your crime
> The powers that be cannot accept in their contemporary
> The multi-faceted brilliance of thought […]
>
> There is turmoil in the auditoriums
> A pushback against the poverty of spirit
> The students are following in your steps
> Angela Davis, the symbol of youth![34]

And not to be outdone, Robert Rozhdestvensky, one of the bards of the Khrushchevian thaw, published a short but impassioned birthday poem in which he assured "Angela" of her coming salvation, imagined by the author as a triumph of youth:

> The day of birth is the beginning of a life,
> Happy birthday to you, Angela! […]
> And in Russia the winters are fluffy,
> And the winds are swirling all over the world,
> And this morning, which is early like youth,
> Anticipating your salvation,
> We're reaching our hands to you,
> And there is a beating heart in each of the outstretched palms.[35]

Angela Davis as a Pop Cultural Phenomenon and "One of Us"

From the moment of Angela Davis's arrest in New York City, in the autumn of 1970, up to her acquittal and the subsequent celebratory tour of the Soviet Union almost two years later, the state-directed "Free Angela Davis" campaign evolved into a massive pop-cultural phenomenon that forged a peculiar intimate bond between the young American woman and millions of Soviet citizens. As far away as Siberia, Soviet women began to name their daughters after the imprisoned communist.[36] In March 1971, Soviet listeners tuned in to a new radio drama, "The Road to San Rafael", which, according to the radio listing for the week of the broadcast, was "about Angela Davis".[37] In January 1972, a dance number, "Angela's Calling", celebrating

[34]Aleksei Alekseev, "Marksistka-Antirasistka", *Kommersant*, 26 January 2019. Available at: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3861929; last accessed 8 January 2024.

[35]Robert Rozhdestvensky, "S Dnyem Rozhdenia, Andzhela!", 1971, 300/80/8, Box 10, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (hereafter RFE/RL) Research Institute, Open Society Archives (hereafter HU OSA).

[36]Hendrick Smith, "In Siberia, From Bratsk to Novosibirsk, US Rock Groups Are Big, Nixon Isn't", *New York Times*, 30 March 1972.

[37]"Programma Televidenia i Radio", *Pravda*, 16 March 1971.

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the "heroism and persistence of an American patriot A. Davis", reportedly created quite a stir among the jury and took the second prize at the all-Union ballet competition, earning its Moscow-based choreographer-creators the coveted title of "laureates".[38] When the Latvian Museum of Art mounted a major art exhibition, "The Peoples of the World in Struggle for Peace and Progress", featuring seventy-seven artists, the visitors entering the show were first treated to a "cast in bronze sculptural portrait of a woman whose name is known to the whole world".[39] Another Soviet artist, the master wood carver Mikhail Ilyaev, found Angela Davis inspirational. He expressed his fascination in terms both gushing and cringe-inducing in their unconscious objectification of his subject: "I was drawn to her exotic African American face with its massive hairdo and curls […] I accentuated the shape of her lips and made the eyes appear real, it took me a whole week to carve her hairdo […]". As one of the high points of his career, Ilyaev would get a chance to present his creation to the real Angela Davis during her post-acquittal visit to the USSR. Years later, the artist still remembered the joyous occasion, which positively impacted his life beyond a purely artistic satisfaction – in the aftermath of his meeting with Davis the Soviet state rewarded the inspired carver by gifting him and his family a three-room private apartment.[40]

Even though Soviet propaganda outlets expended considerable effort and resources on waging a variety of political campaigns, most such undertakings remained firmly rooted within the formal authoritative discourse and therefore rarely resonated with the Soviet public beyond the prescribed performative rituals, usually staged at the place of employment or learning.[41] But the plight of Angela Davis seems to have touched a chord with regular citizens, to such an extent that her story and image became "folklorized", appropriated by citizens for purposes that had little to do with the political aspirations and needs of the Soviet regime. The omnipresent image of a dashing and "exotic" American presented Soviet citizens with an aesthetic that was decidedly "foreign" and therefore alluring.

It is not clear to what extent Angela Davis herself was aware of some of the unintended consequences of her celebrity status behind the Iron Curtain. Years later, she would lament the commodification of her image, which she deemed an unfortunate distraction from the "constant struggle": "It is both humiliating and humbling to discover that a single generation after the events that construed me as a public personality, I am remembered as a hairdo."[42] Davis directed her critique at the usual target – the unholy alliance between the corrupting forces of American capitalism and the tradition of racializing prominent Black intellectuals, an exploitative system that reduces "historical politics to contemporary fashion" and

[38]M. Anokhina, "Laureaty Izvestny", *Pravda*, 21 January 1972; "Torzhestvo Tantsa", *Pravda*, 30 January 1972.

[39]"Vystavki, Gastroli", *Pravda*, 10 November 1972.

[40]Mikhail Ilyaev, *Uroki Iskusnogo Rezchika* (Moscow, 2011), p. 53.

[41]See Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*.

[42]Angela Davis, "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia", *Critical Inquiry*, 21:1 (1994), pp. 37–45; Susannah Walker, "Black Is Profitable: The Commodification of the Afro, 1960–1975", *Enterprise & Society*, 1:3 (2000), pp. 536–564.

transforms a political activist into an "influential fashion trendsetter".[43] But one could argue that this sort of image commodification was hardly limited to the West. If some Americans came to associate Angela Davis with fashion, then so did quite a few of their Soviet peers. In the early 1970s, the "Angela Davis" hairstyle became all the rage across the Soviet Union's eleven time zones. Hairdressers, especially in the cities, were doing a brisk business (quite often on the side) fashioning the famous Afro out of their female clients' straight hair. As one of her contemporaries recalled in a recent interview, "all you had to do is tell the hairdresser that you wanted to look like Angela Davis and they'd know exactly what needed to be done, you'd surely get your perm. I had one too!"[44] And thanks to a virtual flood of broadly disseminated photographs and other depictions of "our Angela", the iconic image transcended the famous hairstyle to also include tight-fitting turtlenecks, tailored blouses, bell-bottom trousers, wide-lapel leather jackets, tall leather boots, and mini-skirts – most of these material attributes of "cool" not readily available at Soviet department stores.[45]

Yet another measure of Angela Davis's ubiquity in the Soviet imagination of the early 1970s can be found in the proliferation of *anekdoty* (urban folklore or jokes) featuring the American communist. As befits the genre, some of the jokes could be scabrous, but even the very crassness of the urban folklore was a mark of a certain intimacy and familiarity with which Soviet popular imagination embraced this particular foreigner. In a restrictive and heavily administered society like the Soviet Union, jokes provided an outlet to express the views and criticisms excluded from the official discursive spaces, functioning sometimes as an effective social and cultural commentary.[46] To that end, the jokes often drew on the admired or notorious figures from the Soviet Union's (or pre-revolutionary Russia's) political and cultural history. A real or fictional character in a Soviet "anecdote" by definition became "one of us" – someone instantly and universally recognizable and therefore "ours". Even a salacious joke could be interpreted if not as a badge of honor then at least as a badge of popular acceptance.[47] The Ukrainian mathematician and dissident Leonid Plyushch, imprisoned by the Soviet authorities in 1972, recalled in a memoir his fellow prisoners including Angela Davis in their publicly expressed sexual fantasies – an act that the memoirist interprets as both a political protest and a communion-like performance.[48] By reducing a famous female communist to a sexual object via communal masturbatory *seansy*, these

[43]Davis, "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia", pp. 37–38.

