

[← Back to Original Article](#)

Russia's Few Blacks Find an Uneasy Home in Their White Motherland

Race: Numbering only 14,000 out of 146 million, Afro-Russians face threats and harassment in a country unfamiliar with 'hyphenated' citizens.

June 13, 1999 | MARISA ROBERTSON-TEXTOR | SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

MOSCOW — Welland Rudd isn't a typical American. He's never eaten Thanksgiving turkey or watched fireworks on the Fourth of July. At 52, he has yet to set foot on U.S. soil.

Rudd isn't a typical Russian, either. Although he speaks the language fluently and has lived his whole life in Moscow, he cuts an unusual figure here. What sets him apart is the cafe-au-lait color of his skin.

The fact that the African American Rudd is a Russian citizen--let alone one born to two Americans who met in a theater troupe on the Russian front during World War II--confounds many of his fellow Russians. In a land famous for its contradictions, he causes sheer bewilderment.

Rudd, whose background is African, Jewish and Serbian American, is an exception within an exception. Of the roughly 14,000 Afro-Russians in the country today, says Emilia Mensah, director of a Moscow-based cultural fund for mixed-race children, the majority are the descendants of male African students who studied in the Soviet Union in the 1960s-'80s and white Soviet women.

A Rise in Hate Crimes

Whatever their heritage, Afro-Russians remain a curious phenomenon in a country boasting hundreds of ethnic groups.

Unlike Americans, who are familiar with the concept of the "hyphenated" American, Russians continue to draw a distinct line between ethnicity and nationality. Afro-Russians, who can simultaneously be Russian and foreign, black and white, fly in the face of conventional wisdom on what it means to be Russian.

There aren't many; they make up only one-hundredth of 1% of this country of 146 million. Other Russians frequently mistake them for foreigners. Some don't even know they exist. Afro-Russians themselves have often lived in isolation from one another, a fact that is slowly changing as many of them reach adulthood and begin to seek each other out.

One factor bringing Afro-Russians together is the increasingly threatening forms of discrimination they face. Although racist jokes have always been a fact of life, police harassment and hate crimes appear to be on the rise. Last year witnessed a rash of attacks on people of color in Moscow, including the beating of an African American Marine in May.

Only two Afro-Russians are clearly figures of national renown. The first was a literary genius; the second is a talk-show host.

The Shakespeare of the Russian language, 19th-century writer Alexander Pushkin, was the great-grandson of an Eritrean nobleman who in his youth served as Peter the Great's valet.

While Pushkin's poetry speaks to the Russian soul, Yelena Khanga answers for its body. Khanga, a thirtysomething journalist, hosts one of the country's most controversial talk shows, "About That," which is devoted to the sexual practices and proclivities of audience participants.

Like Rudd, Khanga is also an American. Her mother, Leah Golden, is the daughter of two American Communists, one black and one white, who moved to the Soviet Union in the 1930s in search of a colorblind workers' paradise. Although they failed to find it, they settled down, reared a child and never returned home.

Other interracial families had more difficulty staying intact. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many were divided by the heavy hand of bureaucracy. When African students were forced by work obligations to return home after graduation, their Soviet wives often faced years of paperwork before they could join their husbands abroad.

Long separations often led to estrangement or divorce. As usually happens in Russia, the children ended up with their mothers. Ties to their fathers, with their faraway homeland, language and culture, tended to dissolve.

Take Vitaly Kochnyev, a 23-year-old student who also helps run an art gallery. His fine-boned features, tan complexion and jaunty stride wouldn't cause a stir in Paris, London or New York.

But in Moscow, where Kochnyev was reared single-handedly by his Russian mother after his father returned to Rwanda when he was 3, things are different. He is used to the curious looks--and sometimes questions--he elicits, often from total strangers.

"People are usually tactful," he says. "If I were to start a new job, after a while a co-worker might ask very politely, 'Listen, I don't want to offend you, but I was just wondering, what's your background?' That sort of approach doesn't bother me at all."

Marianna Ogot, the 30-year-old daughter of a Kenyan economist and a Russian nurse, is equally accustomed to the stares. The manager of

a sushi bar in Moscow's theater district, Ogot is regularly queried by customers who want to know her origins. "People often think I'm Georgian, even Japanese or Korean," she says.

Ogot doesn't like to dwell on racist encounters. One incident, however, sticks in her mind.

A few years ago, after trying to straighten her long hair at home and burning it in the process, she ran to a local salon for help. "I thought, it'll be so simple, I'll just ask them to cut it all off short," she says. "The hairdresser yelled at me and said she wouldn't do it. She said it wasn't worth dulling her scissors on my hair."

Ruslan Kadirov, a 28-year-old opera singer of Ghanaian, Ukrainian and Uzbek heritage, is less sanguine. For him, there is no avoiding harassment, often at the hands of the Moscow police force, who are notorious for their arbitrary document checks of dark-complexioned men. Failure to produce identification upon request can lead to arrest.

"My passport permanently resides here," Kadirov says, gesturing to his breast pocket. "I don't leave home without it, ever."

Kadirov estimates that he is stopped by the Moscow city police at least once a week. In the days leading up to major holidays, he says, he has been detained as often as three times a day.

Foundation Funding Remains a Dream

Such events are a source of great concern for Afro-Russians. "We never, ever felt unsafe before," says Inessa Provencal, 58, the daughter of an African American actor who immigrated to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. "There were always problems, racist comments, even job discrimination, but never actual physical danger."

"In Soviet times, people were told that black people had been discriminated against by the whole world. So Russians decided they needed to be loved, respected and defended. They don't feel that way today," says Janna Beloustova, the 62-year-old daughter of a Congolese actor and a Polish singer.

Soviet ideology condemned racism in broad terms but did little to challenge the assumptions underlying racist stereotypes. In recent years, free speech and economic hardship have revived ethnic tensions. "During an economic crisis, it's easy to point fingers, and we stand out. We're not blamed, but we're targeted," says Kadirov.

Alarmed by such changes, Mensah, a teacher turned activist, decided in 1997 to create a cultural foundation for Afro-Russian children. Tracking down the children scattered across Moscow was challenge enough. Organizing activities for them is the next step. Resources are scarce, and funding remains a dream. "When it comes to sponsors, no one seems interested in black children," she says.

Mensah is fighting to register her organization with the Justice Ministry as the Cultural Foundation for Mixed-Race Children. "At first we wanted to use the term Afro-Russian," she says, "but the Justice Ministry didn't like it. They said, 'What's that? What does it mean?'"

Kochnyev knows what it means. To him, the answer couldn't be simpler. "I'm an Afro-Russian," he says softly. "Not your typical Russian, maybe, but Russian all the same. This is my home."