From Students to Refugees: African Immigration to the USSR and post-Soviet Russia

The Soviet Union knew only educational migration from Africa and no refugees. In the 1990s, some former students had to remain as refugees (Rwanda) in Russia after their graduation or had to flee from their homeland (Congo) back to Russia, as wars broke or regime changes took place out in their countries.

Since the 1990s, people from sub-Saharan Africa have been living in Russia, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as refugees from the war regions (Somalia, the both Congos, Rwanda) who came from their home countries directly to Russia without knowing this land before. Also, there are increasingly other refugees who are known as tranzity (“transit travelers”) in Russia because they are coming from Nigeria, Cameroon and other countries mainly to St. Petersburg because of its proximity to the EU border, mainly for economic reasons. They intend to remain in Russia for the short term only and plan to travel to the EU (Finland, Baltic countries, Germany or France) as soon as possible to apply there for asylum.

The majority of African refugees in Russia, however, still consist of former students. Their first generation is formed by men who had studied and remained in Russia in the Soviet time or in the first half of the 1990s. The second, post-Soviet generation is formed by young men who broke off their studies mainly because of financial problems and remained in Russia without legal status and income.

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