[44]Elena M., personal interview in Ashkelon, Israel, 4 January 2023.

[45]See, for example, "Davis Andzhela", Russian State Archive of Photo and Film Documentation. Available at: http://photo.rgakfd.ru/person/416404; last accessed 25 March 2023; *1972. Leningrad. Andzhela Davis, Nash Krai*, 43 (1972). Available at: https://youtu.be/3vgsObGYz38; last accessed 8 January 2024.

[46]Julie Davis, "Humour and Protest: Jokes under Communism", *International Review of Social History*, SI52: 15 (2007), pp. 291–305.

[47]See, for example, "1001 Izbrannii Sovetskii Politicheskii Anekdot". Available at: http://www.lib.ru/ANEKDOTY/anec1001.txt; last accessed 25 April 2023; Dima Verner, "Anekdoty iz Rossii". Available at: https://www.anekdot.ru/an/an0811/s081125;100.html; last accessed 6 April 2023.

[48]Leonid Plyushch and Tatyana Plyushch, *History's Carnival: A Dissident's Autobiography* (London, 1979).

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inmates of Soviet prisons fused misogyny and political protest; in the most obscene fashion possible, they subverted and mocked the propaganda message of the state that incarcerated them. It seems to be significant that this memory comes from a person (Plyushch) who, a few years later, upon his expulsion from the Soviet Union, would testify before the US Congress on the abuses of punitive psychiatry in the Soviet Union, often directed against female political prisoners.[49]

And then there was a tongue-in-cheek song by Vladimir Vysotsky, probably the Soviet Union's most beloved (if not always officially recognized) actor, poet, and guitar-strumming singer-songwriter, the author of humorous songs and ballads that successfully merged the "low" and "high" cultures and whose appeal cut across the boundaries of age, ethnicity, and class. His songs were popular with army soldiers and factory workers, with World War II veterans and members of the Politburo, with the urban intelligentsia and collective farm hands. Vysotsky's lyrics captured the everyday of a Soviet citizen, characterized by its drabness, absurdity, maddening contradictions, and all-too-human yearnings for a better future. Soviet officialdom could not quite pin Vysotsky down as a dissident – he was not especially politically engaged and, despite some close calls, managed to avoid a direct confrontation with the regime. His songs circulated across the Soviet Union in many thousands of mostly home-made recordings on cassette tapes. To find a way into one of Vysotsky's songs was a sure sign of national recognition. In 1972, the balladeer composed a song in which he lightheartedly mocked the philistine addiction to TV programming. Some fifty years later, the song can be viewed as a primary source of sorts, listing some of the most popular programs and topics featured on Soviet television and thus presenting a snapshot of Soviet life at the time. Listening to the song, we encounter a cast of characters who, due to the power of television, had become household names in the USSR: there is a famous German footballer and a popular Soviet crooner, there is Richard Nixon and Georges Pompidou, and, of course, there is Angela Davis. In fact, it is Angela Davis who continues to haunt the poor television addict's imagination, even after he has been committed to a mental institution:

> And later on, at an exclusive dacha,
> With an intrusive customer service,
> Even delusional I kept on watching the programs,
> I kept on defending Angela Davis.[50]

The Grand Tour of the Soviet Union

On 4 June 1972, after thirteen hours of deliberation, an all-white jury in California acquitted Angela Davis of all charges. After the verdict had been read, the usually

[49]"Psychiatric Abuse of Political Prisoners in the Soviet Union: Testimony by Leonid Plyushch. Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, Ninety-Fourth Congress, Second Session, March 30, 1976" (Washington, DC, 1976).

[50]Vladimir Vysotsky, "Zhertva Televidenia", 1972. Available at: http://www.bards.ru/archives/part.php?id=15667; last accessed 8 January 2024.

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impassive-looking Davis broke down and sobbed. "It's the happiest day of my life", she said. Later, Angela Davis met the jurors in the press room and hugged each one of them.[51] By her own admission, however, Angela Davis had many other people to thank for the victorious completion of her trial. Dozens of organizations had sprung up to champion her cause, and, in the aftermath of the acquittal, Angela Davis embarked upon a cross-country "thank you tour", culminating in her appearance at Madison Square Garden in New York City.[52]

The "thank you tour" was to expand beyond the borders of the US and few had any doubts about Angela Davis's very first foreign stop. Moscow predictably hailed the verdict, even though the acquittal somewhat undermined its propaganda message, which assumed that no justice and/or fair trial could be granted to a Black communist in the United States.[53] But now that the trial had been successfully completed the Soviet Union could move on to a celebratory and self-congratulatory phase, which required Angela Davis's physical presence in the Soviet Union. In late August 1972, a plane carrying "brave Angela" touched down in Moscow. At the airport, she was welcomed by a select group of greeters carrying bouquets of flowers and led by her old pen pal, the cosmonaut Valentina Nikolayeva-Tereshkova (Figure 2).[54] Now, the celebrated visitor was eager to acknowledge this support and thank the Soviet Union and its people for the "Free Angela" campaign waged on her behalf. Without it, Angela Davis announced right on the tarmac, "I would not be free".[55]

The visit to the Soviet Union became the first stop on a grand celebratory tour that included several socialist countries – all sites of massive state-sponsored campaigns in defense of Angela Davis.[56] In covering the visit, Soviet propaganda outlets continued to strike the intimate and highly personalized chord perfected during the previous two years of campaigning. A *Pravda* report on Angela Davis's landing in Moscow played up the sunny weather in Moscow, which added to the festive atmosphere at the airport; the rays of sun fell on a sea of flowers and was refracted in a "multicolored rainbow".[57] Cosmonaut Nikolayeva-Tereshkova emphasized the intimacy of the bond between Angela Davis and the Soviet people by addressing her with the informal singular pronoun *ty*, reserved in the Russian language for close friends and family members (Figure 3). On that sunny, late August day Tereshkova was not greeting a foreign guest but rather an intimate: "These moments are emotional for us and I'm delighted to greet you on the Soviet soil […] Welcoming you to Moscow we say

[51]Earl Caldwell, "Angela Davis Acquitted on All Charges", *New York Times*, 5 June 1972.

[52]"Angela Davis Thank-You Tour", *New York Times*, 7 June 1972; "Black Militant Angela Davis Appearance at Madison Square Garden" (United Press International (UPI), 29 June 1972), Frank Mt. Pleasant Library of Special Collections and Archives, Chapman University. Available at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/upi_african_american/256/; last accessed 8 January 2024

[53]B. Strelnikov, "Andzhela Davis na Svobode", *Pravda*, 6 June 1972; Theodore Shabad, "Russians Hail Davis Acquittal as a 'Victory for the Progressive American'", *New York Times*, 6 June 1972.

