

**Addressing an Afro-Asian Public: Alex La Guma's Report to the 25th Anniversary
Conference of the Afro-Asian Writers Association in 1983**

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Abstract

This article is a text/context piece that republishes and examines a speech by the South African writer and activist Alex La Guma (1925-85) in his capacity as the secretary general for the Afro-Asian Writers Association (AAWA). This speech was delivered in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the organization. As a primary source, it details the ambitions and politics of the AAWA as well as summarizing La Guma's own activities and beliefs, providing a panoramic view of the political and cultural world to which he belonged. La Guma was a true internationalist: the document, it captures his spirit toward the end of his life. This version was published in 1985, the year of his death, in the AAWA journal *Lotus: Afro-Asian Writings*.

Keywords

Alex La Guma, Afro-Asianism, African literature, Cold War, apartheid, decolonization

On September 21, 1966, the acclaimed South African writer Alex La Guma left for exile with his wife, Blanche, and his two sons, Eugene and Bartholomew ("Barto"). He had been an activist since joining the Young Communist League in 1947. This difficult decision was reached

after recurrent episodes of arrest, detainment, and solitary confinement that both Alex and Blanche experienced, as well as a five-year sentence of house arrest for Alex beginning in December 1962, due to his political activities with the South African Coloured People's Organisation and the anti-apartheid Congress Alliance, led by the African National Congress (ANC). A number of activists had left for exile by this point, given the massacre of sixty-nine protestors at Sharpeville in 1960 and the subsequent banning of the ANC and the Pan-Africanist Congress. The Rivonia Trial (1963-64), which had imprisoned Nelson Mandela and other activists, added to the sense of disarray abetted by the apartheid government's escalating oppression. The decision Alex and Blanche reached consequently reflected the sentiments of a number of people. They departed with the belief that an effective anti-apartheid movement would have to undertake an international approach – defined by the Cold War and an emergent postcolonial Africa and Third World – in order to garner the support and resources needed to end white minority rule in South Africa.¹

Alex would spend the rest of his life in exile, first in London (1966-78) and later Havana (1978-85), where he would die from a heart attack.² Despite this extended period of almost twenty years, he is still best known for his fictional depictions of social and political life in Cape Town through such celebrated works as *A Walk in the Night* (1962), *And a Threefold Cord*

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¹ On this decision to leave and this history more generally, see Roger Field, *Alex La Guma: A Literary and Political Biography* (London: James Currey, 2010), chapter 7; Blanche La Guma with Martin Klammer, *In the Dark with My Dress on Fire: My Life in Cape Town, London, Havana and Home Again* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2010), 131, 203.

² Blanche would return to South Africa in 1990. Eugene also returned, while Barto currently lives in Germany. La Guma and Klammer, *In the Dark*, 131, 203.

(1964), *The Stone Country* (1967), and *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (1972) – the first, third, and fourth having been canonized by their inclusion in the prestigious African Writers Series edited by Chinua Achebe.³ During his lifetime, he received a number of awards for these works, including the Lotus Prize for Literature, the Soviet Order of Friendship, the President Nguesso Literary Prize from the Republic of Congo, and a French *Chevalier des Arts et Lettres* – a set of distinctions that indicated a wide-ranging international audience for his work and an equally diverse political spectrum beyond South Africa that found agreement with his political criticism. Not least, he posthumously received the Order of Ikhamanga in Gold from the South African government in 2003.

However, this corpus of fiction, including his final novel *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979), has frequently distracted attention from his significant body of non-fiction, most notably his travel memoir *A Soviet Journey* (1978), an account of his travels in the USSR beginning in 1967, which was first published in Moscow by Progress Publishers in both English and Russian.⁴ *A Soviet Journey* is notable for being his longest work, fiction or non-fiction, as well as being one of the longest accounts of the Soviet Union by an African writer. Equally important, it highlights the longstanding connections between the Soviet Union and South African activists, including his father James (“Jimmy”) La Guma, who was an early figure in the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and travelled to the USSR to meet with Comintern head Nicolai Bukharin in

³ Alex La Guma, *And a Threefold Cord* (Berlin: Seven Seas Publishers, 1964); Alex La Guma, *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (London: Heinemann, 1972); Alex La Guma, *A Walk in the Night and Other Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1967 [1962]); Alex La Guma, *The Stone Country* (London: Heinemann, 1967).

