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## From the Volga to the Mississippi: African Americans and the Soviet Experiment

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FROM THE VOLGA TO THE MISSISSIPPI:  
AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE SOVIET EXPERIMENT

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts  
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction  
at Western Kentucky University

By

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2021

## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the role of African American Communists in the struggle for Black liberation during the interwar period. Making a vital intervention into the field, this work attempts to debunk the harmful Cold-War stereotype of African American Communists as “puppets of Moscow” while simultaneously engaging critically with the relationship between Black liberation and international Communism. Drawing on a vast array of secondary and archival sources, this work charts a course between a vision of the Comintern as an avenging anti-colonial angel, and a cynical force disinterested in Black Liberation.

Tracing the developing relationship between Black intellectuals and the Comintern from the heady days immediately following the First World War, to the Golden age of Interwar Communism in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and finally the disillusionment of the Stalinist era; this thesis interrogates the role of autonomous space, intercommunal alliances, and self-determination in a way that centers the agency of African American Communists.

I dedicate this thesis to the Schomburg Center for the Study of Black Life and Culture, whose patronage granted me access to the primary source materials that made this project possible. Also, I dedicate this thesis to my partner, Andria Spring, who has sat patiently listening to me talk about this project for the last year.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is the culmination of nearly a full year of research, travel, applications, and archival work. From my first tentative writings on African Americans in the Soviet Union for African American intellectual history class to my time spent in the Republic of Georgia, to the work of applying to and attending a Schomburg's fellowship in the middle of a global pandemic and an economic collapse.

Throughout the entire process, I have had the unflagging and invaluable support of my advisors and mentors Dr. Andrew Rosa and Dr. Jennifer Walton-Hanley. They have helped me along every step of the way, from picking a topic to planning how to bring this thesis to fruition. They have suggested books to read, resources to consult, and things to do to distract from the stress of this process. I cannot thank either of them enough, and I hope that my intervention into this field might pay back all the time and emotional labor they have put into my success.

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## Introduction

The effect of the Russian Revolution on African American intellectuals was electrifying. From the leading lights of the Harlem Renaissance to the disciples of George Washington Carver, many African Americans found themselves drawn to Communism and the Soviet Union throughout the interwar period. The reasons for this are clear. From its outset, the Communist International (or Comintern) was the first White-led international organization to call for total racial equality and independence for colonized African nations. As Mark Solomon contends “the embrace of communism” by African Americans “carried with it a promising connection with Soviet Power as an indispensable ally, patron and spiritual guide”.<sup>1</sup> The West Indian poet emigre and early Communist convert Claude McKay went as far as to call the Russian Revolution “the greatest event in the history of humanity.”<sup>2</sup>

From McKay’s perspective, Communism’s revolutionary doctrines promised a day of reckoning for those made rich by chattel slavery and justice for those descended from its victims. Black intellectuals who later travelled to the Soviet Union not only found a society where racial discrimination against darker-skinned people was not ubiquitous, but one where racism or “white chauvinism” was actively prosecuted as a crime.<sup>3</sup> African Americans who joined and helped to define the platform of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) found a degree of autonomy and

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Solomon. *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998. Pg. 4

<sup>2</sup> Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013), 12

<sup>3</sup> Carew, Joy. *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in the Search for Soviet Promise*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010 Loc 715

acceptance within its organizational structure unknown to them in broader American society.

In Cold War historiography, Black Communists are all too often stereotyped as puppets of Moscow, both by many ex-Communist Pan Africanists and by conservative historians. While many revisionist historians have taken Soviet sources at face value and presented a rose-colored vision of the relationship between Black liberation and the Comintern. The truth lies between George Padmore's work *Pan Africanism or Communism* and Hakim Adi's work *Pan Africanism and Communism*. Rather than being implacable foes or steadfast allies, Black Liberation and the Comintern shared a delicate dance of contestation and cooperation. Black people from across the diaspora built a coalition between the Black International and the European revolutionary tradition, and charted a course between autonomy and dogmatism, Black Nationalism and class reductionism. The CPUSA's African American members would radically advocate for their own autonomy and dignity, crusading against white chauvinism within the party's ranks, spearheading the creation of nationwide Black-led labor organizations, and becoming so influential that the Communist party would go from a single African American member in 1919 to leading a movement of tens of thousands of sharecroppers in 1931. This is the story of a radical interracial coalition of protest in the interwar period, its birth, expansion, and eventual collapse of this coalition between the Black Left in the US and the Comintern.

This story of the Black Left during the interwar period spans across much of the Atlantic world, from Kingston and Harlem, to the Volga and Mississippi. Over the space of two decades, from 1919 to 1939 the Comintern (the international union of Communist

parties headquartered in Moscow) and the Soviet Union itself served as critical sites of political engagement and contestation; where the impulses of Soviet foreign policy aspirations and the anti-colonial ideology of Lenin combined and eventually diverged on the point of Black self-determination and autonomous organization. Despite (and because of) the Comintern's centralized and authoritarian nature, the organization's Black Cadres massively advanced the cause for Black Liberation. From Lenin and the Red Summer to the Sixth Congress of the Comintern and the disillusionment with the hardline Stalinism of the late 1930s, Black intellectuals around the world were inspired by revolutionary events in Russia and excited by the prospect that it might spread globally to signal the end of the capital-centered system and all that went with it, including racist oppression.

The contradictions of Soviet Geopolitics and the rise of Stalinism eventually ended the romance between Black intellectuals and the Comintern. However, their engagement left permanent marks. Three main groups emerged around this independent Pan-Africanist movement, dissident Caribbean Marxists like the Trinidadian-born George Padmore, C.L.R. James and Eric T. Williams. African Nationalist postcolonial leaders like Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah would mark an independent wave of radicalism. Finally, in the United States embers of the romance between African Americans and the Comintern continued to burn in the form of Du Bois and Paul Robeson, though the marginalization of the Cold War would limit their effectiveness. Still, in the Third World Revolutionary Black Nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s, from the travels of the Black Panthers to North Korea and Vietnam, to the Civil Rights movement finding an ally in a deep-southern sharecropper with a "Dogeared copy of

Lenin" on their nightstand, one can find the echoes of the Golden Age of Black Communism.<sup>4</sup>

The nature of the connection between Black Radicalism and Socialism is as important as ever. The lessons the engagement between African-descended peoples and the Comintern in the interwar period, on the dual natures of race and class, the problems and joys of interracial organizing, and the corruptive influence of authoritarianism are of vital import for those fighting for liberation both today and tomorrow.

### **Prewar Engagement**

The relationship that Black intellectuals have had with Russia and Socialism is older than the Soviet Union. In contrast to the major empires of Western Europe, the Russian Empire, that bastion of reaction, was widely seen by many as freed from the troubled history of racial slavery and colonialism. While serfdom was widespread, Russia was not intimately involved in the transatlantic slave trade, nor did it participate in the scramble for Africa. In fact, the Russian Empire had even indirectly sided with the cause of Black Liberation when Russian ships were stationed in American ports during the American Civil War to dissuade the British and French from intervention.<sup>5</sup> In the 1860s Russia and Communism were not yet synonymous, but disdain for the Confederacy was one of the few things Czar Liberator Alexander II and Karl Marx had in common. In fact, the year after Russian ships arrived in San Francisco, Marx called the Emancipation Proclamation "The most important document in American History" and the International

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<sup>4</sup> Robin Kelly. *Hammer and Hoe* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) 3

<sup>5</sup> Douglass Kroll, *Friends in Peace and War* (Dulles VA: Potomac Books, 2007), 15

Workingman's Association (the First Internationale) sent an official letter to Abraham Lincoln to inform him that "the triumphant war-cry of your re-election is Death to Slavery!"<sup>6</sup> The first generation of Black Communist intellectuals, men like Claude McKay, sent praise across the Atlantic in the other direction, saying: "Her [The Soviet Union's] demonstration of friendliness and equity for Negroes may not conduce to produce healthy relations between Soviet Russia and Democratic America, the Anthropologists will soon invoke science to prove that the Russians are not at all god's chosen white people".<sup>7</sup>

Between the American Civil War and the Russian Revolution, the international Socialist movement went through a series of transformations reflective of its growing interest in the plight of Black people worldwide. After a split with the Anarchists and Marx's death, a Second International of Socialist political parties was founded. Its members included a significant number of mass-based Social Democratic Parties, including the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, the predecessor to Lenin's Bolsheviks. During the period of the Second Internationale, many Socialist parties won seats in the legislatures of various Imperialist European powers. This ignited fierce debates on how Socialists should deal with imperialism and colonialism. On one end of the spectrum Radical Socialists like Ernest Bax in the United Kingdom argued for "joint armed struggle together with colonized people against imperialist aggressors".<sup>8</sup> Others like the Ur-Revisionist Eduard Bernstein embraced racism and made such statements as

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Heidieman "Socialism and Black Oppression" *Jacobin* April 30 2018

<sup>7</sup> Claude McKay. "Soviet Russia and the Negro" *The Crisis* December 1923

<sup>8</sup> Richard Day. *Discovering Imperialism* (Chicago Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2012), 11

“Races who are hostile to or incapable of civilization cannot claim our sympathies when they revolt against civilization.”<sup>9</sup>

The debate over race and colonialism came to a head at a joint conference of the Second Internationale in 1907, where Bernstein explicitly called for a “Socialist Colonial Policy” saying “we must relinquish the Utopian idea of abandoning the colonies. The ultimate consequence of such a view would be to give the United States back to the Indians!” Infuriated by the remark, Karl Kautsky, a German Socialist commonly regarded as the ideological “pope” of Second International Marxism, retorted with this piercing critique:

I am quite astonished that he [Bernstein] defended here the theory that there are two groups of peoples, one destined to rule and the other to be ruled, that there are people who are like children and incapable of governing themselves. That is only a variation of the old refrain, which was the foundation of all despotism, that some people are born into this world to be riders, with spurs on their feet, and others with saddles on their back to carry them.<sup>10</sup>

Kautsky continued by making an explicit reference to American slavery, noting “it was also the argument of the slaveholders of the American South, who said that culture rested on the forced labour of the slaves and that the country would relapse into barbarism if slavery were abolished. It was wrong then and wrong now, we cannot adopt such an argument.”<sup>11</sup> Kautsky’s argument carried weight, and the Congress of Socialist Parties voted 128 to 108 condemning Bernstein's resolution and declared that “the civilizing mission that capitalist society claims to serve is no more than a veil for its lust for conquest and exploitation. The Congress condemns the barbaric methods of capitalist colonization.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Day, 11

<sup>10</sup> Day, 26

<sup>11</sup> Day, 26

<sup>12</sup> Day, 28

In an article for the Communist Newspaper *Proletary*, a young Vladimir Lenin observed that the resolution was only defeated by “the combined votes of the small nations. The Proletariat has been consumed by a lust for conquest.” Lenin wrote extensively on the issues of colonialism and “The Black Question”.<sup>13</sup> Though his work *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* garners more attention, Lenin also wrote *Russians and Negroes*, published in 1925, in which he argued that African Americans should be “Classed as an oppressed nation” who “were the last to be freed from slavery, and they still bear, more than anyone else, the cruel marks of slavery—even in advanced countries—for capitalism has no ‘room’ for other than legal emancipation, and even the latter it curtails in every possible way.”<sup>14</sup> In addition, Lenin considered *African Americans as a nation within a nation* and explicitly compared the “Semi-feudal” system of sharecropping in the American South to the economic legacy of serfdom in the Russian Empire.