[54]"Angela Davis Warmly Welcomed in Moscow", *New York Times*, 29 August 1972; Nikolayeva-Tereshkova, "Letter of Support".

[55]"Angela Davis Warmly Welcomed in Moscow"; Angela Davis, "Autobiography /Draft/", n.d., Box 132, Folder 5, Tamiment Library: The Communist Party of the United States of America Records.

[56]"Miss Davis Arrives Here after a Tour of 6 Red Countries", *New York Times*, 13 October 1972.

[57]V. Grigorovich, "Dobro Pozhalovat', Andzhela!", *Pravda*, 29 August 1972.

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Figure 2. Angela Davis and Kendra Alexander (right) with Valentina Tereshkova, Soviet Union, 1972.
Source: RIA Novosti archive, image #717718 / D. Chernov / CC-BY-SA 3.0.

'Hello, dear friend!'"[58] Some three hundred hand-picked greeters assembled along a white-painted line waiving bouquets of flowers, mostly gladioli.[59] A few days later, a young man on a Moscow trolley opened up an evening newspaper and joyfully announced to his female companion: "Angela is here!" The faces of other passengers lit up with smiles; there was only one Angela familiar to millions of Soviet citizens by her first name – THE Angela, because "in our country both the old and the young know her". And that "unique warmth", which the passengers on the trolley reportedly felt at the mention of Angela's name, was but an expression of a general joy that all Soviet people experienced over her righteous triumph (Figure 3).[60]

The visit was an indisputable triumph, scripted and executed in accordance with the highest standards of red-carpet hosting, reserved for the most important guests of the Soviet Union. In fact, the 1972 tour probably exceeded the most extravagant welcoming rituals usually lavished on heads of state and the Kremlin's closest political allies. The twenty-eight-year-old American was presented with honorary doctorates from Moscow State and Tashkent universities and received a rapturous

[58]V. Pershin, "Moskva Vstrechayet Andzhelu", *Izvestia*, 30 August 1972.
[59]"Cosmonaut Welcomes Miss Davis", *The Times*, 29 August 1972.
[60]"Andzhela Davis na Sovetskoi Zemle", *Novoe Vremya*, 8 September 1972.

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Figure 3. Angela Davis arrives in Moscow, 29 August 1972.
Source: RIA Novosti archive, image #36716 / Yuriy Ivanov / CC-BY-SA 3.0.

welcome from the students, faculty, and staff at Lumumba Friendship University. Angela Davis visited the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and held an appointment with a secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.[61] At the Moscow Palace of Pioneers Angela Davis addressed "thousands of children", who "covered the stage [from which she was speaking] with flowers and gifts".[62] She toured Leningrad and Lenin's birth city of Ulyanovsk. She was awarded a jubilee medal commemorating Lenin's one-hundredth anniversary.[63] She traveled all the way to Uzbekistan, a Central Asian Soviet republic that historically held a special appeal for African American travelers, who tended to view it as a laboratory of colorblind postcolonial modernity and, due to the centrality of cotton production in its economy, a place that bore some striking similarities to the American South.[64] In Uzbekistan, she was given symbolic keys to the ancient city of Samarkand, the site of Tamerlane's tomb.[65] In Tashkent, the Uzbek elders at the bazaar greeted her "in an Eastern fashion by pressing their palms to their hearts" and the bazaar

[61]"Andzhela Davis v Verkhovnom Sovete SSSR", *Izvestia*, 31 August 1972; "Druzheskaya Vstrecha", *Pravda*, 9 September 1972.

[62]I. Khuzemi, "Do Svidaniya, Andzhela!", *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 10 September 1972.

[63]"Andzhela Davis. Pochetnii Professor MGU", *Pravda*, 8 September 1972; N. Gladkov, "Andzhela Davis: Sovetskaya Nauka Sluzhit Narodu", *Pravda*, 3 September 1972; Khuzemi, "Do Svidaniya, Andzhela!".

[64]See Langston Hughes, *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia* (Moscow, 1934); David Chioni Moore, "Colored Dispatches from the Uzbek Border: Langston Hughes; Relevance, 1933–2002", *Callaloo*, 25:4 (2002), pp. 1114–1135.

[65]"Andzhela Davis. Pochetnii Grazhdanin Samarkanda", *Pravda*, 5 September 1972; "Miss Davis Hails Soviet's Policies", *New York Times*, 10 September 1972.

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women crowded Angela and her companions, pressing on them their fares – freshly picked grapes and juicy tomatoes.[66] The young Uzbek workers at a local textile factory pushed together sacks of cotton to build an observation platform to get a better glimpse of their "honored guest". So many factory girls climbed atop this pyramid that at some point it gave in to their weight and collapsed – the sacks came tumbling down and soon the factory floor looked like a "multicolored carpet spread out in front of Angela".[67]

As Angela and her entourage's time in the USSR was drawing to an end, the Soviet encomia were growing even more sentimental and wistful, her impending departure from the Soviet Union cast as a melancholy occasion, but also the beginning of a long and beautiful friendship. Apparently, Angela Davis herself fully shared those sentiments. Of course, she was exhausted by all the attention lavished on her, but, observed by a contemporary Soviet journalist, the "remarkably attractive American woman" handled the pressures of publicity with great poise, treating her enthusiastic Soviet fans with tact and consideration. As she explained to a group of university students, leaving the Soviet Union filled her with sadness.[68]

The "Free Angela Davis" Campaign and Soviet Dissidents

Considering the prominent place that the "Free Angela" campaign would come to occupy in the public lives of Soviet citizens, it is not surprising that its impact was felt beyond the discursive parameters proscribed by the Kremlin. As demonstrated above, Angela Davis's cause and her image were folklorized, satirized via the proverbial *styob* (mocking of common pieties), and sometimes used to subvert the "authoritative discourse" pushed by the official ideology.[69] One of the more striking aspects of this distortion of the original ideological objective of the campaign could be found in the responses generated by the dissident milieu, where the case of Angela Davis found some seemingly counterintuitive resonance. Both prominent Soviet dissidents and the more liberal-minded members of the Soviet elite recognized the political utility of rallying to the cause of a jailed Black communist or at least of evoking it in pursuit of their own emancipatory agenda. For such Soviet human rights defenders as the academician and Nobel laureate Andrei Sakharov, these rights were universal and the need for their protection overrode simplistic Cold War binaries. Sakharov saw oppression as a supra-ideological phenomenon, stemming from dogmatism and demagogy, which were neither communist nor capitalist but rather a product of an all-too-human predilection for fanaticism, extremism, and sectarianism. Confronting this evil, from his point of view, required a joint action by those who were willing to put aside all nationalist and ideological differences. Sakharov's support for Angela Davis, which he

[66]*Visit Andzhely Davis v SSSR*, Kinokhronika (Moscow, Tashkent, 1972). Available at: https://www.net-film.ru/film-58635/; last accessed 8 January 2024.

[67]Khuzemi, "Do Svidaniya, Andzhela!"

[68]"Andzhela Davis na Sovetskoi Zemle"; Khuzemi, "Do Svidaniya, Andzhela!"