⁴ Alex La Guma, *A Soviet Journey: A Critical Annotated Edition*, ed. Christopher J. Lee (London: Lexington, 2017 [1978]); Alex La Guma, *Time of the Butcherbird* (London: Heinemann, 1979).

1927.⁵ Alex similarly wrote and published a number of literary essays, book reviews, political reportage, letters, and occasional short stories while in exile for such venues as *Sechaba*, *The African Communist*, *Tricontinental*, *Présence Africaine*, and *Moscow News*. These periodicals sponsored by such organizations as the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP), as well as the governments of Cuba and the Soviet Union, indicate once more the diverse range of audiences that La Guma wrote for and their different ideological positions – from African nationalism, to socialism, Third Worldism, and black internationalism. Combined, these assorted exile writings point to both his political and artistic engagements beyond South Africa, which his fiction alone does not demonstrate, as well as his attempts to find common ground among varied political communities that shared deep affinities against Western aggression, despite surface differences. Indeed, these writings constitute a provisional archive of what it meant to be a South African exile – the constant vulnerabilities of being a political émigré, the strength derived from common cause with other activists, and the day-to-day intellectual labor involved in building a transnational movement. Exile was a time of political uncertainty and personal freedom, a liminal status of forcibly becoming an outsider while still retaining the commitments of an insider. It is a situation of tension and paradox that could suppress the imagination, but also unleash new forms of creativity, new forms of political consensus.⁶

Reprinted here, La Guma’s speech as a secretary general of the Afro-Asian Writers Association (AAWA) delivered in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1983 is an example of these written ephemera that reveal the broader political world that La Guma and many other anti-apartheid activists belonged to – a world shaped by the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the

⁵ On this history, see Christopher J. Lee, “Introduction,” in Alex La Guma, *A Soviet Journey: A Critical Annotated Edition*, ed. Christopher J. Lee (London: Lexington, 2017 [1978]), 7-12.

⁶ A number of these writings are currently being compiled as a new book, entitled *Culture and Liberation: Exile Writings, 1966-1985*, edited by Christopher J. Lee.

Soviet Union, but also the promise of an emergent postcolonial world in Africa and Asia as defined by the 1955 Asian-African Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, and the 1961 founding of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade, Yugoslavia.⁷ The Third World as a political project called for a future beyond those offered by the existing global superpowers.⁸ Against this backdrop, La Guma became secretary general for the AAWA in 1979 during the organization's meeting in Luanda, Angola. This position was La Guma's most notable public role, next to being the ANC's diplomatic representative for the Caribbean and Latin America, and the AAWA would experience notable decline in the years after his death in 1985. This address marked the AAWA's twenty-fifth anniversary conference held in the same city that hosted its founding meeting in 1958.

The speech consists of a lengthy report of approximately 5,500 words that captures the central aims and activities of the AAWA. Given that the AAWA remains a little-studied and mostly forgotten organization today, this address provides significant information about its role in building cultural networks during the Cold War through promoting different political causes and hosting conferences across Asia and Africa, in addition to publishing its flagship journal *Lotus: Afro-Asian Writings*, which began publication as *Afro-Asian Writings* in 1968. Funded by the Soviet Union, printed in East Germany, and based in Cairo, Beirut, and Tunis for different periods, *Lotus* was published quarterly by the Permanent Bureau of Afro-Asian Writers up through the late 1980s in English, French, and Arabic editions, if somewhat irregularly and with

⁷ On the Bandung conference and the global Cold War, see, for example, Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). The AAWA is sometimes spelled with the possessive with "Writers'" instead of "Writers." I have chosen the latter spelling in this article.