In 1914, Lenin broke with Kautsky due to his (and the Second International more broadly) unwillingness to oppose the First World War. Afterwards, he continued to criticize Kautsky for what he saw as a milquetoast answer to the racial question. When Kautsky offhandedly used America as an example of “perfect bourgeois democracy,” Lenin savaged him, saying “the learned mister Kautsky could have studied this ‘law’ of bourgeois democracy in connection with the lynching of negroes in America.”<sup>15</sup> The special attention Lenin gave to “the Negro question” would continue after the October Revolution.

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<sup>13</sup> Day, 28

<sup>14</sup> Joe Patman, “V. I. Lenin on the ‘Black Question’” *Critique: The Journal of Socialist Theory*, 48, No.1 (2020) 80

<sup>15</sup> Patman, 82

Lenin's break with Kautsky and the success of the October Revolution shattered the Second International. Those who aligned with Lenin then duly convened the first meeting of the Communist International, shortened as the Comintern, in March 1919. The Comintern was qualitatively different from the old Second International in that it only recognized one communist party per represented state. It was directed by the Russian Communist party, later the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and adhered to Leninist Democratic-Centralist principals. These principals stipulated that the policies embraced by the executive committee of the Comintern had to be followed to the letter by its constituent parties.<sup>16</sup> In effect, the Comintern had become a "single universal Communist Party."<sup>17</sup>

While the first meeting of the Comintern had delegates from Communist and revolutionary leftist parties from across Europe, North America and Asia, there were no African American or African delegates. This was a problem that would soon be rectified, both by a class of Communist-inclined African Americans who found themselves under assault by a reactionary backlash in the United States, and by Lenin himself.

### **Kindling**

The Communist party would have trouble finding a group more interested in hearing its message than the educated African American middle class of the northern cities. Many African Americans had moved to the Northern Cities from the Deep South during the First World War, seeking employment in the factories and relief from the

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<sup>16</sup> The Executive Committee of the Comintern was theoretically elected by all the Communist Parties, but was in practice dominated by the CPSU see: Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, Red Globe Press.

<sup>17</sup> Adi, 9



deteriorating conditions in the South in a refugee crisis we call “The First Great Migration” (1916-1919).<sup>18</sup> A many factors had combined to make life increasingly intolerable for African Americans in the Deep South. Economic conditions were deteriorating. With the sharecropping system at its height African Americans in the South found themselves forced into debt peonage or ‘debt slavery’ where their wages went directly to paying back money owed to their white landlords. Meanwhile, the use of Black Prison labor exploded, lynching increased and Jim Crow solidified. African Americans began to feel that staying in the South risked re-enslavement or death.<sup>19</sup> Fundamentally, the accommodationist compromise that had defined the relationship between upwardly-mobile African Americans and the white supremacist Bourbon Democrats who ruled the South was collapsing. This post-reconstruction agreement spearheaded by Black intellectuals like Booker T. Washington argued that African Americans should eschew social and political equality for a place in the economic order. However, while a small number of African Americans managed to claw their way into respectability, many more languished on the same plantations their ancestors had worked during slavery and those who reached the middle class were still at risk for brutal white-supremacist violence.

Still, as Eric Arnesen argues in *Black Migration*, “Conditions in the South had long been oppressive and harsh, but they alone had not been sufficient to generate large numbers of migrants from the region” there had been earlier limited Black exoduses, with tens of thousands leaving the South after the end of reconstruction, but it would take an

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<sup>18</sup> Breton Mock. “The ‘Great Migration’ was about racial terror, not Jobs” *Bloomberg City Lab* June 24th, 2015

<sup>19</sup> Eric Arnesen, *Black Protest and The Great Migration* (Boston: Bedford/Saint-Martin’s Books, 2003) 3

explosion of opportunity in the North to set off mass migration.<sup>20</sup> The First World War provided such an opportunity. Before the war most African Americans were limited to performing menial labor and domestic work in the northern cities, with employers in the better-paying factories refusing to hire African Americans when white labor was available. But with the outbreak of the war in Europe and later the draft millions fewer white workers were available to fill the factories just as demand skyrocketed for war material. Northern employers, facing a labor shortage, began recruiting African Americans for the first time. Pittsburgh's steel mills, Detroit's automobile factories, and Chicago's meatpacking plants opened to African Americans for the first time.

Labor agents from Ford, General Motors, and Union Pacific blanketed the South looking for workers. They did not have difficulty finding takers, daily wages in Northern factories were nearly five times higher than those for farm workers in the South.<sup>21</sup> Southern whites refused to blame their own treatment of African Americans for the migration, instead passing legislation restricting the activities of "carpetbagging" labor recruiters from the North.<sup>22</sup> But by 1917 it was too late, the Great Migration was in full swing, Black newspapers and Progressive organizations like the Urban League encouraged migrants to move North. Word travelled quickly between friends and families, and whole communities began to uproot themselves and move north en masse.

This movement to the North is part of a long search for "autonomous space" by African Americans, a heritage that stretched back to runaway slaves, maroon communities, and emigrationists. Though an improvement compared to the Deep South,

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<sup>20</sup> Arnesen, 6

<sup>21</sup> Arnesen, 9

<sup>22</sup> Arnesen, 9

African Americans arriving in the North were again discriminated against, with factory owners and urban police forces assuming the role of plantation owner and the lynch mob. The Great Migration had transitioned many African Americans from rural-agrarian to urban-industrial wage labor, which came with a new set of injustices and repression. While the factory doors were opened to them, it was on a last-hired first-fired basis. Southern migrants had difficulty securing lodging because of racist landlords, and often found themselves in squalid tenements.<sup>23</sup> White immigrants and natives alike resented African American competition for jobs, and conservative craft unions refused to organize African Americans.<sup>24</sup> Urban poverty was endemic, it says something about how terrible conditions in the South were that African Americans continued to move North. A new environment and new challenges required new articulations of resistance and the extension of the search for autonomous space even further afield.

African Americans brought their own traditions of resistance to northern cities. Tactics like work slowdowns, sabotage, and theft, all formally used among the enslaved of the agrarian South, found new expressions on the factory floor of the urban industrial North. In those same factories, African Americans were also exposed to a radical milieu of immigrant industrial laborers immersed in the European revolutionary socialist tradition. Despite savage repression from the state, bosses, and paramilitary strikebreakers, African Americans were recruited by both the Knights of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In the resulting synthesis African Americans experienced the hypocrisy of much of the moderate labor movement and the ephemerality of support from immigrant groups who often painted African American laborers as scabs.

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<sup>23</sup> Arnesen, 15

<sup>24</sup> Arnesen, 12

However, African American industrial laborers and the nascent radical middle-class also discovered the liberatory potential of radical socialism. As the most precarious element of the Northern Urban Proletariat, African Americans saw just how repressive modern capitalism could be.

Just as the First Great Migration was entering into full swing conditions in the Caribbean were primed for a mass migration of Afro Caribbean people to the United States. Those fleeing from the Southern United States to New York City found a kindred community in recent Afro-Caribbean immigrants. Push factors included the rapid consolidation of power by white-owned plantations harvesting cash crops over independent small Black farmers on many Caribbean Islands, and a series of American military adventures and interventions across the Caribbean. The United States would rewrite constitutions and seize natural resources across the Caribbean during the early 20th century, in the period following the Spanish-American War the US occupied Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Honduras. This led many landless and unemployed Afro-Caribbeans to leave their islands in search of work and education in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

Though Afro Caribbean immigration was not limited to impoverished farmers, middle class Afro Caribbean people stifled by the colonial mores of the still European-controlled Caribbean islands were drawn to vibrant cultural centers in cities like New York. These emigrants brought with them a unique sense of autonomy and independence wherever they went, helping to set off the New Negro movement in America and the Negritude movement in France. In America, Afro-Caribbeans found themselves a

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<sup>25</sup> Winston James,  *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*  (New York: Verso Books, 1998), 110

minority group for the first time, and bristled under the weight of American racism. Significantly, Afro-Caribbean people imported their own traditions of resistance to white supremacy, having “come from societies in which Black people, from the period of slavery and its aftermath, had established a rich and virtually unbroken tradition of culture of armed and forthright resistance... unparalleled by any other group of Africans in the New World”<sup>26</sup>

Afro-Caribbeans became some of the most influential African radicals in the United States.<sup>27</sup> Marcus Garvey, founder of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), as well as Claude McKay, Harlem Renaissance poet and Communist fellow traveler came from Jamaica. From Trinidad and Tobago came George Padmore, first leader of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW), Claudia Jones, one of the most influential women in the Communist party, and C.L.R. James, Trotskyite writer of *The Black Jacobins*. While Cyril Briggs, founder of the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), came from the British-ruled island of Nevis in the Lesser Antilles.