[69]See Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*; Mark Lipovetsky, "The Indiscreet Charm of the Russian Cynic", *openDemocracy*, 24 October 2013. Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/indiscreet-charm-of-russian-cynic/; last accessed 8 January 2024.

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famously articulated in an open letter to the US and Soviet leaderships, reflected his deep-seated conviction that "racism, fascism, Stalinism, and Maoism" were but the more extreme manifestations of universal oppression. A struggle for social justice and intellectual freedom *everywhere* was a necessary precondition for global human flourishing and prosperity.[70] One can see how such a call for universal human rights values could hold limited appeal for the ideologically committed. In retrospect, some Soviet dissidents' assumption of a commonality of fate between their own struggle and the cause of racial and social justice that had consumed Angela Davis may seem naive. Yet, some of this idealism, while partially genuine, may also have been intentional and even strategic.

On 28 December 1970, Sakharov made public an open letter jointly addressed to President Nixon of the United States and to the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR Nikolai Podgorny. The remarkable document drew explicit parallels between two contemporaneous cases: one of a young Black American radical, accused of being an accessory to murder (but, in fact, also persecuted for her anti-racist activism), and the other one that of a group of young Soviet Jews, accused of an attempted plane hijacking (but, in fact, persecuted for their Zionist activism). At 4 am on 15 June 1970, the KGB apprehended a group of young Soviet (mostly) Jews who had apparently conspired to hijack a small plane from an airfield outside Leningrad in order to fly out of the Soviet Union and eventually make it to Israel. The plot was as daring as it was amateurish – the subsequent trial would make it clear that the KGB had been closely watching the conspirators prior to their arrest. The arrest culminated in a highly publicized trial of eleven plotters; it also unleashed a wave of "anti-Zionist" persecutions and arrests across the Soviet Union, targeting the burgeoning Jewish nationalist movement and its activists in Leningrad, Riga, Kishinev, Sukhumi, Odessa, and elsewhere.[71] In the court of international public opinion, the cases of Angela Davis and the Leningrad "hijackers" sometimes became intertwined, because they seemed to have dichotomized the ways in which the Cold War antagonists treated their respective political opponents. This tendency to conflate the issue of human rights in the Soviet Union and the mistreatment of African American citizens in the United States would become a distinct feature of some of the arguments deployed by Soviet dissidents and their Western champions on behalf of Soviet Jews.[72] The high-pitch fervor of the Soviet Union-directed campaign in defense of Angela Davis may have been at least partially motivated by the need to drown out the vociferous dissident and Western criticism of the USSR's human rights record. After all, 1970, the year of the fateful shootout in a California courtroom and the subsequent hunt for and apprehension of Angela Davis by US authorities, was also the year when the Soviet anti-Zionist campaign shifted into high gear through a series of mass detentions of Jewish dissidents and the trial of the eleven would-be hijackers in Leningrad.

[70]Andrei D. Sakharov, *Sakharov Speaks*, ed. Harrison Salisbury (New York, 1974).

[71]Richard Cohen, "Proud Men", in *idem* (ed.), *Let My People Go! Today's Documentary Story of Soviet Jewry's Struggle to be Free* (New York, 1971), pp. 75–117; "Moscow on Trial: What to Do with Imprisoned Jews?", *Jews in Eastern Europe: A Periodical Survey of Events*, 4:6 (1971), pp. 3–83.

[72]See, for example, "Soviet Jewry Committee Calls for Release of Angela Davis, Ruth Alexandrovich", *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, 38:92 (12 May 1971), p. 3.

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The verdict in the Leningrad "hijacking" trial was announced on Christmas Day, 25 December 1970. Even by strict Soviet standards the punishments meted out by the court were exceptionally severe: two of the alleged ringleaders (Mark Dymshitz and Eduard Kuznetsov) received death sentences, while the remaining co-conspirators were given lengthy prison terms.[73] A few days later, in an apparently choreographed goodwill gesture, the court commuted the two death sentences to hard labor.[74] It is not clear to what extent the Soviet authorities were influenced in this decision by the international human rights campaign, but Sakharov, who attended the appeal hearings, had cabled his open letter to Nixon and Podgorny just three days earlier. On the day of the appeal (30 December 1970), a group of prominent Soviet intellectuals wrote to President Nixon, pleading for clemency for Angela Davis, while another collective letter by fourteen Soviet scientists (some of them rumored to be liberally inclined) had been cabled on the day of the verdict. The letter praised the jailed radical and pleaded with the US president to "safeguard her life".[75] On the surface, the latter two documents bore all the hallmarks of the officially sanctioned support letters that Angela Davis was receiving in their thousands. Yet, the timing of these letters appears peculiar, and their true intention is open to interpretation. Were the members of the Soviet elite simply doing the state's bidding in showcasing the Kremlin's anti-racist bone fides? Or were they also expressing an implicit plea to their own government, engaged in the severe repression of dissidents, Jewish nationalists, and nonconformists at home?

Sakharov's letter does not leave one guessing in this regard. The letter starts out with a plea to Nixon to "protect the life of an American scholar" and then goes on to express the author's hopes "in the objectivity […] and humaneness of the American court". He swiftly transitions, though, to what appears to be the real objective of the letter – an impassioned entreaty to Podgorny to prevent the executions of the convicted hijackers and to reduce the sentences of the others who had been convicted. He then explicitly links the American and Soviet cases as two examples of state-promulgated "judicial violence" that stands in the way of genuine democracy and the rule of law. In his critique of the Soviet state's refusal to grant its citizens freedom of movement, Sakharov effectively removes ideology from the equation and thus disturbs the predictable Cold War binaries. In his rendering, the Black American radical, facing a possible death sentence, and the condemned Jewish would-be hijackers emerge as the victims of very similar systems of violent state oppression – to defend "the interests of international peace, tolerance, democracy […]" one should speak up on behalf of all victims of state violence.[76]

[73]"Moscow on Trial: What to Do with Imprisoned Jews?", pp. 74–75.

[74]Bernard Gwertzman, "Soviet Court Acts on Appeal Today", *New York Times*, 30 December 1970.

[75]"Soviet Scientists Back Miss Davis", *New York Times*, 26 December 1970; Prial, "More Russians Send Plea to Nixon on Angela Davis"; "Ot Imeni Sovetskikh Uchenykh", *Pravda*, 26 December 1970.

[76]Andrei Sakharov, "An Open Letter to President Nixon on Behalf of Angela Davis", 28 December 1970, Box 10, RFE/RL Research Institute, HU OSA; A.D. Sakharov, "Open Appeal to President Richard Nixon and to Chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet N.V. Podgorny (28 December 1970)", *Exodus: A Supplement to The Journal of Soviet Jewish Affairs (Documents Section)*, 4 (June 1971), pp. 42–43; "Let Soviet Citizens Emigrate", in Harrison Salisbury (ed.), *Sakharov Speaks* (New York, 1974), pp. 160–163.

