

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Volume 3, Number 6

From Mississippi to Uzbekistan

Dr. Lilly Golden-Khanga, a co-founder of the Institute of Africa in Moscow, spoke at the Harriman Institute October 26, 1989. Khanga is a black woman originally from Uzbekistan in Soviet Central Asia, where she was born of American parents. She discussed nationality and race issues with students, faculty and guests of the Institute.

Khanga blamed today's turbulent nationalities problems on the perverse Stalinist policies of the past, rather than on new freedoms. She fears that the institutionalization of these Stalinist policies and the passage of time have rendered many of the problems unsolvable. In the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, "which every Armenian wants returned," she said: "Azerbaijan would revolt. [They] won't listen. They'll never give it back." Demoralized by the Soviet government's lack of attention to their wishes, many Armenians are applying to emigrate.

The old policy of encouraging Russian immigration to the Baltic republics has created another potentially explosive situation. Citing the strikes by Russian workers in Estonia this summer, Khanga said that she is afraid that any change in the republic's status could touch off mass violence. She characterizes the predicament as "very dangerous." While in Riga, Lithuania, a few months ago, she watched television reports of tanks outside the city. No official in Moscow or Riga could explain what the tanks were doing there; the soldiers claimed that they were looking for two escaped convicts from Belorussia.

Feudal Lords

Repeating allegations made by Soviet special investigators Telman Gdlyan and Nikolai Ivanov, Khanga charged that some of the recent violent clashes in the Caucasus and Central Asia, though rooted in old inter-religious or inter-ethnic feuds, "were inspired by others, to hurt Gorbachev." Investigations showed that Party secretaries or other administrators in some cases supplied weapons to mobs of unemployed malcontents. Yegor Yakovlev of *Moscow News*, probing incidents involving Abkhazis and Georgians, concluded: "It was planned. Someone wanted a coup."

Khanga believes that corrupt local outpost cliques are encouraging the violence in order to create confusion and thus protect their own power. She noted that early in Soviet history, the Bolsheviks tried to force a leap from feudalism to socialism in Central Asia, but "the old feudal ties and habits were not abandoned." The beys, or feudal lords, have continued their dominance as Party secretaries and other representatives of Soviet rule. In Uzbekistan, massive racketeering operations by officials were recently uncovered. There followed over 800 arrests and the suicide of Sharaf Rashidov, the republic's once-revered first secretary. Khanga raised the extreme case of one Adylov, the Uzbek chief of the Central Union of Consumer Societies. "He was like a bey," she said, claiming that Adylov kept a cave filled with tigers into which he threw those who opposed him.

Khanga likened the turmoil inside the Soviet Union today to problems in Africa. There, tribes separated by language, culture and traditional enmity were forged into new states as the European powers abandoned their colonial possessions. Many of the same issues — state language, local autonomy, independence and equality of opportunity — are present in both Africa and the USSR.

Racism

Turning to questions of race, Khanga asserted that what is seen as racism in the Soviet Union is actually, strictly speaking, chauvinism and xenophobia. There is a historical, deeply rooted bias against outsiders that is embraced by certain elements of Russian society. Speaking of ultranationalist groups such as Pamyat, she said that "these people hate everybody. They hate Jews, Tatars, Georgians, Armenians, African people... Everybody!"

Russia never had African colonies or slaves. Its only black menial workers were those brought by the Turks to Abkhaziya in the seventeenth century, and they completely interbred with the local populace. Therefore, much of the political, social and economic servility which she believes breeds racism in the West was absent in the Russian Empire. Russians are not used to thinking in racial terms. Even



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Alexander Pushkin, who was descended from Ibrahim Hanibal, "the Negro of Abyssinia," is considered by Russians to be a Russian poet. There is no census category for race, so the number of blacks living in the Soviet Union is not known.

The Road to Uzbekistan

Asked about her family history, Dr. Khanga took a deep breath and said, "It's a long story." She was born in Uzbekistan of American parents, a black father and a Jewish mother. The two met in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, where they had both come to help build the new socialist state. (In all, 20,000 Americans moved to the USSR in that era; their story is told in Paula Garp's book, *They Came to Stay*.) Khanga's father died when she was six and she grew up knowing almost nothing about him.

Two years ago, Khanga found her father's old US Army papers and discovered that he had been drafted in Clarksdale, Mississippi. On a visit to the United States, she was invited there, and during interviews with old townspeople she established that her father had gone to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He had been a student of George Washington Carver, the famous black botanist and agronomist. Later she discovered that he led a contingent of sixteen black Americans to the Soviet Union in 1924 to study the new society.

On a visit to Tuskegee in September, she was presented with a special gift: the letters her father wrote to Carver. They reveal his sense of optimism about the USSR: "Over here, white and black are equal." He settled in Uzbekistan to be with "people of color," Khanga said, failing to suppress a grin, and adding, "When I tell [Uzbeks] that 'Americans think that you are colored,' they just laugh.

They don't understand this." In 1930, her father extended an official invitation to Carver on behalf of the Soviet government to come to Moscow and serve as Minister of Agriculture. Carver declined, but assisted his pupil in finding blacks to go to the Soviet Union.

The Uzbekistan colony attracted only thirty-two blacks in all. In 1931, the poet Langston Hughes met with them. His experiences were published in Moscow under the title *An American Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia*, which was suppressed a few years later because of references to officials who were purged. Hughes also talks about the USSR in his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*.

Black in the USSR

Ending her talk on a lighter note, Dr. Khanga told the story of how her Soviet nationality was determined. At age sixteen she went to the militia station to receive her passport and was registered as "American." She protested, saying "'American' is citizenship, not nationality." Next the clerk suggested "Uzbek," but she said no, pointing out that she had no Uzbek blood. She asked instead to be registered simply as "Soviet citizen," but this was denied. The republics have resisted any attempt to replace nationality with citizenship on the Soviet passport.

Finally Khanga told the clerk, "Write that I'm a Negro." The clerk replied that "Negro" denotes race and not nationality. As she tells it, "I said 'Yes, I don't care. Write Negro!' ... I guess I wanted to hold on to one thing to identify me with the black race."

"Well then," the clerk replied, "you must prove that you are a Negro."

Reported by Jeff Zerkowitz

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