Though native-born African Americans would occasionally clash with the Afro-Caribbeans who dominated many organizing spaces, mutual resentment of “a small ruling class that engrossed the land” was a common feature of both impoverished Caribbean farmers and former deep-southern sharecroppers.<sup>28</sup> The meeting of two Black cultures under conditions of repression heightened diasporic and class consciousness.<sup>29</sup> “The West

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<sup>26</sup> James, 111

<sup>27</sup> James, 122

<sup>28</sup> James, 38

<sup>29</sup> Minkah Makalani, “Internationalizing the Third Internationale” *The Journal of African American History* 96 No.2 (2011) pg. 151

Indians carried into Harlem a sensitivity to the social stratification of their Caribbean homelands... Those Colonial roots made them fiercely anti-imperialist and hostile to Capitalism.”<sup>30</sup> For African Americans the international nature of racist and colonial repression came into high relief just as many of them were being conscripted to participate in that system’s mass-suicide through trench warfare and poison gas.

### **Meeting**

World War One opened the door for future liberatory possibilities though not in the ways many African American radicals originally thought. W.E.B Du Bois originally considered the war to be an opportunity for African Americans to confirm their citizenship through blood, infamously calling for them to “close ranks” behind the war effort. However, his eventual disillusionment with the war is indicative of a radicalism soon to come in Black politics. As he put it: "But, by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if, now that the war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land."<sup>31</sup> Many Black intellectuals like Du Bois and future Black leaders in the Communist party such as Otto Huiswoud first became disillusioned with Liberalism after Woodrow Wilson’s call for “National Self Determination” as part of his Fourteen Point Plan to prevent another war purposefully excluded colonized non-white nationalities. Moderate Socialists and Progressives were also discredited by their refusal to support the unabashedly anti-imperialist new revolution in Soviet Russia.

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<sup>30</sup> Solomon, 4

<sup>31</sup> Chad Willams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2010) p. 207.

The 1910s were an extremely bleak period for those fighting for Black Liberation. Woodrow Wilson (the first Southern President elected since the Civil War) had begun his administration by segregating the Federal Government, effectively bringing segregation to every state in America. In 1915 Wilson showed *Birth of a Nation*, a movie glorifying the Ku Klux Klan, in the White House, describing it as an: “authentic record of reconstruction” bringing the lost cause myth into Lincoln’s former home. African Americans fought back, organizations like the recently founded NAACP and the Black press called for boycotts of *Birth of a Nation* and argued forcefully against federal segregation. The end of the War and Wilson's public rejection of any mention of racial equality in the Treaty of Versailles enraged Black intellectuals further. While the failure of Congress to pass any sort of Anti-Lynching legislation served as yet another insult.

Though it was not just Black intellectuals who were radicalized by the First World War and its aftermath. In France, African American soldiers were treated with a degree of humanity and respect that was impossible to imagine in the United States. African troops in France interacted with revolutionary Russians, and it was reported that some African American soldiers who were sent to occupy territory in Soviet Russia in 1918 defected to the Red Army.<sup>32</sup> African American soldiers returned to America with a sense of their own dignity, and a desire to see it reflected in their own society.

The period immediately following the First World War was one of immense reactionary violence directed both against African Americans and the workers movement. The first Red Scare occurred parallel to a series of anti-Black race riots and an explosion in lynching during a period called the Red Summer. In the newspapers Attorney General

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<sup>32</sup> Adi, 11

Arnold Palmer had declared that all “Alien Reds” were to be deported.<sup>33</sup> In late April 1919 falsified reports of “May-Day Death Plots” and plans to overthrow the American government led to widespread crackdowns of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and radical elements in the Socialist Party.<sup>34</sup> Concocted hysteria about a worker’s uprising intermingled with white supremacist postwar retrenchment. Three months after the May Day scare, newspapers in Arkansas justified an anti-Black pogrom which left one hundred dead with a headline titled “Negroes Plan to Kill all Whites.” In-fact, the repression had been brought about when a Black-led Union called the Progressive Farmers and Households Union of America had attempted to organize sharecroppers.

By 1919, the old Socialist Party had been shattered by repression and ideological disagreement over the Soviet Union, out of the wreckage emerged the Communist Party of America (CPA), the Communist Labor Party of America (CLPA), with and a rump reformist Socialist faction even less amenable to interracial organizing and revolutionary action. It is here that we find Otto Huiswoud, the first known Black Communist in the United States. Huiswoud was originally from Suriname and joined the CPUSA already experience organizing in the left wing of the Socialist Party, he was widely seen as an ideologue and fierce knife-fighter in the factional disputes that characterized this early period of the American Communist movement; he was also one of the founding members of the Communist Party of America. He and two other men, the Afro Caribbean Socialist

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<sup>33</sup> *The Ogden Standard* “Palmer Declares that Alien ‘Reds’ are to be Deported” Ogden City: November 8th 1919. From the Library of Congress. *Chronicling Historic American Newspapers* <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85058396/1919-11-08/ed-1/seq-1/#words=Palmer+RAIDS+raids> (Accessed 12/6/2020)

<sup>34</sup> *The Tulsa Daily World* “May Day Death Plot is Uncovered” Tulsa: April 30th 1921. From the Library of Congress. *Chronicling Historic American Newspapers* <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042345/1920-04-30/ed-1/seq-1/#words=coal+Palmer> Accessed:12/6/2020



Claude McKay and the first African American Communist “aspiring actor and writer” Lovett Fort-Whiteman, became the nucleus of the early African section of the Communist party in the United States (though McKay later unconvincingly argued that he never joined the party).<sup>35</sup>

Published in between articles in *The Liberator* (a wartime Socialist Magazine founded by Max Eastman) denouncing the SPA for its weak-willed moderation; Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die” particularly encapsulated the spirit of the age when it called for African Americans (and the embattled revolutionary movement of the era more generally) to:

“Like men face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but  
fighting back!”<sup>36</sup>

This uptick in resistance to white supremacy did not go unnoticed. The infant national security state, already strengthened by a nearly-unprecedented slate of laws including the Sedition Act of 1918 (which made it illegal to criticize the war effort) turned its gaze to the postwar radicals. As described in Theodore Kornweibel’s excellent work *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns against Black Militancy* the FBI’s predecessors created a network of informants within Black Radical communities, withheld passports from those considered “too dangerous” and intermittently blocked the distribution of several Black Radical periodicals including *The Liberator*.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2011) 115.

<sup>36</sup> Claude McKay, “If we must die” *The Liberator* June 1919, 21

<sup>37</sup> Theodore Kornweibel. *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1998) 27

## The ABB and Its Rivals

It was in this climate of total repression that the “racial consciousness” espoused by the period’s New Negro Movement led to the creation of multiple conservative and radical Black-led organizations. Most importantly for our purposes is Cyril Briggs’ African Blood Brotherhood (ABB). The ABB incorporated both Black Nationalist and Marxist ideology and served as the first Black-centered and led Marxist organization in the United States. Briggs had immigrated to Harlem from Nevis in 1905, and the nucleus of the ABB’s membership were West Indian. Through his connections with fellow Caribbean transplants Otto Huiswoud and radical writer Claude McKay, the organization eventually merged with the Workers Party, which would later become Communist party of the United States of America (CPUSA).<sup>38</sup>

The ABB and its organizational descendants were nowhere near the largest of the Black organizations born out of the progressive era and the fires of World War One. The most moderate of which included the National League on Urban Conditions among Negroes (ULUCN) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Though significantly more far reaching in their demands than the old Bookerite accommodationist Black movements of post-reconstruction, the NAACP’s base among the Black middle class and avowedly reformist agenda often placed them at odds with Black Communists.<sup>39</sup> Still, in 1919 both the ABB’s and NAACP’s likely membership of 3,500 and 90,000 respectively were both dwarfed by Marcus Garvey’s

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<sup>38</sup> Makalani, 99

<sup>39</sup> Kornweibel, 38

United Negro Improvement Association, who's influence reached "hundreds of thousands of followers" across the world.<sup>40</sup>

Garvey carried an appeal for the masses of new arrivals from the US South and the West Indies. His ideology of personal uplift, a return to Africa, and Black racial pride struck a nerve with the working-class masses of the urban North, who made up the rank and file of the UNIA. Black Communists envied Garvey's appeal with the masses. The ABB especially was heavily influenced by the Garveyite movement. The ABB supported Garvey and had staked out an independent Black Nationalist line. Unlike Huiswoud and Fort-Whiteman, Briggs came to Communism through the rapidly developing Black consciousness and Black nationalist thought of the era, not through the Socialist Party. Initially the ABB's engagement with the Comintern was wholly pragmatic; "In its *Program*, the ABB explained that the important thing about Soviet Russia is not the merits or demerits of the Soviet form of Government, but the outstanding fact that Soviet Russia is opposing the imperialist robbers who have partitioned our motherland and subjugated our kindred"<sup>41</sup> The goal of the ABB-affiliated newspaper *Crusader* was much more a "renaissance of Negro culture and power throughout the world" than a global proletarian revolution.<sup>42</sup>

Themes of "race patriotism" inundated the ABB's publications. However, it contained a merger of thought that made it unique from other Black organizations. Fundamentally, despite the Garveyite trappings, the ABB was a Socialist organization, and its rhetoric arguing that "Socialism and Communism were in practical application in

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<sup>40</sup> Kornweibel, 100

<sup>41</sup> Adi, 15

<sup>42</sup> Adi, 15

Africa for centuries before they were even advanced as theories in the European world” distanced it from more moderate movements.<sup>43</sup> Despite all their differences, the NAACP and the Garveyite movement had a fundamental similarity, they were both reformist uplift movements. One called for equal civil rights for African Americans, the other for the creation of a Black homeland and the return of the Diaspora to Africa. Neither took militant action, and both had abiding middle class sensibilities premised on economic uplift and Black capitalism.