Sakharov's famous appeal started a trend whereby Soviet citizens on a collision course with their system (and their supporters abroad) began to resort to comparisons with the Angela Davis saga as a way of universalizing their own struggle and "shaming" the regime. On the eve of Davis's scheduled trial in California, three well-known Soviet dissidents published yet another open letter addressed to the International League for Human Rights, in which they called on US authorities to adhere to the highest standards of legality and due process. The real purpose of the letter was transparent and probably had little to do with its authors' concern for the well-being of the American on trial. The writers pre-emptively listed the potential dangers ostensibly facing Angela Davis, but a close reading of this list of possible human rights violations makes it clear that the authors sought to publicize such violations as they were occurring in the USSR: 1) declaring the accused mentally unstable and subjecting him/her to forced psychiatric treatment; 2) denying the accused the right to choose a defense lawyer; 3) limiting the right of the accused to call in his/her own witnesses and present exculpatory evidence; 4) preventing the friends and family members of the accused from attending the trial; and 5) preventing the press from attending the trial.[77] In what was turning into a double-speak epistolary genre, the dissidents once again evoked the case of Angela Davis, so passionately championed by the Soviet regime, to bring attention to their own struggle.

A few foreign sympathizers were similarly inclined to draw parallels between the two struggles. So, rallying on behalf of Ruth Alexandrovich, a young Jewish woman, arrested by Soviet authorities in Riga approximately at the time of Angela Davis's apprehension in New York City,[78] the Universities Committee for Soviet Jewry in London distributed posters demanding "USA Free Angela Davis – USSR Free Ruth Alexandrovich". A committee spokesman emphasized the similarities between these two young women, who "were involved in dramas arising out of the tragic and confused times we live in", but almost immediately hastened to delineate the fundamental difference between the two cases:

> While Miss Davis has been allowed to speak and write from jail, Ruth Alexandrovich has been held incommunicado since her arrest, has no defense counsel and only her KGB jailers have access to the documents on her case. While Miss Davis's trial will be held in full view of American and world opinion, Miss Alexandrovich may never be able to speak in her defense unless world public opinion raises its voice against this inhumanity as it has spoken up in the case of Angela Davis.[79]

These persistent attempts to draw parallels between the plight of American Blacks, as represented by the case of Angela Davis, and the predicament of Soviet Jews, as demonstrated by the Leningrad "hijacking" trial and the trial of Ruth Alexandrovich

[77]I.R. Shafarevich, A.S. Vol'pin, and A.N. Tverdokhlebov, "Obrashenie v Mezhdunarodnuyu Ligu Prav Cheloveka", 16 January 1972, 300/80/8 Box 10, RFE/RL Research Institute, HU OSA.

[78]"Moscow on Trial: What to Do with Imprisoned Jews?", pp. 97–101.

[79]"Soviet Jewry Committee Calls for Release of Angela Davis, Ruth Alexandrovich".

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in Riga, had at least some desired effect. In the spring of 1971, a prominent African American legal scholar and member of Angela Davis's defense team, Professor Henry McGee, Jr. of UCLA, traveled to the Soviet Union on a futile mission to try and observe the Riga trial and maybe even get to represent Ruth Alexandrovich.[80] McGee's "mission impossible" soundly failed and he was promptly deported from the USSR. Yet, the very fact of his attempted involvement meaningfully demonstrated that the legacy of Black–Jewish solidarity, one of the hallmarks of the Civil Rights era, could, on occasion, be effectively marshaled in defense of Soviet Jews, despite the Soviet Union's professed anti-racism.[81] Clearly, at least some of the Soviet dissidents and their advocates were aware of this important historical connection. Ironically, Angela Davis herself later revealed through her own activism certain political limitations of such an alliance.[82]

As the Kremlin continued to expand the scope of its "Free Angela Davis" campaign, the case began to turn into something of a double-edged sword for the regime. On the one hand, it allowed Moscow to position itself once again at the vanguard of the international movement against racism and imperialism. Simultaneously, the persecution of Angela Davis by US authorities put on display not only the systemic and persistent racism of American society, but also its accepted legal practices and norms, which fleshed out the contrast between the two legal systems. From the point of her arrest in the autumn of 1970, the Soviet public was treated to ideologically biased but nevertheless often quite detailed coverage of the case and the trial. The readers of Soviet newspapers were well aware that, even in detention, Angela Davis gave regular interviews to the media, and wrote and published op-eds and open letters; they knew that while in prison she was visited by relatives and friends and had a team of prominent lawyers working on her behalf; they knew that an eccentric California millionaire-farmer posted a large bail on her behalf, and that millions of people around the globe rallied to her cause. Eventually, in June 1972, the readers of Soviet newspapers would learn that their hero had been acquitted on all charges by a panel of American jurors.[83] The contrast between the treatment of Angela Davis by the American legal system and the treatment of nonconformists by Soviet authorities may have been lost on the majority of Soviet citizens, but it was certainly not lost on those bearing the brunt of political repression in the Soviet Union. Hence, the regular evocations of the case by the victims and their politically engaged supporters – both at home and abroad. Hence, the occasional attempts by activists to emulate the behavior and legal tactics of Angela Davis's backers in the

[80]"US Law Professor Says He Was Denied Right to Attend Trial of Riga Four", *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, 38:107 (4 June 1971), p. 3; "Professor Was Denied Right to Attend Trial of Riga Four", *The Detroit Jewish News*, 11 June 1971; Barbara Campbell, "12 Negro Professors to Help Defend Angela Davis", *New York Times*, 26 January 1971.

[81]See *Martin Luther King, Jr. Addressing Twelve American Jewish Communities by Telephone Hookup from Atlanta, Georgia, December 1, 1966*, Records of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, 1966, Box 369, Folder M10 (I–181 and I–181A), American Jewish Historical Society.

[82]Angela Davis's more recent argument connecting the struggle for African American equality with the fight for Palestinian liberation is laid out in Angela Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, ed. Frank Barat (Chicago, IL, 2016).

[83]B. Strelnikov, "Sudilishe v San Jose", *Pravda*, 4 April 1972; Strelnikov, "Andzhela Davis na Svobode"; Shabad, "Russians Hail Davis Acquittal as a 'Victory for the Progressive American'".

United States.[84] And hence, the appeals directed at Angela Davis by some domestic opponents of the Kremlin, some of whom appear to have been rather obscure individuals.

