

FLAGSHIP OF RUSSIAN AFRICAN STUDIES. TO THE 65TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INSTITUTE FOR AFRICAN STUDIES

The Institute for African Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences was established in Moscow 65 years ago. The date of its foundation is considered to be October 2, 1959, when the President of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Academician A.N. Nesmeyanov, signed Resolution No. 692 of the Presidium of the USSR Academy of Sciences “On the Organization of the Institute for African Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences and its Tasks”¹. On October 30, 2024, a commemorative meeting dedicated to the 65th anniversary of the Institute was held. The Honorary President of the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Academician A.M. Vasiliev, delivered a keynote address, stressing that “the ideology of the Institute is Afrorealism, that is, the development of such a perception of Africa as it is”. And the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Sierra Leone to the Russian Federation, Mohamed Yongawo, emphasized in his address that “the Institute for African Studies functions as a pivotal platform, serving to fortify Russia’s comprehensive relations with the African continent”².

The foundation of the Institute at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s was both inevitable and timely. The first director of the Institute for African Studies, I.I. Potekhin (1903–1964), articulated in 1960 the reasons that precipitated the escalating academic interest in the continent: “Before the Second World War, African countries did not play an independent role in the arena of world politics. The imperialist powers exercised uncontested control over the destinies of African peoples, acting in accordance with their own agendas and interests. There were only four African states in the League of Nations, but even they were forced to follow the political path of those powers. Now more and more new African states are entering the world arena as independent partners in international life” [Potekhin 1960: 58].

The rapid development of the national liberation movement across the African continent served as a catalyst for the inspiration of young researchers. People who had survived all the hardships of the bloodiest war, they were literally seething with plans for the peaceful reconstruction of their country and the building of a just future for other peoples. As I.I. Potekhin noted immediately after the formation of the research center, “In the post-war years, a powerful popular movement against colonialism and imperialism unfolded on the African continent. Under the pressure of this movement, the colonizers were forced to retreat and give up their political positions” [Potekhin 1960: 57].

¹ On the Organization of the Institute for African Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences and its Tasks. Resolution of the Presidium of the USSR Academy of Sciences. *Institute for African Studies*. https://www.inafran.ru/sites/default/files/page_file/reshenie_o_sozdanii_instituta.pdf (accessed: 10.11.2024)

² Solemn meeting dedicated to the 65th anniversary of the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. *Institute for African Studies*. 30.10.2024. <https://www.inafran.ru/node/3343> (accessed: 10.11.2024)

V.G. Solodovnikov (1918–2018), who succeeded I.I. Potekhin as the director of the Institute in 1964 and headed it until 1976, believed that “Soviet African studies faced the task of scientific research of socio-economic, political, and international problems of these countries, analyzing and developing proposals for cooperation between the USSR and African countries, as well as with national liberation movements and political parties in the countries still under the colonial rule in Southern Africa” [Solodovnikov 2000: 42].

Time demanded new approaches from the school of African studies that evolved in the USSR. V.G. Solodovnikov articulated the main goal of the Institute’s activities as follows: “While preserving research into the history, culture, and ethnography of the peoples of Africa, the Institute for African Studies should direct its main attention to the study of contemporary issues: decolonization and the socio-economic problems of the liberated countries”. He further specified that the focus of scientific research should be “studying the trends in the development of African countries, analyzing and taking into account all factors that influence this development: internal factors—the traditions of the old African society, a monocultural economy, the lack of developed capitalism, and the weakness of the national bourgeoisie, the narrowness of the market, the lack of capital and of qualified personnel, the role of political parties, etc.; and external factors—traditional economic ties with the former metropolises, the penetration of foreign capital” [Solodovnikov 2011: 66]. In other words, a comprehensive study of the continent. The Institute for African Studies was to become a coordinating center for all African studies in the country.

The merits and contributions of Anatoly Andreevich Gromyko (1932–2017), Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor, Corresponding Member of the Academy of Sciences, who headed the Institute until 1992, are of paramount significance. His was the most difficult task: preserving African studies in the country in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The crisis of the 1990s, when a sharp drop in funding and, perhaps, more significantly, a lack of interest on the part of government agencies in the science and research, brought the academic institution to the brink of death. It is important to acknowledge the dedication of the institution’s staff, who demonstrated unwavering commitment to their duties. It was their efforts that not only ensured the survival of the national school of African studies but also managed to pass it on to their successors. Thanks to them, the Institute for African Studies not only survived but also found its place within the new Russian context. Moreover, it was not only in academic science but also in applied research. A.M. Vasiliev, Honorary President of the Institute for African Studies, Academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences, played a pivotal role in this period, having led the Institute from 1992 to 2015.

The challenges were considerable. In the 1990s, Russia experienced a period of economic and political turbulence, marked by a significant deterioration in relations with the African continent. This decline in relations was accompanied by a notable absence of high-level visits by Russian officials to African states. During this period, the Institute’s researchers continued to prove the mutually beneficial nature of Russian-African cooperation and the growing importance of the continent in the world. The first decade of the 21st century was marked by visits to African states by Russian leaders at the highest level. A.M. Vasiliev, Director of the Institute, was appointed Special Representative of

the President of the Russian Federation for Relations with African Leaders (2006–2011), which underscored the Institute's contribution to Russia's foreign policy in this area.

The further activity of the Institute for African Studies has proved the productivity of the position based on a comprehensive study of the current problems of the African continent, as asserted by the Director of the Institute since 2015, Member of the Presidium of the RAS, Corresponding Member of the RAS, Doctor of Economics, Professor I.O. Abramova [Abramova 2019: 8]. The growth of the Institute's authority in the country and abroad, especially in Africa, can be clearly explained by the fact that the subject of its research was subordinated to the main idea: to promote the strengthening of the independence of African states, the search for ways of autochthonous development, which received a new meaning in the context of the formation of a multipolar world order.