At first, the ABB could have fit in within this ecosystem. Though some of the first issues of the ABB’s newspaper *The Crusader* referenced to an alliance with “class-conscious” white workers, it was not explicitly Marxist. The work of groups like the Hamitic League, an esoteric Afrocentric organization, was regularly published, and their condemnation of “Hebrew Politicians and Greek Philosophers” certainly didn’t fit in with Marxist rhetoric.<sup>44</sup> However, through his connections with other radicals in Harlem, and reacting to Soviet anti-colonial broadsides, Briggs found himself drawn more and more into the Communist orbit. In Leninist Communism, Briggs could see a real ally in the fight for Black Liberation, in rhetoric at least the Communists had none of the equivocation of the old Socialists, total racial equality, and end to colonialism, and a whole new world were the demands of the day.

Slowly but surely, groups like the Hamitic League were dropped from the pages of the *Liberator*. Cyril Briggs’ claim that Socialism had long-since existed in Africa poisoned him against Garvey’s plan of developing Africa through capitalism. After multiple attempts at bringing the Garveyite movement into the Communist fold, Cyril

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<sup>43</sup> Solomon, 43

<sup>44</sup> Soloman, 12

Briggs broke with Garvey, writing under a pseudonym that “the goal of the Garvey organization is evidently the liberation of Africa from the white imperialist powers for the purpose of creating the entire vast continent of nearly 12 million square miles into an empire for the imperial dynasty of Marcus Garvey”<sup>45</sup> Briggs was certainly not alone in noticing the dictatorial inclinations of Marcus Garvey. Comparative moderates like Du Bois saw him as a huckster and charlatan.<sup>46</sup>

Rejecting the mainline Garveyite vision Briggs instead took Garvey’s idea of a Black State in Africa and brought it to a more radical conclusion across the Atlantic. It is here one can also find the genesis of Black “Self-Determination” in the United States. While Lenin had already described African Americans as “An oppressed nation” and Wilson had applied the concept of Self-Determination to Europe, Briggs was the first to articulate the desire for an independent African state within the borders of the USA.<sup>47</sup> Importantly, Briggs described this independent African State as part of a “Universal Socialist Cooperative Commonwealth” which would bring about “the overthrow of Capitalism, the dawn of a new day, a new heaven on Earth.”<sup>48</sup> Brigg’s calls for “some ten percent” of US land to be made into the preserve of this African-Majority Socialist Cooperative Commonwealth would have been seen as incomprehensibly radical even by the most left wing members of the Socialist party, and by Garvey.<sup>49</sup> By 1928, however, African American independence in the Black Belt would become the official doctrine of the Comintern.

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<sup>45</sup> ‘C Lorenzo’ “The Negro Liberation Movement” *The Toiler* December 1921

<sup>46</sup> Alistair Key. *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology* (London: Hymns Ancient and Modern, 2008) 27

<sup>47</sup> Solomon, 14

<sup>48</sup> Solomon, 14

<sup>49</sup> Solomon, 14

As early as 1919 The Soviet Union, in turn, found itself drawn to African Americans. The Soviets viewed African Americans as the educated elite of the African Diaspora. More importantly, the Soviets thought African Americans could serve as Apostles of Communism to the Black world.<sup>50</sup> In mainline Marxist-Leninist ideology, industrial workers are the revolutionary class and the largest concentration of Black industrial workers in the world in the 1920s were African Americans in Northern cities. African Americans Industrial Workers were also some of the most disillusioned with capitalism in the entire world. Subjected to discrimination as well as labor discipline, last hired and first fired, without union protection and occupying some of the poorest paid jobs in the labor force Communist organizers could not have found a population more primed to listen to their message.

In 1920 at the Second Congress of the Comintern, Vladimir Lenin requested a “draft thesis on the Negro Question” and talks first began on the creation of a special “Negro Commission” and the possible convocation of a “world negro congress” of African-Socialist representatives from across the world. However, it was not until the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922 that any African Americans actually made it to Moscow. The two representatives who did were Otto Huiswoud and Claude McKay. Huiswoud addressed the Comintern on the Black American Laborer’s conditions and was instrumental in creating the Comintern thesis on “The Negro Question” even meeting with Lenin himself.<sup>51</sup> This new Comintern thesis was revolutionary in its implications but not its implementation. It declared that “the penetration and intensive colonization of regions inhabited by black races is becoming the last great problem on the solution of

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<sup>50</sup> Adi, 64

<sup>51</sup> Adi, 25

which the further development of capitalism itself depends” and, furthermore, that “the international struggle of the Negro race is a struggle against Capitalism and Imperialism and it is on this basis that the world Negro movement must be organized.”<sup>52</sup>

The term “world Negro movement” is significant, as it indicates the Comintern is using Lenin’s thesis on African Americans as a distinct nation and applying that mode of analysis to African-descended people across the world. This revolutionary idea is a sort of Pan-Africanist one, and, although, W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey had both already organized Pan-Africanist movements, this was the first time that the Comintern officially infused that ideology into its revolutionary socialist strategy. Importantly, this kind of Pan-Africanism was massively different from both Garvey’s and Du Bois conceptions. Though Du Bois later grew more radical, as of the early 1920s the program of his Pan-African movement was limited to fighting for the extension of the right to vote to Africans and the creation of a system of tutelage that could eventually result in independence.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile Garvey’s vision had him as the President of the entire African continent, rebuilt to resemble the United States. The Comintern’s conception of Anti-Imperialism and a ‘World Negro Movement’ called for total and immediate independence and self-government for African people.<sup>54</sup> Remarkably, the majority-white Comintern’s position on colonialism was more radical than both the Black led Garveyite movement and Pan African Congresses. However, implementation of this new strategy was left up to “the various sections of the Communist internationale who have Negroes in their territory or colonies.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Adi, 23

<sup>53</sup> Du Bois, “To the World: Manifesto of the Second Pan African Congress” *The Crisis* November 1921

<sup>54</sup> Adi, 24

<sup>55</sup> Adi, 24

This was a problem for several reasons. Despite modern perceptions of the Comintern as an all-powerful institution controlling its constituent parties, the various national Communist parties often purposefully did not implement Comintern decisions. The legacies of Second International Racialist Socialism still loomed large. The CPGB (Communist Party of Great Britain) for a large period of the early 1920s did not explicitly call for the withdrawal of British forces from the colonies and ignored Comintern requests to follow the party line.<sup>56</sup> Local majority-white Communist parties in Imperialist nations often simply did not care about “the Negro question.” Even more Communists were stuck in a rigid class-first perspective, which considered racism to be an ancillary problem that would be rendered obsolete by the destruction of capitalism. This would have to be rectified by the Comintern.

Lenin had criticized the Socialist party in the United States for its unwillingness to engage with Black workers long before the October Revolution. Even afterwards the new Communist party “did not actively recruit Black People.” The eventual change in policy “seems to be largely the responsibility of Lenin” who not only listened to African American Communists who travelled to the meetings of the Comintern like McKay and Huiswoud, but actively pushed for the pro-Black resolutions adopted at the Comintern to be implemented by local Communist parties.<sup>57</sup> Lenin even called for the CPUSA to organize a National Congress of African American Communists who would direct outreach on Black issues.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Adi, 29

<sup>57</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) 219

<sup>58</sup> Patman, 84



In a letter written to Lenin by a prominent member of the Comintern saying that: “the program of the Soviet Government must be that the Negro and other colonial peoples participate on equal footing with European people in conferences and commissions and have the right to prevent interference in their internal affairs.” Lenin had underlined the words “on equal footing” four times and written “true!” in the margins.<sup>59</sup>

Still, despite all this rhetoric from Lenin, the Comintern’s consensus at the Fourth Congress was that local Communist parties were to be in charge of policy implementation on the “Negro Question”. This Fourth Congress also marked the beginning of a “second period” for the Comintern. While the “first period” was identified as a revolutionary crisis which gripped the world from 1918-1922, ignited by the First World War, the Russian Revolution and major working-class uprisings across Europe and the United States, the “Second period” was to be a time of consolidation. One of the major points of departure with the first period was the formation of alliances with more moderate left-wing parties in order to secure victories on more bread-and-butter issues like wage increases. The intention of these “popular fronts” was to gain popularity for and grow the various Communist parties in anticipation of the next major revolutionary upsurge. This period was also characterized by a moderation of internal Soviet policy. The radicalism of War Communism was replaced by the adoption of a market socialist New Economic Policy and a period of joint rule between Joseph Stalin, Nikolai Bukharin, and Leon Trotsky.

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<sup>59</sup> Patman, 85

The second period marks the beginning of a recurring trend in the interactions between the Soviet Union and African Communists. High-level ideological and doctrinal decisions by the Comintern, influenced by Soviet foreign and domestic policy, would continue to heavily effect the work of African Communists across the world. For both the better and for the worse.

For instance, the two decisions by the Fourth Congress of the Comintern; to leave the implementation of resolutions on “the Negro Question” to the local parties, and to adopt a popular-front strategy, gravely hurt the CPUSA’s interactions with African Americans. The mid 1920s can easily be seen as an early nadir for African American Communist relations. For instance, in 1924, Otto Huiswoud’s membership in the Workers Party of America was briefly suspended after he vigorously denounced a white farmer who had spoken against an anti-lynching resolution at a meeting of the Farmer-Labor party.<sup>60</sup> Though the Workers party had agreed with Huiswoud’s sentiment, they had considered it a breach of discipline that undermined their efforts to follow the Comintern’s directives. This tendency to toss aside African American interests to appeal to white liberals was one of the many things that would later divide many African Americans from the Comintern. The number of African Americans in the CPUSA remained low throughout the early and mid-nineteen twenties, with the cadre of Black Communists mainly being made up of holdovers from the ABB.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Maria Van Enckevort. “The Life and Work of Otto Huiswoud” (Doctoral Thesis, University of the West Indies, 2001) 34

<sup>61</sup> Adi, 31

## **The Negro Sanhedrin and ANLC**

African American communists had been repeatedly disappointed not just by the CPUSA but by other Black-led organizations outside of the party. The popular front extended to them too and on numerous occasions the ABB had attempted to get the Garveyite movement to adopt anti-capitalist rhetoric, and to meet with other African American organizations. One such meeting was an “all-race conference” that met in Chicago in 1924. Dubbed the “Negro Sanhedrin” by the sociologist Kelly Miller of Howard University as a biblical reference to the supreme council of the Hebrew people, the Sanhedrin was attended by hundreds of delegates from Black organizations across the US with representatives of the CPUSA and ABB joining people like W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B Wells. Also in attendance were representatives from more conservative institutions like Kelly Miller who was elected chairman of the gathering. The radical delegation of CPUSA and ABB members led by Fort-Whiteman had attempted to put forward resolutions in favor of condemning the American Federation of Labor (AFL) for allowing its constituent unions to reject Black prospective members. Other resolutions by the ABB and CPUSA included diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union, an end to racial segregation, and, most provocatively, the repealing of all anti-miscegenation laws.