"Dear Madame Angela Davis! You're in prison, but you interact with the whole wide world. You have access to telephone, telegraph, mail, and radio. You can use paper for writing. You can order any book and it'll be delivered to you. You get to choose the judge that you find most suitable. You can see your family and friends", Victoria Smirnova from Leningrad wrote to Angela Davis in January 1972.[85] The letter adheres closely to a line of argument that we find in other evocations of Angela Davis's case by Soviet dissidents. The author contrasts bitterly the rights and privileges accorded to Davis by the American judicial system with her own alleged travails at the hands of Soviet authorities. Smirnova claims to be a victim of Soviet punitive psychiatry, which routinely targeted nonconformists and the regime's political opponents.[86] She describes in graphic and harrowing detail the horrors of confinement in a Soviet mental institution, where the doctors and nurses torment their patients, sometimes at the behest of the authorities. As with other similar documents, the letter presents a curious mixture of over-the-top emotionality and practicality: Smirnova does not pull any punches in describing the injustices and torments she is forced to endure as payback for her stated desire to leave the Soviet Union, a country where there is no "freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly". She encourages Angela Davis to acknowledge the privilege of living under the "cursed" capitalism, in a society where even radical iconoclasts such as Davis herself are accorded legal and human rights. But the point seems to be not so much "putting Angela Davis in her place" as convincing her to wield her celebrity and Western privilege on behalf of Soviet victims of oppression, more specifically on behalf of Smirnova: "Madame Angela Davis! I demand Freedom, not a revocation of my citizenship – no, not that, but Freedom. A visa to the West and Freedom! Help me."[87]

A German-Soviet woman, Margarite Tissen, also wrote to Angela Davis. Tissen begged Davis to interfere on behalf of her imprisoned, ill, sixty-year-old husband, whose crime, she claimed, consisted of penning an unsent letter to the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, and of publicly complaining about the absence of German-language schools in the USSR. According to Tissen, her husband had simply expressed his thoughts, reflecting on the world around him as he observed it, and for that he was condemned by a Soviet court. "Tell me, dear Angela, is it fair to judge and condemn one for his thoughts? Because that's exactly what he was accused of."[88] It was Angela Davis's high status

[84]"Soviet Civil-Rights Leaders Demand Bail for Dissident", *New York Times*, 9 July 1972; Hendrick Smith, "Sakharovs Offer Bail for Jailed Activists", *New York Times*, 12 February 1973.

[85]Viktoria Smirnova, "An Open Letter to Angela Davis", 5 January 1972, 300/80/8 Box 10, RFE/RL Research Institute, HU OSA.

[86]See Juliane Fürst, "Liberating Madness: Punishing Insanity. Soviet Hippies and the Politics of Craziness", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 53:4 (2018), pp. 832–860.

[87]Smirnova, "An Open Letter to Angela Davis".

[88]"Pis'mo Andzhele Davis ot Margarity Tissen", undated, mid-1974, 300/80/8 Box 10, RFE/RL Research Institute, HU OSA.

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in the Soviet Union that had inspired Tissen to reach out to the American celebrity. And Tissen was quite straightforward about her motivation: "I ask you to use your standing with the Soviet government to intercede on my husband's behalf. I beg you to hurry up! We don't have much time left!"[89] There is no evidence that Angela Davis either read or responded to this or other such pleas, but it is clear that, in the course of the Soviet-led campaign in defense of Angela Davis, some of those persecuted behind the so-called Iron Curtain had come to see her as a figure of authority and possible influence. Surely, Angela Davis, who had so publicly stood up for the rights of "political prisoners" and against the power of the state, would be amenable to these petitions. There is no evidence that she was.[90]

Clashing Dreams of Freedom

Further proof of a growing tension between Angela Davis's quest for social and racial justice in the West and the campaign for human rights in the East was supplied in July–August 1972, when Davis's impending tour of the Soviet Union and other socialist nations was already in its planning stage. A group of Czechoslovak exiles and dissidents, led by a leftist intellectual and former director of Czechoslovak State Television, Jiri Pelikan, appealed to Angela Davis via a document submitted to Amnesty International in London. The group sought to intervene on behalf of their comrades back home, who had been targeted by state persecution in the aftermath of the Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring in August 1968. The appeal was articulated as a call for solidarity between victims of state oppression, with the signatories claiming that Angela Davis's "victory against a seemingly all-powerful, arrogant bureaucratic machinery […] is to us a source of inspiration in our own struggle". In a by now familiar fashion, the Czechs contrasted the global publicity around Angela Davis's trial with the virtual silence surrounding the fate of Czech dissidents in places such as Prague and Brno, who were not likely to be accorded "the elementary rights of defendants in court proceedings".[91] The appeal generated considerable publicity and was eventually expanded into a lengthy open letter, which Pelikan published in the *New York Review of Books* in late August, just as Angela Davis arrived in the Soviet Union on her post-acquittal "thank you tour".

A striking opening paragraph of Pelikan's letter to Davis alerts its addressee to the incongruity between the official rhetoric wielded by the socialist nations in defense of her freedom and the reality of oppression suffered by their own citizens:

> Dear Angela Davis,
>
> You will perhaps be surprised that a Czechoslovak political exile should feel the need to write to you. You must have had many messages from Czechoslovakia, but you missed those from the people who would have liked

[89]"Pis'mo Andzhele Davis ot Margarity Tissen".

[90]See Davis, "Autobiography /Draft/". According to Davis, one of the main purposes of her tour of the socialist nations in 1972 was to turn their attention to the plight of "other political prisoners".

[91]"Czech Dissidents Ask Angela Davis for Aid in Trial", *International Herald Tribune*, 18 July 1972; Adam Roberts and Richard N. Gardner, "Notes of the Month", *The World Today*, 28:9 (1972), pp. 371–376.

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> to express their solidarity but could not do so because their voices are stifled, because they are in prison, condemned or awaiting trial.[92]

Just like his Soviet peers did in their own communications to Angela Davis, Pelikan reminds the American freedom fighter that injustice and human rights violations are hardly an exclusive feature of Western capitalist societies. He draws on his own experience as a veteran of anti-Nazi resistance during World War II and a long-time member of the Communist Party to exhort Davis to pay attention to the violations of legality and human rights committed in the socialist countries. In making this case, he appeals to her progressive sensibilities:

> That is precisely why you, Angela, and the millions of people who supported you and believe in a more just socialist society with more freedom, can no longer be silent about the violation of human rights in the countries that call themselves "socialist" and by their behavior discredit socialism more than any reactionary propaganda.[93]

Prominent Czech intellectuals and former members of the Czechoslovak party elite were more difficult to ignore than some obscure Soviet malcontents. On the eve of Angela Davis's visit to the land of socialism, the Soviets were concerned enough about its optics (and likely about possible unscripted behavior by their guest) to dignify the Czech appeal with a rather undignified response. In a dismissive article, *Pravda* blithely described the former director of Czechoslovak TV as just another "emigrant" engaging in an act of political sabotage at the behest of imperialist intelligence agencies.[94] But the Soviet response was indicative of the fact that Moscow was treating the whole affair with concern. Despite their oft-professed admiration for Angela Davis, Kremlin ideologues did not yet know what to expect from their freedom-loving American friend.

But they did not need to worry. Within days of the publication of the initial Czech appeal, a response came from within Davis's inner circle via her close associate, a prominent Black American communist Charlene Mitchell. Claiming to speak on behalf of Davis, Mitchell dismissed the arguments put forth by the Czech exiles. Miss Davis, she said, did not believe that it was reasonable for people to leave the socialist countries for the capitalist ones – a "retrograde step" that revealed their opposition to the "socialist system". Mitchell advised the troublesome Czechs to stop undermining their government and attacking their own country.[95]

If the Soviet leadership entertained concerns about the visit, the conduct of Angela Davis and her entourage while touring the Soviet Union and other socialist nations most certainly put those to rest. In word and in deed Angela Davis acted as a true friend of the "socialist community of nations". In numerous speeches and

[92]Jiri Pelikan, "A Letter", *The New York Review of Books*, 31 August 1972; Jiri Pelikan, "An Open Letter to Angela Davis", *New Politics*, Fall 1972, pp. 72–76.

