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edited by

Aurora Almada e Santos, Bernardo Capanga André,
Corrado Tornimbeni and Iolanda Vasile

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Tito in Africa. Picturing Solidarity

Radina Vučetić and Paul Betts (eds.)

Museum of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, 2017

Tito in Africa. Picturing Solidarity is a companion of texts related to a homonymous photo exhibition curated by Mirjana Slavković and Ana Sladojević and hosted at the Museum of Yugoslavia between June 27 and September 3, 2017. A smaller version of the same exhibition was on show at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford until April 2018. In 2019, part of the exhibition will travel to the Wende Museum of the Cold War in Culver City, USA.¹

The book and the exhibition are two of the public results of the Project *Socialism goes Global*, produced in a partnership between the University of Exeter and the Museum of Yugoslavia. The book presents and discusses an extensive number of photographs from the official visits of Josip Broz Tito and his wife, Jovanka Broz, to an array of African countries, and includes a selection of images from the exhibition. Besides the visual material, an impressive amount of gifts, journal articles and other memorabilia are placed under the scrutinizing gaze of the four contributors to the book. Finally, *Tito in Africa* is complemented by a very informative chronology of the relations between Yugoslavia and several African countries.

New scholarly attention has been recently paid to post-1945 international relations in the Global South, and, consequentially, fresh interpretations and positionalities on the Cold War are emerging. In particular, research focusing on micro-histories and life histories, or studies based on relatively unexplored archives in South-Eastern Europe and Africa represent a promising trend towards more complex regional and transnational histories. *Tito in Africa* brilliantly unveils some parts of this puzzle. The book takes its photographic material seriously, as elements that supplement and bring value to the understanding of historical events.

The images analyzed in the four chapters of the book are, as Radovan Cukić explains in his third chapter, a product of Tito's official visits to Africa. Indeed, a "photo department within the President's Cabinet was formed in the middle of the 1947 with the objective of documenting all of Tito's activities" (p. 79). The material presented in the book

includes photographs taken by members of the President's Cabinet, but also images retrieved from photo albums gifted to him during his travels, as well as shots taken by Tito himself, as he apparently developed the passion for it.

The book opens with Radina Vučetić's chapter *Tito's Africa: Representations of Power during Tito's African Journeys* and offers an overall understanding of the state visits, focusing on "Tito's image in Africa [that] was created largely during these trips" (p. 22). Apparently, the Yugoslav model of socialism and Tito's "combination of one-party and one-man" system were appealing to new African states that were trying to forge their own place "between the capitalist and communist worlds" (p. 15). One of the strong arguments of this chapter highlights that the Yugoslav model of socialism was perceived as "an alternative to the Soviet and Chinese interpretation of communism", since it showed a distinct sensibility to national particularities, making it more attractive to the countries in question (p. 15). The chapter also offers a view of the epochal transformation in the diplomatic networks in and around the continent. Yugoslavia's first diplomatic mission in African was established in 1952, in Ethiopia, but the first African tour took place only in 1961. From this moment on, until his last African trip in 1979, Tito accomplished a respectable record of "169 official visits to 92 countries" while hosting "175 heads of state" (p. 19).

As often the case with other socialist countries (e.g. Ceausescu's Romania), Tito's visits to African countries were presented as 'friendship visits'. As Vučetić shows, they surpassed expectations and inherited the "models of colonial imagery within the patterns of diplomatic protocol and interstate relations that attract special attention" (p. 22). Moreover, Tito's cult of personality was constructed as "a political icon of the non-aligned world" (p. 24). The *mise-en-scene* of these visits showcased Tito as a friend, although not completely equal: one can think of the peculiar, modern, gifts he offered to his African hosts (ranging from guns to cars), which were symbolically meant to facilitate the entry of Yugoslav companies in African markets.

A particularly interesting point raised by Radina Vučetić is the method of double reading photographs that appear, at first glance, to have a colonial connotation. Taking on the example of the Ghanaian president, Kwame Nkruma, who resorted to "elements of traditional culture in his political appearance" in order to affirm and strengthen his authority, she highlights the importance of using multiple culturally and contextually specific lenses when reading these photographs (p. 30). On the one hand, it was quite clear that Tito's "safari diplomacy" (p. 42) "was a way of displaying power (class power and the power of masculinity) [...]" and in regard to Africa it was deeply linked to the colonial past and the colonial experience" (p. 42). On the other hand, the multilayered reading of these photographs, as Vučetić puts it, suggests that the "wildlife diplomacy" (p. 44), while a continuation of the 'safari diplomacy', was also a new form of promoting tourism and preserving wildlife through the direct experience of foreign leaders.