Moderates in the Sanhedrin stonewalled all of these measures, placed the Sanhedrin’s labor commission under the control of a Black member of the Chicago chamber of commerce, and expelled both the ABB and the CPUSA from all further national congresses. This ended any chance of cooperation between Black radicals and moderates for the foreseeable future.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Makalani, 114

At this point, the Comintern was still coming down hard on its constituent parties to advance Black interests. However, its solutions were ad-hoc and mainly consisted of chastising the local Communist parties until they did what was required. Still, there were isolated successes. African American Communists fought vigorously against their isolation within the CPUSA and Black politics more generally. In fact, a year after the failure of the Sanhedrin, Ford-Whiteman wrote to the Comintern's standing executive committee saying the CPUSA had done "practically nothing" on the Negro question and made "no serious effort to organize Black Workers."<sup>63</sup> Even by 1928 the CPUSA had "no more than fifty negroes in our party."<sup>64</sup>

It would take radical Black self-organization within the Comintern to truly build a mass movement. Fort-Whiteman's complaints would not go unanswered. The Comintern supported his efforts to found an "American Negro Labor Congress." (ANLC), which would attempt to deal with both the failure of the Sanhedrin and the previous inability of the Communist party to successfully recruit large numbers of African Americans.<sup>65</sup> At its founding the ANLC was meant to be a "front" organization of the CPUSA, not directly tied to the party, but still pushing its agenda. Its members included many longtime Afro-Caribbean Communists such as Cyril Briggs, who would resent the influence of the eccentric Fort-Whiteman within the organization.<sup>66</sup> The ANLC was vital for the organization of African Americans as workers. Mainstream American Unions like the AFL were racialized craft unions unwilling to accept Black membership or organize

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<sup>63</sup> Makalani, 119

<sup>64</sup> Makalani, 122

<sup>65</sup> Adi, 65

<sup>66</sup> Fort-Whiteman was known for wearing Russian garb daily, flaunting his relationship with the Soviet Union. This was obviously problematic when trying to form a front organization see: *The Cry was Unity*

unskilled workers. The American Negro Labor Congress followed in the footsteps of earlier radical unions that crossed the color line like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).<sup>67</sup> Although the ANLC only lasted for five years, from 1925 to 1930, before it was replaced due to inactivity by a new organization called the League for the Struggle for Negro rights, the ANLC would leave a lasting mark through the recruitment of new activists and its incessant calls for the continually delayed World Negro Congress.

The ANLC's first meeting was held in Chicago in 1925, where it took the mantle of the main organizing forum for Black Communists in the United States. In Fort-Whiteman's own words, the ANLC's purpose was: "to gather, to mobilize, and to coordinate into a fighting machine the most enlightened and militant and class-conscious workers of the race." While the ANLC would certainly fall short of that goal, its existence showed the capacity for African American self-organization within the Comintern and the CPUSA. Its demands were radical, both on the Communist Party and society at large. The ANLC called for "total social equality for the Negro Race," condemned the Ku Klux Klan at the height of its power, and demanded that the Comintern organize a "World Race Conference" that would bring together African

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<sup>67</sup> The relationship between the American Labor Movement, political radicalism, and race is a complicated one. In the early 20th century American Unions ran the gamut from Craft Unions like the AFL which were supposedly a-political and deeply suspicious of Communist and Interracial organizing to the Anarcho-Syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (or 'wobblies') who believed in total racial equality and a Socialist economic system. The ANLC follows in the legacy of the Wobblies (and many wobblies would join the Communist party), but its connection to the CPUSA and explicit focus on organizing African Americans would make it unique. For more on the wobblies, see Patrick Renshaw's excellent *The Wobblies: The Story of the IWW*. For more on the ANLC, both Minkah Makalani's *In the Cause of Freedom* and Mark Solomon's *The Cry was Unity* provide a great deal of in-depth information. Also, *Labor's Giant Step* by Mark Preis may be old, but it provides a great overview of the ideological diversity and factional backbiting within Interwar Unions.

Communists from across the diaspora.<sup>68</sup> Though that would come in the future, the Comintern was already heavily supporting African American members of the CPUSA.

Fort-Whiteman had been one of the testbeds of what would become a consistent effort in this period by the Comintern to send African American and West Indian students to the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow (KUTV). There, prospective leaders would be trained in “Guerilla Warfare and Marxism-Leninism,” among other subjects. The ANLC and this period in general can easily be seen as pre-staging a later explosion in engagement. Both the ANLC and the KUTV would serve as recruitment and training points for a new wave of Black Communist Radicals. Harry Haywood would attend KUTV, while future CPUSA Vice-Presidential Candidate and Politburo member James Ford were recruited by the CPUSA at the ANLC. These newcomers were instrumental in the formation and success of the next period of the Comintern’s engagement with African Americans.

### **The Sixth Congress and Third Period**

The Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928 is often regarded as a point of fundamental and radical change. On the matter of popular fronts, the sixth congress certainly was, but its effect on African Americans is more up for debate. The Sixth Congress marked the end of the “second period” of popular fronts and accommodationism and advanced a “third period” ideology, declaring that the coming years would be marked by “massive class battles and imperialist wars.”<sup>69</sup> The popular fronts created to appease moderates were scrapped and the alliances dissolved. No longer

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<sup>68</sup> “Negro Labour Meeting Attacks Ku Klux Klan” *The Daily Worker* October 30th, 1925

<sup>69</sup> *Id.*, 64

would the Communists attempt to work alongside what it considered milquetoast Socialists, and no longer would African American Communists attempt to compromise with or infiltrate less-radical organizations.

The end of the popular front had implications for African Communists across the world. The most famous change of the Sixth Congress was the decision by the Comintern's Negro Commission, led by Harry Haywood and including James Ford, to adopt a resolution calling for "Black self determination on the basis of a separate nation in the Black belt." This decision has been construed by later commentators as the result of intensely divisive factional struggles within the Comintern where Harry Haywood, in particular, had to fight vigorously for its adoption. However, the record of the Comintern meeting seems to indicate that the issue of self-determination in the Black belt was heavy but not significantly divisive. The call for self-determination echoed ideas first advanced by the ABB and Lenin years earlier.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the point on self-determination was only one of thirteen separate theses advanced by the Comintern at the Sixth Congress on the Negro Question, most of which were simply calling on the CPUSA yet again to step up organization.

The Sixth Congress's self-determination thesis was so indistinct from what had already been articulated by earlier calls for self-determination that in "1928 self-determination meant 'full emancipation' or empowerment." The thesis would have to be reiterated in 1930 with an explicit mention of possible "Secession" from the United States, meaning that the Comintern was explicitly calling for the creation of an independent Black state within the territory of the USA. Though this radical of an

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<sup>70</sup> Adi, 70

interpretation of “self-determination” was not unprecedented, many American Communists privately opposed the new thesis despite it being the party line, including Otto Huiswoud and Cyril Briggs, who both claimed it smelled of “Garveyism.”<sup>71</sup> This is a remarkable about-face for Briggs, who began our story as a fiercely independent and pro-Garvey Black Nationalist.

Despite the growing internal debates, African American engagement with the Comintern exploded in the period immediately following the Sixth Congress of the Comintern. While African American membership in the Communist Party only grew to around “several hundred” by 1931, organizing efforts in the South finally began to bear fruit in the Third Period. For example, the CPUSA-backed Share Cropper’s Union (SCU) in Alabama reached up to 12,000 members, and the CPUSA’s pro-bono legal team International Labor Defense (ILD) which defended African Americans and Union members in various civil rights cases reached up to 500 more.<sup>72</sup> Great strides were being made internationally as well. That first meeting of the World Negro Congress that Lenin had called for in 1920 of was finally held in Hamburg in July of 1930. There representatives from across the African Diaspora founded a permanent organization to advance the struggle for Socialism and Black Freedom globally known as the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW)<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> Adi, 72

<sup>72</sup> Kelly, 119

<sup>73</sup> Adi, 124



## The Golden Age of Black Radicalism

To attribute the success of the CPUSA's organizing efforts among African American workers during the Third Period to the radicalism of Haywood's Black Belt thesis would be a mistake. It was not Haywood's self-determination thesis, which was not even published by the *Southern Worker* (the newspaper of the CPUSA appealing to Southern African Americans) that caused the surge in African American engagement with the Soviet Union.<sup>74</sup> While his thesis may have been a minor factor, more immediate, institutional, and, frankly, materialist causes can be found.