[93]Pelikan, "A Letter".

[94]Roberts and Gardner, "Notes of the Month"; "*Pravda* Synopsis: Pelikan, Angela Davis", 14 August 1972, 300/80/8 Box 10, RFE/RL Research Institute, HU OSA.

[95]"Czech Exiles' Plea Rejected by Miss Davis", *The Times*, 29 July 1972.

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interviews, she rarely failed to express her gratitude to the socialist countries, who had stood by her throughout her legal ordeal.[96] And she was tireless in her expressions of admiration for the achievements of "mature socialism", including those in the realm of race relations.[97] Speaking on behalf of persecuted Czech dissidents or jailed Soviet Zionists was clearly out of the question.

It seems the 1972 tour also put to rest any lingering expectations of a possible "allyship" with Davis on the part of Soviet, Czech, and East German dissidents.[98] Not only did Davis leave unanswered the pleas directed at her to expand her campaign in defense of political prisoners beyond the Iron Curtain, but her support for the socialist regimes on the other side of the ideological divide was often articulated in terms that left no space for ambiguity. She praised the Soviet science and education systems, she commended the Soviets on eradicating racism, and she spoke admiringly of the joys of Soviet childhood; while feted in Prague, she never came close to bringing up the case of Czech dissidents on trial for anti-government activities; standing by the Brandenburg Gate in divided Berlin, she spoke approvingly of the Berlin Wall:

> When we return to the United States, we will do everything to explain the true significance of this border to our people […] In this way, we hope to make our contribution to the ideological struggle against the forces of imperialism.[99]

Those citizens of the socialist countries who had come to pin some of their hopes for a freer future on this globally famous and charismatic American radical were bound to be disappointed. In the aftermath of her acquittal and the triumphant tour of the socialist nations, Angela Davis would continue to solidify her credentials as a true friend of the Soviet Union and its reliable communist ally in the United States. In fact, her seemingly unbridled enthusiasm for the land of socialism puzzled some of its more dazed and skeptical denizens. In Prague, some students were reportedly taken aback by her praise for the oppressive post-Prague Spring regime of Gustáv Husák and by her evocation of "proletarian internationalism" in a place that, just four years earlier, had been overrun by Soviet tanks.[100] "Is she a fool or is she dishonest? It seems to me she is doing a disservice to her own countrymen by her statements here", grumbled one Soviet dissident exasperated by Davis's eagerness, likely articulating an opinion quite common within his circle.[101] A few years later, a Moscow physicist, expelled from the party for voicing his frustration over the restrictions on foreign travel for Soviet scientists, bitterly complained: "It was easier

[96]Davis, "Autobiography /Draft/".

[97]"Angela Cites Red Backing of Blacks", *Chicago Daily Defender*, 30 August 1972; Khuzemi, "Do Svidaniya, Andzhela!"; Gladkov, "Andzhela Davis. Sovetskaya Nauka Sluzhit Narodu".

[98]Years later, prominent Soviet dissidents continued to lament Davis's rejection of their cause as well as the cause of the persecuted Czechs. See, for example, Plyushch and Plyushch, *History's Carnival: A Dissident's Autobiography*, p. 378.

[99]Dorothy Miller, "Angela Davis in the GDR", Radio Free Europe Research: Communist Area, 18 September 1972, 300/80/8 Box 10, RFE/RL Research Institute, HU OSA.

[100]"Angela Davis: A Puzzle for E. Europe", *Washington Post*, 11 October 1972.

[101]"Miss Davis Hails Soviet's Policies"; Miller, "Angela Davis in the GDR".

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to fight for the freedom for Angela Davis than for our own freedom."[102] These frustrations found their most definitive expression in a speech by none other than Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize-winning author of *The Gulag Archipelago* and, in 1975, a recent arrival to the United States, expelled from the USSR by Soviet authorities a year earlier. On 9 July 1975, Solzhenitsyn delivered a lengthy address at an AFL–CIO-sponsored gathering in his honor in New York City. In his speech, Solzhenitsyn issued thunderous denunciations of Communism and dire warnings of imminent doom to the complacent West. In Solzhenitsyn's rendering, Communism represented not so much a political as a moral failure, manifested as a peculiar inability to feel the pain of others – be it the pain of the Czechs crushed by Soviet tanks, or the pain of the Germans shot by East German border guards while attempting to scale the Berlin Wall or swim to freedom across the Spree river, or the pain experienced by Soviet political prisoners subjected to the torments of punitive psychiatry. According to this unforgiving vision shared with the New York audience by the Soviet Union's most famous dissident, Communism was an affliction of the unfeeling and in the United States it had a face – the face … of Angela Davis:

> There is a certain woman here named Angela Davis. I don't know if you're familiar with her in this country, but in our country, literally for one whole year, we heard of nothing at all except about Angela Davis. There was only Angela Davis in the whole world and she was suffering. We had our ears stuffed with Angela Davis. Little children in school were told to sign petitions in defense of Angela Davis. Little boys and girls, 8 and 9 years old in schools, were asked to do this. Well, they set her free. Although she didn't have rough time in this country she came recuperate at Soviet resorts. Some Soviet dissidents –but more important, a group of Czech dissidents – addressed an appeal to her: "Comrade Davis, you were in prison. You know how unpleasant it is to sit in prison, especially when you consider yourself innocent. You now have such authority. Could you help our Czech prisoners? Could you stand up for those persons in Czechoslovakia who are being persecuted by the state?" Angela Davis answered: "They deserve what they get. Let them remain in prison." That is the face of Communism! That's the heart of Communism for you![103]

Solzhenitsyn took some liberties in presenting the exact details and circumstances of the "Pelikan affair". But there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his contempt, which, as the years passed, would gain more and more currency among the opponents of the Soviet regime. Until the very last years of the Soviet Union's existence, Angela Davis would remain indifferent to their struggle, just as many of them stopped taking seriously her quest for racial justice. The antipathy was clearly mutual. In 1979, Angela Davis became the recipient of the Lenin Peace Prize and was invited back to the Soviet Union.[104] On her second trip to Moscow, Davis, now a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USA and the

[102]"Soviet Physicist Who Complained of Travel Curb Is Ousted by Party", *New York Times*, 28 May 1978.
[103]"Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: New York, July 9", *AFL–CIO Free Trade Union News*, 30:7–8 (1975), pp. 21–22.
[104]"Bortsu za Mir", *Pravda*, 21 July 1979.

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party's vice-presidential nominee, once again inserted herself into the debate about human rights in the USSR. The anti-Soviet campaign waged by the Carter administration, she explained in an interview to a popular Soviet literary magazine, was based entirely on false premises. The Soviet Union was not guilty of violating human rights. On the contrary, it was the government of the United States, which expressed the interests of the ruling classes, that routinely violated human rights – inside the country and all over the world.[105] The two dreams of freedom once again appeared to be incompatible.