⁸ On the Third World project, see Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007).

distribution unclear.⁹ Nonetheless, it promoted poets and writers from a wide scope of Asian and African countries, with a particular concern for restoring indigenous poetic traditions and local cultural aesthetics as a means of building national cultures in the wake of global decolonization. *Lotus* and the AAWA also offered ongoing critiques of neocolonialism, apartheid, and other forms of ongoing imperial aggression against Third World interests, as La Guma's speech demonstrates. La Guma was stridently committed to this wide range of interconnected aesthetic and political aims. Like his contemporaries Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, La Guma believed that cultural revolution went hand in hand with political revolution.¹⁰ Indeed, this speech reveals how the anti-apartheid struggle was informed by and contributed to a broader political atmosphere of transnational political efforts against remaining forms of colonialism.

However, like the AAWA, the reputation of La Guma has declined since the end of apartheid – the product of a new political era in both South Africa and globally, as well as his own extended physical absence due to exile and a premature death at the age of sixty. Though La Guma published the majority of his work during his exile of almost two decades, including three novels, a travel memoir, an edited collection entitled *Apartheid: A Collection of Writings on South African Racism by South Africans* (1972), and a number of shorter pieces that reached audiences around the world in places like Cairo, London, Paris, Moscow, and Havana, he still remains best known for his books and stories composed while he was in South Africa. Yet here, too, there is a case to be made that La Guma's fiction has always been international, due to

⁹ On the history of *Lotus*, see Hala Halim, "Lotus, the Afro-Asian Nexus, and Global South Comparatism," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32, no. 3 (2012): 563-83; Duncan M. Yoon, "'Our Forces Have Redoubled': World Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2015): 233-52.

¹⁰ Amilcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), chapter 15; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1961]), chapter 4.

circumstances of censorship in South Africa.¹¹ La Guma's first book, *A Walk in the Night*, which indelibly fixed his home neighborhood of District Six within South African literature, was published with Mbari Press in Nigeria. His second book, *And a Threefold Cord*, which depicted the plight of shack dwellers on the Cape Flats, was published in East Berlin. La Guma's high level of productivity with these books written during the early 1960s while still in South Africa – despite experiences of house arrest, detention, and solitary confinement – reflect the political urgency of the time, nationally and internationally. Indeed, his full sequence of novels not only treats the state violence of the apartheid regime as commonly addressed, but also the colonial question and the national question as grappled with by the ANC and SACP, which had aligned during the 1950s, and by other liberation struggles around the world. Drawing upon the political thought of Lenin and the anti-colonial program of the Comintern, as received by his father, La Guma's fiction identified the South African situation as colonial in orientation – thus conforming to political programs such as the CPSA's Native Republic thesis and the ANC's "colonialism of a special type" – and thus requiring systemic revolution.¹²

If his fiction writing was tacitly animated by this nationally focused political engagement and by the immediacy of experience in South Africa, his non-fiction writing went further to indicate the wider world that defined South African politics and his life in exile. In this regard, the speech reprinted here is not only a sign of his significant involvement with the AAWA, but it reveals the range of communities and causes that intersected with this organization and with La Guma's own enduring commitment to Third World internationalism during the Cold War. His speech is at once reflective and celebratory, a stocktaking of current political situations and a

¹¹ Andrew van der Vlies, *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read All Over* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 119-124.

¹² For a more extensive discussion of these programs and their relationship to both La Gumas, see Lee, "Introduction," *A Soviet Journey*.

statement for the future. The fact that it was delivered in 1983 and published in 1985 suggests that the editors of *Lotus* may have published it as an epitaph, a final statement of La Guma's literary and political legacies, given that he died from a heart attack in Cuba that year. For reasons that are unclear, the AAWA and *Lotus* went into decline shortly after as mentioned – presumably a product of the waning Cold War, but also, perhaps, a reflection of the strong leadership role that La Guma provided and the intellectual loss his death presented. In summary, this speech is a vital primary source that provides a documentary sense of the grassroots networks of Third World solidarity that once existed, through the voice of one of its most active participants.

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