First, during the late 1920s, the brutal factionalism that characterized the internal politics of the Communist party up to that point (outside of the scope of this thesis) came to an end. Much of the Communist party's energy was then freed for party work. Secondly, a great deal of the party-building work done over the course of the 1920s bore fruit in the early 1930s. Funding from the Soviet Union allowed for the creation of newspapers, circulars, workers clubs and a party bureaucracy.<sup>75</sup> The CPUSA became a social and economic ecosystem, one of the largest, formally integrated ones in the United States. In the CPUSA, jobs abounded in political activism, writing work, and organization, African Americans could often be found filling these positions, drawn in by pay equality with whites and an actively anti-racist workplace culture. Jobs in the CPUSA attracted everything from writers to artists to journalists and workers. As Robin Kelly puts it: for "the upwardly mobile working class" Black families that were drawn to

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<sup>74</sup> Kelly, 16

<sup>75</sup> Solomon, 51

the CPUSA “the party merely constituted an alternative stepping stone to respectability” in the confines of their world.<sup>76</sup>

African Americans also climbed through the ranks and built parallel institutions to advocate for their own interests. In 1929, Black Communists Otto Huiswoud, Cyril Briggs, Otto Hall, John Henry and Edward Welsh were all elected to CPUSA’s Central Executive Bureau, the highest decision-making body of the CPUSA.<sup>77</sup> Years earlier, Otto Huiswoud had taken control of the party’s Negro Commission (till then led by a White Communist) and passed the torch to Cyril Briggs. Meanwhile, other African Americans and Afro Caribbean people were shooting up the ranks of the Comintern internationally. George Padmore was leading the ITUCNW, James Ford was one of the chairs of the Comintern’s RILU (Red International of Labor Unions) and Fort-Whiteman had stayed in the Soviet Union since the Sixth Congress and taken up a high-ranking position at the Comintern and KUTV. Simply speaking, African Americans had secured positions and gained a great deal of influence within the Communist world, influence which could not be ignored.

African American’s popular political impulses had few other places to go in the early years of the 1930s. The Garveyite movement and the UNIA had long since collapsed, a victim of both consistent repression by the FBI and the growing egotism of Garvey himself.<sup>78</sup> The New Deal made little room for African Americans. The influence they carried within the CPUSA was an outlier, as African Americans had virtually none within both the Democratic and Republican parties. FDR’s progressive alliance rested on

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<sup>76</sup> Kelly, 114

<sup>77</sup> Solomon, 97

<sup>78</sup> Kornweibel, 131

a deal with the devil, and in the South, he aligned himself with the political machines of the Conservative Dixiecrats. Compromises were often made between New Deal bodies designed to increase worker power like the National Recovery Administration (NRA) and various large southern businesses to keep Black wages low.<sup>79</sup> Locked out of the benefits of the New Deal by Jim Crow, even more African Americans began to leave for the North.

The Great Depression was the saving grace for the Communist party both in the USA and the USSR. It validated the most extremist predictions of the Third Period and seemed to indicate an imminent collapse of capitalism. One of its most immediate effects was setting off a new wave of engagement between African Americans and the Soviet Union. A wave that was unlike previous waves of interaction which had been defined by African American Communists travelling to the Comintern or the KUTV. The American economy's collapse combined with Stalin's desire to rapidly industrialize sent a new wave of Black and African American workers, intellectuals, musicians, agriculturalists and engineers into the Soviet Union. Many of whom were not Communists.

Indicative of this new wave was an African American engineer from Ford motor company named Robert Robinson, who was recruited by a Russian delegation to work in the Soviet Union. Enticed by higher pay and fearful of being laid off, Robinson travelled to the Soviet Union and, eventually, was employed in a tractor factory in Stalingrad. In July 1930 he was the victim of a racist attack by two of his White American coworkers while walking on the banks of the Volga. The perpetrators were promptly arrested, tried

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<sup>79</sup> Harvard Sitkoff. *The New Deal for Blacks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 153

on Soviet national radio, and expelled, but not before being framed as living evidence of American Racial Chauvinism.<sup>80</sup>

It was in 1931, not 1928, that the CPUSA finally initiated a mass-movement of African Americans. Inspired by Robinson's trial in the Soviet Union and pushed by Briggs (now a member of the Central Committee) the CPUSA conducted a similar trial in New York City when August Yokinen, a CPUSA member, was accused of failing to stop three African American communists from being thrown out of a Worker's Club. In March 1931, Yokinen was convicted of "racial chauvinism" and expelled from the party.<sup>81</sup> Expulsion for failure to stand up to racism (not just for racist actions) was a sea-change in CPUSA policy and a massive escalation of the campaign against racism within its ranks. The same month as the Yokinen trial, nine African American boys were arrested on a train in Alabama on suspicion of raping two white woman. They were sentenced to death with trumped-up evidence by an all-white jury in Scottsboro. Seeing an opportunity to make inroads with African Americans in the South, the Communist party sprang into action. The International Labor Defense (ILD), the legal wing of the Communist Party, led by Scopes trial lawyer Clarence Darrow, appealed all the way to the Supreme Court and secured the release of five of the nine Black youth.<sup>82</sup> This was not a mere publicity stunt by the party, as International Labor Defense quickly proved itself indispensable, famously twice taking the case of Angelo Herndon: an African American labor organizer convicted of 'insurrection' for interracial organizing and owning

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<sup>80</sup> John Garder. "African Americans in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s: The Development of Transcontinental Protest" *Western Journal of Black Studies* Vol 23 Iss. 3 (1999) 193

<sup>81</sup> *The Lincoln Star*. "Communist Party expels Finnish Janitor in first Mass Trial held for: White Chauvinism " Lincoln: March 2nd 1931.

<sup>82</sup> Kelly, 78

Communist Literature to the Supreme Court and winning landmark victories for freedom of speech.<sup>83</sup> That same year, James Ford, an organizer from Alabama, was the first Black Vice-presidential candidate, running along with Earl Browder on the Communist party ticket.

This explosion of Black engagement with the CPUSA in the early 1930s was a direct result of the growth of African American influence within the CPUSA throughout the 1920s and after the Sixth Congress. Organizations like the ANLC and ITUCNW gave the CPUSA the leadership, bravery and tools necessary to demonstrate its commitment to Black Liberation. Through the Yokoenien and Scottsboro trials, and the nomination of James Ford, the CPUSA finally created the mass movement it had desired. The Communist affiliated Sharecroppers Union in Alabama had grown into the thousands and was engaging in more and more militant action. The African American population, at large, had developed a guarded respect for the CPUSA after the Scottsboro trial. The United States had finally recognized the Soviet Union, and Black elites and conservatives signaled a possible chance for rapprochement with the Communists when the Tuskegee Institute outfitted an agricultural expedition to the Soviet Union.<sup>84</sup> Unfortunately, this Black-Red alliance would be smothered out almost as soon as it had begun.

### **The Second Popular Front and Early Disillusionment**

In 1934, six years after the beginning of the Third Period, the Comintern brought back the popular front. The third period's arguments against collaboration with "Social

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<sup>83</sup> Frederick T Griffiths and Angelo Herndon. "Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and the Case of Angelo Herndon." *African American Review* 35, no. 4 (2001) 2

<sup>84</sup> Garder, 197

Fascists” may have been successful in fighting for Black Liberation in the American South, but in Germany it had helped contribute to success of the Nazi party. The Communists had been unwilling to collaborate with the Social Democrats to stop Hitler due to third period dogma, and both were destroyed.

Threatened by the newly strengthened fascist powers, the Soviet Union sought to improve relations with the United Kingdom and France in an attempt to contain Germany. For the CPUSA, shifts in the Comintern’s policy marked a movement away from the radical Black sharecroppers unions in the southern US and towards a “Southern Popular Front: a United Southern movement spearheaded by white liberals and organized labor.”<sup>85</sup> Gone was the idea of destroying the United States and replacing it with a “United Soviet States of America” and an “Independent Black Belt Republic.” Now “Communism is 20th century Americanism,” designed to be palatable for the patriotic (and often racist) southern liberals.<sup>86</sup>

This change in policy helped the CPUSA at large, just as its Black membership numbers had increased during the Third Period, total membership decreased by 25% between the years 1928 and 1932 from 24,000 members to 6,000 members. The rest of the decade would see Communist Party membership balloon to 55,000.<sup>87</sup> With the Second World War approaching, the preeminent struggle was against imperialism, fascism, and militarism. Black engagement with the Comintern was not completely shattered by the birth of the second popular front. The new emphasis on anti-fascism may

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<sup>85</sup> Kelly, 125

<sup>86</sup> Maurice Isserman. *Which Side Were You On?: The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982) 9

<sup>87</sup> Fraser Ottanelli. *The Communist Party of the United States from the Depression to World War Two* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999) 43

have limited the anti-colonial struggle generally, but it certainly focused the Comintern's efforts.

African American Communists helped lead the international resistance to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, fought for the Republic as part of the Comintern-organized Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War, and worked together with progressive organizations in the National Negro Congress to try to stem the tide of Fascism.<sup>88</sup> The National Negro Congress went as far as to adopt Anti-Fascism as one of the main points in its platform, while African Americans like Langston Hughes and Oliver Law went to Spain to report for and fight for the Spanish Republic.<sup>89</sup> However, the CPUSA would never again lead a mass movement of the Black working class. Though the struggle against Mussolini and Hitler was just, it effectively put the demands and needs of the African American masses on hold.

Internationally the situation was just as dire, though there are conflicting stories around the circumstances. George Padmore, head of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, publicly broke with the Comintern and accused it of dissolving the ITUCNW. He was one of the most influential in a growing wave of Black Socialist dissidents who became frustrated with what he perceived as the lack of emphasis on Black issues and the culture of secrecy in the Communist party. These dissidents would articulate an independent Pan-Africanist Socialist tradition, inspiring the first leaders of independent Trinidad, Kenya, and Ghana. Though during the early thirties that was still in the future, and Padmore walked a lonely road with a scarce few others. He and other early dissidents like Trinidadian writer and Trotskyite CLR James were

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<sup>88</sup> See: Penny Von Eschen *Race Against Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997)

<sup>89</sup> Von Eschen, 11

seen as little better than the Communists by the western press, and were persona non grata with the Comintern. Continuing to advocate for total racial equality and Socialist revolution won them no friends in moderate circles, and their criticisms of Stalin made any rapprochement with the Comintern impossible.

Meanwhile, storm clouds were gathering over the Soviet Union. Robert Robinson could not secure an exit visa to return to the US, and would find himself stuck in the Soviet Union until the 1970s. In 1937, the Soviet government began pressuring those still in the country to adopt Soviet citizenship.<sup>90</sup> The Holodomor of the early 1930s had occurred in rural Ukraine, far from any places where African American emigres lived. However, the purges of Stalin's enemies in the Communist party during the late 1930s were another matter. Terror was inflicted across every level of Soviet society, especially in major cities where many African American emigres lived.