Conclusion

In the controversial thriller *Brat-2* (Brother-2) by the late Russian auteur Alexey Balabanov, a small-time gangster travels to the United States on a mission to mete out rough justice to a corrupt American businessman. The thug is visibly nervous, and just before boarding a plane for Chicago he thrusts his fist up in a Black Power salute and exclaims defiantly "Freedom to Angela Davis!". The film came out in 2000 and has since attained a cult-like status among Russian-speaking movie audiences. It has also emerged over the years as a nationalist manifesto of sorts, popular with Russia's extreme right.[106] The film remains unapologetic in its violence and sexism; it also contains scenes that one would struggle to describe as anything but crudely racist. In this context, the film's evocation of a faded anti-racist Soviet slogan may seem odd. However, it appears less so when set against the background of the film's almost cartoonish anti-Americanism. The film's main male characters – rough, uncouth, violent, misogynistic but somehow genuinely Russian and "real" – are juxtaposed with the world of American superficiality and capitalism. That raised fist represents a protest against an onslaught of American materialism and its accompanying breakdown of meaningful human relationships. The demand to free Angela Davis is a demand to be freed from American dominance and from the sense of insecurity in the face of overwhelming historical and economic forces. Decades later, cultural memories linger in post-Soviet Russia and the image of Angela Davis continues to be revived and appropriated for new cultural and political projects.

The durability of Angela Davis's presence in the post-Soviet imagination has something to do with a sense of nostalgia that has accompanied the traumatic transition from Soviet communism to post-Soviet capitalism. But is also a tribute to the scope and persistence of a massive propaganda campaign waged across the eleven time zones of the Soviet Union in the early 1970s. The "Free Angela Davis" campaign became its own distinct chapter in the history of the Cold War. Launched as an anti-racist and anti-imperialist juggernaut, it quickly turned into a political and cultural phenomenon. It also partially assumed a life of its own. The massive public campaign to save the life of a jailed Black American radical suited perfectly

[105]Angela Davis, "Pravitel'stvo SShA Yavlyaetsya Narushitelem Prav Cheloveka", *Yunost'*, 17 January 1979.

[106]Mark Lipovetsky, "Dvadtsat' Let Sputstia Fil'm Balabanova Sluzhit Opravdaniem Voiny v Ukraine", *Russia.Post*, 11 July 2022.

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the propaganda needs of the Soviet regime, whose intentions were distinctly political. Yet, the scale of the movement and the fact that it brought America in all its maddening and unfamiliar complexity into the homes of Soviet citizens would eventually produce some entirely unexpected and, as it turns out, long-lasting consequences.

Angela Davis was presented to Soviet citizens as a heroic figure, as a martyr of impeccable ideological credentials. From the perspective of the regime the utility of her case was purely political. But very quickly this exotic foreigner, who bore little resemblance to the stolid Communist heroes of the socialist realist canon, emerged as a figure of cultural fascination, eventually turning into a pop-cultural symbol – as famous for her signature hairdo and fashion choices as for her politics. She was also distinctly foreign and, more importantly, she was distinctly American. Her personal story was decidedly "un-Soviet". Even though the Soviet regime had set out to "defend" Angela Davis from the depredations of American racists, her personal biography, widely publicized in the Soviet press, pointed to a world that was strangely alluring and largely inaccessible to the average Soviet citizen. It was a world of foreign travel and adventure, a world where one could study in Paris or Frankfurt, a world where one could become a philosophy professor in one's twenties, a world where one could legally purchase a gun and possibly organize a courtroom escape, or join a political party considered subversive by the government. For the millions of Soviet citizens signing petitions and marching in defense of Angela Davis, her case also presented an opening onto the world beyond Soviet borders.

It is also worth noting that in Angela Davis Soviet citizens were introduced not just to a communist and anti-racist symbol, but also to a feminist icon. The complexity and often contradictory nature of this encounter between a champion of global women's rights and a society that, despite the Kremlin's best propaganda efforts, remained steeped in traditional and patriarchal values was not lost on many Soviets, especially on Soviet women. Such prominent Soviet women celebrities as Valentina Tereshkova and Lily Golden were drafted into the "Free Angela Davis" campaign to speak up on behalf of the jailed communist, but they certainly performed an additional ideological function – to showcase the Soviet Union's commitment to women's equality and emancipation. Yet, for many other Soviet women, Angela Davis had come to symbolize the lifestyles and personal and political choices that they aspired to but that were unavailable due to the prevalent ideological and cultural restrictions.[107] From Angela Davis's fashion choices to her globe-trotting to her academic excellence to her involvement in politics to her apparent rejection of conventional gender roles – hers was a life trajectory that could puzzle, fascinate, and inspire.

Angela Davis's direct confrontation with her own government proved to be a source of both fascination and inspiration for Soviet and East European dissidents. Her case would become a reference point for those opponents of the regime who hoped for a

[107]There existed a tradition of Soviet women participating in the "soft power" outreach by the Soviet state, directed at foreign audiences. Such efforts were usually rigidly structured and closely supervised. See, for example, Gradskova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation*; Christine Varga-Harris, "Soviet Women and Internationalism in Socialist Travel Itineraries in the 1950s and 1960s", *Diplomatic History*, 46:3 (2022), pp. 486–504.

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universal application of the concept of human rights.[108] There is no question that some of the interest was purely pragmatic because her case, championed by the Soviet government, exhibited some not-so-far-fetched parallels with the plight of Soviet nonconformists persecuted by their own regime. Ironically, considering Angela Davis's later anti-Israeli activism, her case became an inspiration for some Soviet Zionists, who conceived of themselves as a national minority, deprived of access to their own land, language, and culture. However, attempts to find common ground between the two causes were doomed to failure. Angela Davis did not share the Zionist sensibilities of such Civil Rights leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr. or John Lewis. In fact, her political outlook dovetailed with many of the foreign policy positions taken by the Kremlin at the time.

It was probably inevitable that Angela Davis and the opponents of the Soviet regime would articulate dramatically different ideas of freedom, rooted in their respective personal and historical experiences. During the Cold War, that political divide proved to be impossible to bridge. But more than thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union those dreams of freedom still have not overlapped, and those differences of aspiration have yet to be resolved.[109]

[108]There is a bitter historical irony in the divergence of the two struggles. To the extent that Soviet and American "renegades" remained aware of each other (I would argue that Soviet dissidents tended to be more attuned to the vagaries of the fight for racial and social justice in the United States, simply because the United States loomed so inordinately large in their dreams of freedom), their respective quests proceeded on parallel tracks or even at cross-purposes. See Meredith L. Roman, "Soviet 'Renegades', Black Panthers, and Angela Davis: The Politics of Dissent in the Soviet Press, 1968–73," *Cold War History* 18: 4 (2018), pp. 503–519.

[109]This line of conservative critique of Angela Davis, including by former Soviets, persists to this day. See, for example, Jonathan Tobin, "Opposing Honors for Angela Davis Isn't Racist", *National Review*, 11 January 2019. Available at: https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/01/opposing-honors-for-angela-davis-isnt-racist/; last accessed 8 January 2024; Cathy Young, "Angela Davis Is Not a Human Rights Hero", *Forward*, 9 January 2019. Available at: https://forward.com/opinion/417302/angela-davis-human-rights-activist/; last accessed 8 January 2024.

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