The Institute currently employs more than 100 researchers and comprises 10 research centers, including the Centre for African Strategy in BRICS, which was established in 2024. It is a newly established center for the study of the BRICS African Strategy, with three countries of the continent (South Africa, Egypt, and Ethiopia) being members of this international body. Annually, a dozen and a half individual and collective works are published, many of which have become notable milestones in the history of Russian and global African studies and Arabic studies. The Institute also publishes the monthly scientific and socio-political journal "Asia and Africa Today," which has been in circulation since 1957. A special place in the publishing activities is occupied by the scientific "Journal of the Institute for African Studies," the only Russian specialized journal on Africa, and a platform for publications by leading Africanists in Russia and abroad.

Six decades later, the words of the Institute's first Director about this part of the world remain pertinent: "Its potential is enormous. The colonial rule of the imperialist powers held back the economic development of the African continent. The masters of the colonies deliberately impeded the development of industry: they needed the colonies as sources of raw materials and as markets for their industrial products. They have not abandoned this policy even today; they are still extracting raw materials and profits from the colonies and impeding the development of industry within the African states" [Potekhin 1960: 57].

I.O. Abramova emphasizes that "the geostrategic and military-political significance of the 'peripheral' zones of rivalry, namely the Middle East and Africa, has increased in the context of an extremely dangerous direct confrontation between the 'old' and 'new' players". At present, "Africa is developing faster than any other region of the world and has accumulated quite a lot of potential in recent years. As one of the main suppliers of natural and labor resources for the constantly shrinking 'shagreen skin' of real production in the world, Africa maintains a precarious balance between financial assets and real capital within the global economy" [Abramova 2019: 9].

In recent years, there has been a reassessment of the comparative importance of the world's regions in world politics, as well as in Russian politics [Abramova, Fituni 2022: 569]. Russia is increasing its presence on the continent in the economic, educational, and military spheres. In 2023, Russia's trade with African countries increased by 30% and

almost reached \$25 billion³. The first (2019, Sochi) and second (2023, St. Petersburg) Russia-Africa summits, which were expertly supported by the Institute for African Studies, played an important role in this. In November 2024, Sochi hosted the first ministerial conference of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum⁴.

Russia and African states face a common task: the formation of a more just world order that reflects the new realities. As President V.V. Putin noted at the second Russia-Africa summit⁵, “Russia and African states call for building a new, fairer global architecture, are working together to protect international law, the UN Charter, and the central role of that global organisation and are trying to coordinate their positions on the main issues on the international agenda. It is notable that our positions on many issues are very close or fully coincide”⁶.

A.M. Vasiliev acknowledges that “the challenges that humanity faces in the 21st century, the threats of a nuclear, chemical, and biological war, the already ongoing cyber war, the unknown consequences of the spread of information technologies, an environmental catastrophe, mass migrations, escalation of terrorism—these challenges are such that they can be managed only through a global and united effort” [Vasiliev 2018: 525].

The new challenges facing Russia and the states of the African continent are the subject of in-depth study by researchers at the Institute for African Studies, which is celebrating its anniversary noticeably younger this year. During the existence of the Institute’s dissertation councils, hundreds of candidate dissertations and dozens of doctoral theses have been defended. Now more than 30 postgraduate students and applicants are currently being trained within its walls. The influx of young employees guarantees the scientific center a broad perspective while preserving the continuity of in-depth research and, above all, the researchers’ passion for their field of study.

Here is what the younger staff of the Institute says about their choice of scientific career:

G.K. Sugakov: “My interest in studying Africa stems from my love for this continent. The Institute for African Studies has formed excellent conditions for scientific research, and the number of young employees is increasing every year. The economic potential of Africa is becoming increasingly evident, and specialists in this field are already in high demand”.

I.A. Zakharov: “Africa is interesting primarily for its profound socio-economic, cultural, and political transformations. Africa is one of the few regions of the world where we can trace the historical and geographical regularities of these processes in sufficient detail and follow them in real time”.

³ Lavrov noted the growth of trade between Russia and Africa. *RIA Novosti*. 23.05.2024. (In Russ.). <https://ria.ru/20240523/lavrov-1947987277.html> (accessed: 10.11.2024)

⁴ A meeting of the foreign ministers of Russia and African countries was held in Sochi. *TV BRICS*. 11.11.2023. (In Russ.). <https://tvbrics.com/news/v-sochi-proshla-vstrecha-ministrov-inostrannykh-del-rossii-i-stran-afriki/> (accessed: 11.11.2024)

⁵ Saint Petersburg, July 27–28, 2023.

⁶ Russia-Africa Summit. *President of Russia*. 28.07.2023. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/71826> (accessed: 10.10.2024)

A.I. Berezhnov: “As I became involved in scientific and expert-consulting activities, I realized the significant demand for specialists in Africa at present. African studies in Russia are currently on a rise”.

Ya.A. Glukhov: “The interest in African countries lies in their uniqueness and contrast. Russian African studies are experiencing a renaissance due to the growing importance of Africa in the global context. I am convinced that science is illuminating the world with the light of new knowledge, and that this will facilitate the resolution of African continent’s problems”.

In summing up the final assessment of the multifaceted 65-year activity of the “think tank,” it seems appropriate to quote the words of its oldest employee, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor, Honored Scientist of the Russian Federation Roza Nurgalieвна Ismagilova: “Our Institute is a completely unique scientific institution. I have had the good fortune to work in all the world scientific centers of African studies, and I can say with confidence that there is no similar center with such complex problems and such specialists”.

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