### **Eugene Gordon and the Stalinist Counterrevolution**

Eugene Gordon was a later convert to Communism than many other prominent African Americans, joining the party and starting the Boston Branch of its literary wing, the John Reed Club, in 1931.<sup>91</sup> This came on the heels of a decade of moderate literary achievements, publishing fiction and nonfiction in magazines like *Scribner's*, *The Nation*, and *Opportunity*. In the years before his full conversion to Communism; Gordon had even founded his own magazine, *The Saturday Evening Quill*, with a group of friends. Though the magazine was short lived, Gordon's membership in the Communist party

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<sup>90</sup> Carew, Loc 409

<sup>91</sup> Eugene Gordon Papers Table of Contents, 1932. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. NY, USA.



proved to be a road to further literary employment. That employment would come thousands of miles away at a publication called *The Moscow Daily News*.

A paper with a truly international and revolutionary pedigree, *The Moscow Daily News* was founded in 1930 by Mikhail Borodin (a participant in the first congress of the Comintern) and Anna Louis Strong, two Marxist titans in their own right.<sup>92</sup> *The Moscow Daily News* served as the first daily English-Language newspaper in the Soviet Union, and as a great training ground for aspiring Communist writers from across the English-speaking world.

Gordon is first mentioned by the *Moscow Daily News* in May of 1934, in a review of that year's edition of "International Literature." The author of the review has kind words for Gordon, calling his story *Southern Boyhood Nightmares* (a recollection of surviving the 1900 New Orleans Race Riot) a "grim picture of Negro Suffering."<sup>93</sup> A response to the review two issues later concurs with the quality of Gordon's work declaring that Gordon's story: "is not only well written, but feels like an authentic document from life".<sup>94</sup> Like many other African American writers and journalists, Gordon's work benefited from his membership in the Communist party.

Gordon had arrived in the Soviet Union during the height of the Stakhanovite movement, where individual workers were encouraged to massively over-fulfill work quotas, and those that did were recognized as "heroes of Socialist labor" and were given pay raises, job benefits, and other perks.<sup>95</sup> Gordon served to legitimize the movement in

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<sup>92</sup> Julia Meckinburg *American Girls in Red Russia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) 168-169

<sup>93</sup> H.O. White, "Nonsense" *Moscow Daily News* May 18th 1934

<sup>94</sup> Walt Carmon, "Find Criticism of 'international literature' rather one-sided" *Moscow Daily News* May 22nd, 1934

<sup>95</sup> Hung Chung-Tai. "Revolutions, Catastrophes, and the Dictators: A Review of Stalin and Mao by Lucien Bianco." *China Review* 19, no. 1 (2019)

the food industry, interviewing everyday workers, heads of large processing plants, and, eventually, the Commissar of the food industry of the USSR himself, Anastas Mikoyan. In his interviews with workers, factory managers, and food science experts, Gordon would ask how the Stakhanovite movement was impacting production, when the obligations of five-year plans were set to be met, and how much things had changed since Czarism. Gordon even interviewed former Stakhanovites who had been sent to universities in Moscow to train in management as a reward for their work, one of which “swore that it made him angry to read that certain foreign journalists described the Stakhanov movement as a speedup and implied that Stakhanovites were harassed slaves that didn’t know what it’s all about”.<sup>96</sup>

Gordon also covered social issues such as prostitution. In March and April of 1937, he wrote two articles on ending prostitution and integrating prostitutes back into Soviet society. Both articles argued that “the past is behind” these women, and that they will soon participate as full members of the coming Socialist Society.<sup>97</sup> This sort of subject-matter was nothing new for Gordon. In a 1933 collaboration with Cyril Briggs of the ABB, Gordon had written a pamphlet titled *On the Position of Negro Women*. In the pamphlet one can see some of the antecedents of his thinking on women in the Soviet Union. He recognized that: “In a society based in production for profit to be both a women worker and a Negro is to be doubly handicapped... She suffers both from the general discriminations against women workers and from her identity as a Negro” This insightful theorizing on the intersectional nature of racial and gender-based repression by

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<sup>96</sup> Eugene Gordon “Where workers learn to command in Industry” *Moscow Daily News* June 26th 1936

<sup>97</sup> Eugene Gordon “How the Soviet Union is ending Prostitution” *Moscow Daily News* March 26th 1937; Eugene Gordon “Former prostitutes tell how they have become useful members of society” *Moscow Daily News* April 22nd 1937

Eugene Gordon is exceptional for the time. However, in following passages Gordon returns to a more typical and class-reductionist polemic.<sup>98</sup>

A later one of such passages argues that: “The white working women, in her own interest, must stand at the head of the struggle for improved conditions for Negro working women.” Another states that: “The victorious October revolution which overthrew capitalism swept out at the same time all the garbage of race hatred, national oppression, and gender discrimination by which capitalism maintains its murderous rule. Today under the guidance of the Communist Party and its leader Joseph Stalin the women workers of all nationalities are equal partners in the construction of Soviet Industry and Agriculture”.<sup>99</sup> This unfettered praise was a far cry from Briggs’s once cautious and pragmatic engagement with the Soviet Union; to both Briggs and Gordon the Soviet Union was a post-racial, post-class, and post sexism society. The unfortunate reality is that ethnic divisions and sexism were still alive and well in the Soviet Union.

African American engagement with the Soviet Union was spearheaded by men. This led to massive oversights. The fact that a pamphlet written *On the Position of Negro Women* was not written by, or contained any interviews with, Black women is indicative of larger problems on both sides of the Atlantic. African American women never reached the same heights of power within the internal power structures of the CPUSA as African American men did, even the socially-conservative Garveyite movement contained more of a place of prominence for women. Garveyite women had their own auxiliary organization and Garvey’s wife, Amy Jacques Garvey, wielded a tremendous amount of

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<sup>98</sup> “The Position of Negro Women” February 1935. American Left Ephemera Collection, Box 1, Folder 65. University of Pittsburgh Digital Collections, Pittsburgh.

<https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt:31735061655951>

<sup>99</sup> “Position of Negro Women” 8, 16

influence. This is not to say that African American women did not play an absolutely vital part in the Communist party, one of the original founders of the African Blood Brotherhood alongside Cyril Briggs and later one of the earliest African American members of the Communist party was an African American woman named Claudia Jones. In addition to being the first female African American member of the Socialist and Communist parties, Jones was also the first Black woman to run for elected office in New York State.<sup>100</sup> Other African American women would use the Communist party to achieve goals that would have been unthinkable otherwise, with CPUSA member Williana Boroughs becoming an English language announcer for Radio Moscow throughout the late 1930s and World War Two.<sup>101</sup>

Still, African American women were nowhere to be found in the executive bodies of the CPUSA, African American women were not often published in party publications, and many African American men who had fought hard against “white chauvinism” within the party did little to confront “male chauvinism”

Things were even worse in the Soviet Union. Gone were the days of Lenin’s government employing the first ever female minister, Alexandra Kollantai. Stalin’s regime had rolled back progress on gender equality achieved under Lenin, emphasizing a “traditional role” for women. Despite increasing industrialization, mass death of Russian men during World War Two and the various famines, the female labor participation rate

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<sup>100</sup> Eric McDuffie “She devoted twenty minutes to condemning all other forms of Government but the Soviet”: Black Women Radicals in the Garvey Movement and the Left During the 1920s in MA Gomez (e.d) *Diasporic Africa, A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2006) 220

<sup>101</sup> Clarence Taylor, *Reds at the Blackboard: Communism, Civil Rights, and the New York City Teachers Union*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) 59

actually decreased by 4% under Stalin's tenure.<sup>102</sup> While Lenin's Cheka certainly did not hold a principled position on human rights, the rule of law only continued to erode as the Soviet Secret Police, The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) gained more influence. Hideous abuses against women were perpetrated by those who considered themselves above the law. Lavrentiy Beria, the leader of the NKVD who took office the year Gordon left the Soviet Union was a notorious rapist and pedophile, whose crimes went unpunished until after Stalin's death.<sup>103</sup>

Race hatred and national oppression, too, were not gone. The Soviet Government was responsible for a Famine in Kazakhstan from 1932-1933 that killed more Kazakhs than the Czar ever had, and almost completely wiped out their nomadic way of life.<sup>104</sup> Even Gordon's editor in chief at the *Moscow Daily News*, Mikhail Borodin, was purged and killed after Stalin began mistrusting Jewish members of the party in the early 1950s.<sup>105</sup> The gradual destruction of the Comintern's revolutionary ideals put many African American communists in a precarious position, especially as the Comintern grew more secretive, and Stalin grew more paranoid. Many African American radicals would break with the Comintern, disillusioned by the growing culture of secrecy and intolerance for ideological dissent. Still, the connections made in the golden remained strong. Many African Americans who had made their livelihoods within the Communist party and still

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<sup>102</sup> Roger Pethybridge. "Stalinism as Social Conservatism?" *European History Quarterly* 4 Vol. 11 (1981) 472

<sup>103</sup> Simon Montefiore. *Stalin: The Court of the Red Czar*. New York: Alfred A Knopf Publishing, 2004 pg. 506

<sup>104</sup> Elena Volkava "The Kazakh Famine: The Beginnings of Sedentarization" *The Kenan Institute* March 26 2012

<sup>105</sup> Dan Jacobs. *Borodin: Stalin's Man in China*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) 35

believed in its mission would stick with the Soviets, they would find themselves in the midst of one of Socialism's darkest periods.

