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(1918 - 1984)

Going to the Festival 1957

oil on canvas

Many Americans don't realize just how diverse the Soviet Union truly was. Stretching across 14 republics and home to hundreds of ethnic groups, languages, religions, and cultures, it encompassed an extraordinary range of identities.

Officially, the government promoted communism as a unifying system in which all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or faith, would be equal. The ideal was for everyone to identify first and foremost as "Soviet," with other identities relegated to the background. In theory, ethnic Russians and non-Russians held the same legal status, and cultural diversity was meant to exist within a framework of shared socialist values.

In practice, however, ethnic hierarchies persisted, with Russian language and culture remaining dominant. The "model Soviet citizen" was almost always portrayed as ethnically Russian, and upward mobility often depended on fluency in Russian and alignment with Russian norms. Many policies and programs, especially during Stalin's leadership, were meant to weaken ethnic groups and take power from ethnic leaders. Many groups were targeted for persecution and ethnic cleansing. This included the forcible deportation of Koreans, Chinese, Kalmyks, Crimean Tartars, and Cossacks in the East and South, with ethnic Germans, Poles, Finns, Estonians, and Latvians similarly deported in the West. Chechnyans, Ingush, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Turks, Kurds, Hemshilis, Karachai, Balkars, and other minorities were forcibly relocated to Kazakhstan and Siberia. These involuntary deportations and relocations led to hundreds of thousands of deaths.

Barbaric treatment of minority ethnic groups continued throughout the 1930s. Latvians were arrested and shot en masse, while the Cossacks were targeted for genocide. At the same time, Jewish people were denied immigration rights, and the state even ordered the execution of prominent Yiddish authors.

Yet, despite the harsh realities on the ground, the Soviet Union's anti-racist rhetoric had global reach. Soviet leaders like Lenin and Trotsky closely observed race relations in the United States, using Jim Crow segregation and the oppression of African Americans as evidence of capitalism's failures. Soviet propaganda from the 1920s and 1930s depicted the U.S. as a brutal, racist society, contrasting it with the USSR's supposedly egalitarian beliefs.

Soviet visual culture embraced anti-racism and gender equality. Posters, films, paintings, and newspapers regularly featured the image of the conscious, revolutionary Black worker as a protagonist. This messaging resonated abroad and even inspired dozens of African Americans to travel to the Soviet Union. Notably, Soviet racism was not directed at Black visitors, but at ethnic minorities within its own borders.

In the early 1930s, the Soviet Union actively recruited African American workers, artists, and agricultural experts to help build its socialist vision. Musician Paul Robeson and poet Langston Hughes traveled there as cultural ambassadors. A group of Black agricultural specialists from the Tuskegee Institute helped modernize cotton production in Uzbekistan. Among them was Joseph Roane, who worked closely with Uzbek farmers to improve crop yields. He and his wife even named their child Yosif Stalin Roane before eventually returning to the U.S.

By the 1950s, with borders more open, the USSR began inviting students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America to study at universities in Moscow, often for free. This initiative was part of a broader Cold War strategy: as newly independent African nations emerged, the Soviet Union positioned itself as a global ally to anti-colonial struggles. Soviet leaders asked: Why align with the United States, a country that still denied rights to African Americans, when the USSR claimed to offer equality?

While these gestures promoted the image of a society free from racism, everyday realities in the Soviet Union often told a different story. Deep ethnic diversity, from Central Asia to the Caucasus to the Baltics, was frequently managed through central control rather than true pluralism. The Soviet ideal may have been unity beyond race and ethnicity, but its realities were shaped by the enduring complexities of identity, power, and cultural dominance.



In Search of Ourselves:

Soviet Art and the Shared Human Spirit