Paul Betts's article *A red wind of change: African media coverage of Tito's tours to*

decolonizing Africa comes to complement this 'friend of Africa' narrative by looking more closely at the ways the local press reported "Tito's major tours to Africa in 1961 and 1970" (p. 48). Betts argues that Tito was received and perceived differently, often thanks to his past as a partisan fighter and a "global anti-imperial champion" (p. 49). The chapter focuses both on the actual existence and transmission of this image and on the representations of the Yugoslav policy of peace, independence and non-alignment (p. 49). Betts highlights the importance of "Tito's peripatetic diplomacy", as a "summit diplomacy", extended to countries that at the time "had little historical relation with one another" (p. 50). Here, the coverage of Tito's state visits "helped strengthen relations by means of repeated visual enactments of growing African-Yugoslav solidarity" (p. 55), as well as depictions of "popular support" for the visits themselves (p. 57). An added value of the chapter is to interrogate the image build around Tito's wife Jovanka "as the Marshal loyal companion" (p.55), also presented "as a role model for African women, to the extent she embodied political engagement, women's betterment, loyal service and modest demeanor" (p. 55). But, perhaps, one of the most important contributions of the chapter is to show "that the African press photography was not very different from Yugoslav's professional photographers of the same events [which] shows that this is hardly an 'imperial gaze', but rather a shared visual register from both sides. After all, accompanying books prepared by the host African states as commemorative gifts to Tito after his visit chronicle the Tito tours in strikingly similar modes" (p. 66).

Radovan Cukić's chapter *The Image of Africa in the Photographic Collections of the Museum of Yugoslavia*, explores how the 'image of Africa' was presented overtime in the Museum of Yugoslavia's collections. According to him, this image was comprised "of 15,210 sleeves" up until 1980, which were organized by events. To this, we must add today another "132,000 photographs in 18 x 24 cm format, stored in 708 boxes" (p. 80). Tito received 41 of the 2,300 albums from the collection as gifts from his African hosts. A fundamental point made by this chapter is that the regime gave a great importance to the education of photojournalists, creating a "comprehensive testament of contemporary history" (p. 85).

Cukić proceeds with a categorization and typology of the photographs: private photographs, photographs intended for large dissemination, the classically official photographs, with a highly propagandistic message, and the ones for smaller and precise audiences, or photographs of a personal and familiar nature (p. 86). As a side note, a similar categorization can be made of images of Ceausescu's visits to Africa found in the Romanian National Archives. Drawing this comparison helps us to better understand what Cukić plainly underlines: "political photography [...] represents a picture of power relations between actors of political life, and not a picture of reality itself" (p. 87). As such, photographs need to be seen not as mimetic representations of reality, but as part of a puzzle of documentation, information and interpretation.

Beyond the Photographic Frame: Interpretation of Photographs from the Museum of

Yugoslavia's Collection in a Contemporary context is Ana Sladojević's chapter on the meanings of these photographs in contemporary society, including but not limited to their usage by scholars. A crucial point here is that the purpose of the photographs as well as their interpretation is dependent and rooted on distinct historical contexts. The end of socialist Yugoslavia, for instance, put an end to this particular visual culture of showcasing and celebrating the country's relationships with the Global South. According to Sladojević, it was only in the mid-2000's that we saw a revival in the study of this historical period, which included greater interest in these photographs as well. Of significance in this process is the (re)discovery of these materials and collections and of possibly new interpretations of them "by processes of recuperation of ideas that are inevitably distorted by temporal and semantic distance" (p. 98).

This book is definitely an important step towards the reinterpretation of a "recent, but in many ways obscured past" (p. 124). It opens the path and invites new scholarship "to critically rethink both colonialism and anticolonialism", socialism, decolonization ((just *en passant* explored here), and, above all, to focus on South-South dynamics within the historiography of the global Cold War.

Iolanda Vasile

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Notes:

1 - *Tito in Africa: Picturing Solidarity*, "Pitt Rivers Museum", n.d.: https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/Tito_in_Africa.

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