Eugene Gordon himself participated in the legitimation of some of the worst Stalinist excesses. In a series of articles published in 1937 Gordon interviewed the Soviet Prosecutor General Andrei Vyshinky. Vyshinky was the notorious chief orchestrator of the show trials against the various factional opponents of Stalin. Vyshinky was known for publicly berating the accused before handing down a predetermined sentence, calling them among other things "Rabid dogs, decayed people, degenerates and vermin".<sup>106</sup> The accused, usually after being tortured into a false confession, would then be summarily executed. Vyskiny oversaw the murders of, among others, the old Bolsheviks Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Bukharin. All three men were intimately involved in the Comintern's efforts towards an answer to "the Negro question" in the 1920s.<sup>107</sup> Gordon vindicated and defended Vyshinky and Stalin, as well as the purges. His articles were part of a wave of propaganda against dissident Socialists and the opponents of Stalin. On the same page as his interview with Vyshinky another article was accusing the Trotskyites in Spain (then engaged alongside the mainline Communists in the struggle against Franco) of being "close allies" of the Fascists, and "enemies of mankind".<sup>108</sup>

Support for Stalin and disdain for Trotsky was not unique among Black Intellectuals, even those who were not Communists were understandably unwilling to believe the stories of atrocities and repression coming out of the Soviet Union, chalking

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<sup>106</sup> Arkady Vaksburg *Stalin's Prosecutor, the life of Andrei Vyshinky* (New York City: Grove Atlantic, 2001) 107

<sup>107</sup> Adi, 22-35

<sup>108</sup> Observer "Developing of World Affairs Poses Inescapably The Question: Collective Security or War" *Moscow Daily News* May 1st 1937

them up to ‘capitalist lies.’ The Soviet Union had bought itself a great deal of goodwill with its opposition to imperialism. Du Bois even wrote a Eulogy to Stalin where he unapologetically defended him and glowingly praised his defeat of the “rural bloodsuckers” the Kulaks while calling Trotsky a “liar” filled with “flamboyance and exhibitionism”.<sup>109</sup> The issue of Trotsky was one of many that would divide a shrinking number of old-guard Stalinist loyalists within the Black Radical tradition from a rapidly emerging wave of anti-Stalinist Socialists and independent Pan-Africanists. Some like CLR James would come from an independent Socialist tradition, never joining the mainstream Communist party, others like George Padmore, director of the ITUCNW would break dramatically with the Comintern. Meanwhile, the brief mass movement of the early thirties would fade, bought off by the New Deal and shorn of its militancy by the Comintern’s directive to build a new Popular Front.

Eugene Gordon and men like him. Harry Haywood, Paul Robeson, and Cyril Briggs, could accurately be described as party men. Their lives were too intertwined with the Communist party to leave. The gulf between the hardliners and the dissidents, because of what atrocities the hardliners had defended, were too deep. In his interview with Gordon, Vyshinky declared that large groups of criminals were organizing themselves into “Soviets” and giving themselves up to authorities because they “cannot be ignorant of the Socialist Construction going on around them”. These lawbreakers were described as “bandits, robbers, embezzlers, and a small percentage of murders.” who were all “morally superior to the Trotskyite Criminals.” All of the credit for this “mass movement” of criminals was given to the newly promulgated Stalin Constitution, of

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<sup>109</sup> William Du Bois. “On Stalin” *The National Guardian* March 16th 1953

course.<sup>110</sup> The interview truly came at the height of the purges, while NKVD units were implementing their “mass operations” against class enemies, Kulaks, and mistrusted ethnicities. The extent to which Gordon was aware of this is up for debate, but he could not have been ignorant of the climate of fear that engulfed Russia at the time. Fear that for some Black Radicals then in the Soviet Union would prove justified.

### **The Terror and Final Divorce**

One month to the day after Gordon interviewed Vyshinsky Black dachas carrying NKVD officers would arrive outside of the Moscow home of Lovett Fort-Whiteman, the first African American Communist. He had requested to return to the United States three weeks earlier, a request that was denied. The 59-year-old Fort-Whiteman, head of the CPUSA’s delegation to the Negro Sanhedrin, the principal organizer of the American Negro Labor Congress, and multiple-time Comintern delegate, was convicted of “Counter-revolutionary activities” and shipped to a GULAG in Kolyma Siberia where he was worked to death in a gold mine.<sup>111</sup>

Fort-Whiteman was killed because he “insisted that the group [African Americans in the Soviet Union] should maintain a high degree of consciousness of their color and always remember they were Negroes,”<sup>112</sup> a view that should be pointless in a “colorblind” society like the Soviet Union. James Patterson, the head of International Labor Defense, had written to the Soviet government about Fort-Whiteman. Saying that Fort-Whiteman was said to “openly profess an anti-Comintern line on the National

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<sup>110</sup> Eugene Gordon, “Lawbreakers in Countryside movement to leave old life for the New” *Moscow Daily News*, May 1, 1937, 2

<sup>111</sup> Carew, Loc 1505

<sup>112</sup> Carew, Loc 2960



question,” which he used for the “corruption of the the Negro elements” under orders from “the American consulate.” This was of course completely untrue, but it did not stop Patterson from writing to the Soviets that Fort-Whiteman “could not be allowed to return to the United States.” This was effectively a death sentence. Fort-Whiteman had been on the wrong side of Comintern factional struggles before, as his leadership of the ANLC had ruffled the feathers of people like Cyril Briggs and Huiswoud.<sup>113</sup> The consequences of that in the United States was the exchange of angry letters, in the Soviet Union during the purges, death.

The Soviet Union, yet another place that African Americans sought out autonomous space, had betrayed its promise. To the Committed Communist, a man like Eugene Gordon, the Soviet Union was what he saw in the city of Astrakhan during a Volga river cruise. The Soviet Union was everything the United State was not; it was a place of racial equality unparalleled in the world. In Astrakhan, Gordon Said: “A globe-trotter might have imagined himself in the streets of Miami Florida or Savannah Georgia. For the black and the brown and the yellow complexions we encountered might have belonged to a population of mixed Negro, Indian, and American white characteristics. He would have also noticed the existence of something never seen among the streets of Miami and Savannah, the free and natural mingling of these multitudes of nationalities.” There along the banks of the Volga, Gordon could see a vision of his home on the Mississippi not torn apart by the racial oppression that defined his childhood.<sup>114</sup>

In retrospect there is a haunting, almost dreamlike, beauty in the way Gordon describes his trip. The Soviet Union Gordon describes did not exist, and yet it did. The

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<sup>113</sup> Makalani, 120

<sup>114</sup> Eugene Gordon “Visiting Colorful Astrakhan” *Moscow Daily News* August 10th 1937

vision of total racial and gender equality that Gordon sold in his paper and to himself was incomplete at best and an outright lie at worst. Still, his vivid descriptions of a revolutionary anti-racist world; from dancing to Jazz on the deck of a steamer on the Volga with White Russians, to seeing the diverse and unsegregated streets of Stalingrad and chatting about race with Kazaks and Turkmen, represented a real form of liberation not present in the United States. That is the fundamental tragedy of the Soviet Union, even in its darkest moments its potential was clear. African Americans saw the Soviet Union through the lens of Jim Crow, and for some, like Fort-Whiteman, such distortions could prove fatal.

African Americans like Gordon had already lived in a Terror Regime. The NKVD and the show trials were ideologically more acceptable than Lynch Mobs and all-white juries. They killed on the basis of ideology and class rather than race, but they killed all the same. It is doubtful that the distinction mattered to Fort-Whiteman, freezing and starving somewhere in Siberia. One recalls the words of Kautsky, “of some men with riders and others with saddles” and of Bakunin “if people are being beaten with a stick, they are not much happier if it is called the people's stick.”<sup>115</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The African American members of the CPUSA did great work for the working-class Black and White. From a vulgar utilitarian perspective, their success in the Scottsboro case alone saved five lives, four more than all the African Americans killed by the Comintern. From the Cotton Fields of the South with the Sharecroppers Union, to the

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<sup>115</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pg 23

heights of Comintern and CPUSA power in NYC and Moscow African American Communists would raise the consciousness and expectations of African-descended people from Mobile to Cape town. They won real material victories, from wage increases to shorter work days to integrated unions.

However, in 1937 while Gordon was still in the Soviet Union, the Comintern officially broke with the revolutionary Pan-Africanist ideology that had informed its thinking since the first writings of Lenin and Briggs. Declaring that “all questions concerning the Negro peoples must be examined according to the conditions in their home countries. It is impossible to admit that there exists and must be developed a special international movement of the Negro race”<sup>116</sup> All of those years of advocacy and debate within the Comintern, the efforts of Huiswoud, Haywood, and others were cast away. Two years later Stalin would divide Poland with Hitler, and in the ensuing war the Comintern itself would be dissolved. A more poignant example of the death of revolutionary principal in the face of realpolitik could not be found. Afterwards only the most diehard mainline Communists believed that the Soviets were still in it for world revolution, and a new generation of Black Radicals would look to Africa and a vision of a homegrown humanist and democratic socialism.<sup>117</sup>

The African Americans in the Comintern heavily influenced its policy and greatly advanced Black Liberation, but the Communist party was still an authoritarian, centralist organization that when forced to choose between Soviet foreign policy goals and African liberation, would always choose the former. Despite the disappointing end of the Black-

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<sup>116</sup> Adi, 407

<sup>117</sup> Douglas Sturm. "Martin Luther King, Jr., as Democratic Socialist." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 18, no. 2 (1990): 79 ; George Padmore. "An open letter to Earl Browder" *The Crisis*, October 1935.

Red alliance, the story of the Black Communists is important. As it adds an important corollary to the history of the Black Intellectual tradition of this period which is all too often simplified as a transition from Booker T Washington to Du Bois. The diverse ideological stances of African American Communists, on everything from Black Nationalism to the idea of multi-racial coalitions puts lie to the old myth of Communist uniformity, and this work has attempted to shed light on a maligned group of radicals all too often dismissed as “puppets of Moscow”.

As shown throughout this piece Black Communists were not monolithic, nor were they puppets. They engaged in lively ideological debates both with each other and with white comrades, they fought vigorously for their own interests within the Communist party, and carved out a real place of autonomy and freedom (however short and however limited) for themselves.

Contemporary liberation movements have much to learn from the Black Communists of the early 20th century. The placement of African Americans in prominent positions throughout the CPUSA should be emulated by multiracial left-wing movements today, as should the Communist party’s ability to create an institutional culture that (at least for a time) provided community and anti-racist solidarity. As for the eventual fate of the Comintern, its real lesson is the necessity to combine radicalism with pluralism, and to merge self-organization and revolutionary ideology with genuine internal democracy and freedom to dispute the party line.

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