Black October: The Migration of Black Americans to the Soviet Union in the Interwar Period

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Black October: The Migration of Black Americans to the Soviet Union

During the Interwar Period

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The blood of Pushkin
Unites the Russian and the Negro
In art.
Tomorrow they
Will be united anew
In the International.

- Julian Anissimov

Кровь Пушкина,
Сроднила Россию и Негров
В искусстве.
Завтра они
сроднятся опять
В Интернационале.

- Юлиан Анисимов

This thesis is dedicated to all those left out and forgotten by history.

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1 Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, “Series XIV: Personal Papers, Journals” in Langston Hughes Papers
Abstract

Through an in-depth look at first-person accounts, primary documents, and archival research, this project broadens the scope of information available about the interwar migration of Black Americans to the Soviet Union for agricultural, industrial, and artistic initiatives which helped advance the Socialist Project. These men and women had different motivations for their emigration stemming from racial solidarity with various Soviet peoples, economic reasonings, and safety from American racism. This paper hopes to bring to life the stories of those whose legacies have been lost to history by uncovering their lives under communism, their achievements and recognitions, and that of their families and descendants. Some stories include the advancements in cotton made by Oliver Golden and his group in Soviet Uzbekistan in 1931; Langston Hughes and his group's artistic collaboration with the Soviets on the anti-racist film "Black and White"; and the industrial inventions propelled by Robert Robinson. By tracking the lives and emigration stories of these Black men and women, this thesis offers a complete and comprehensive overview of three distinct migratory groups between 1920 and 1945. This thesis examines these migration patterns through the lens of policies put forward by the Communist International at the various Congresses of the 1920s and shapes the understanding of how policy influenced migration.
Notes

This research focuses on a time when terminology used to describe people of African
descent (and people of color more generally) was crude, often discriminatory, and racist. Many
common terms from the 1920s and 30s are outdated, offensive, and no longer appropriate.
However, in an effort to accurately showcase the archival research done and reflect the time
studied, all quotations from archives will remain the same. This means this thesis will present
outdated racial language in quotations. All terms appearing in quotations are directly cited from
archival documents from the discussed time, such as “Negro” and “Colored.” Names of official
groups and their various initiatives will also remain the same. All research analysis shall use
contemporary terminology considered to be presently non-offensive. These include, but are not
limited to, “People of Color” and “Black.”
Introduction

One of my mother’s earliest memories is of my grandfather reading *Mister Twister* to her and discussing the central message of race and racism with her. “*Mister Twister, former minister, billionaire....*” was the start of one of the most famous Soviet children’s books, written by Samuel Marshuk in 1933. The story is about a selfish American billionaire capitalist who has come to the Soviet Union for a vacation. When he and his family check into their five-star hotel for foreigners in Leningrad, they are horrified to find a Black man living in the room next to them. This book, read by millions of children in the Soviet Union, emphasizes the Soviet narrative of race relations. American capitalists were not only greedy, they were racists. The book’s narrative of the Soviet Union as simultaneously anti-capitalist and anti-racist go hand-in-hand with the official narrative of the time. The older generations, such as my grandmother, remember a famous saying from their childhood: “We, in the USSR, are happy, but in America, they are lynching Black people.” The consciousness of American racism amongst the Soviet people was no accident. It resulted from a carefully planned propagandist policy that sought to set the USSR apart from the West, marking the Soviet Union as a haven for people of color.

The Soviet Union was a feat in political experimentation in its short-lived seventy years of existence. The complete restructuring of a previously feudal society into an economically and socially radical society inspired both fear and hope across the globe. The stark position the Soviet Union took against the bourgeoisie and its early attempts at worldwide revolution brought strife and violence across many nations. However, this new vision of the world inspired some of the people that Soviet leaders and other communists were seeking to liberate from the clutches of

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2 Klara Semyonovna Fridlyand, Personal Communication with the Author, April 2023

3 This strife and violence also included the USSR. During the Civil War (1917-1922), the USSR was invaded by other nations, including the United States, presumably to combat the victory of Communism.
capitalism. Due to the feudal economy of the Russian Empire, the new Soviet Union dealt with a
disadvantage in the global economy and had to accelerate economic growth to the level of its
competitors. In just twenty years following the revolution of 1917, the USSR undertook drastic
economic changes through rapid industrialization and agricultural collectivization led by Joseph
Stalin, ultimately transforming the country. Touting adherence to Marxism (and later
“Marxism-Leninism”), the USSR was “the self-proclaimed champion of the oppressed” and
stood in staunch opposition to capitalism and imperialism around the world.4 By exporting this
vision, the USSR courted those who they considered ‘victims’ of “economic, political and social
systems.”5

Among these supposed ‘victims’ was the Black population of the United States, who
were subjected to oppression and discrimination from the onset of their arrival in the Americas.
Initially, Soviet interest was focused on what they called “the Negro question,” which sought to
theorize and support the liberation of the international Black community through Marxist
principles of anti-capitalism, anti-colonialism, and global solidarity. Addressing this “question”
was spearheaded by the Communist International (Comintern), the Soviet-led alliance of
international Communist parties that led the charge for a worldwide communist revolution
during its existence from 1919-1943. The Comintern’s dealings with Africa and the African
diaspora included electing Black Americans and Africans to official party positions, selecting
them for higher education within the Soviet Union, and aiding them in their liberatory struggles
back home. However, with an eye toward industrialization and mobilization on the economic
front, the Comintern also specialized in recruiting Black industrialists, specialists, and artists for
work within the USSR. In the early years of the Communist movement, addressing “the Negro

4 Allison Blakely, Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought, (Washington D.C.: Howard
University Press, 1986), 73
5 Ibid.
“Question” evolved from class-based appeals to solidarity (the unity of Black and white workers) to one of racial equality and the liberation for Black people, which became a central policy position within the Comintern and Soviet leadership. However, a significant question remains regarding the relationship between Soviet commitments to end racial prejudice and the need to further Communist propaganda.

This thesis aims to pay particular attention to the experiences of Black Americans in the Soviet Union, their motivations for migration, and whether the expectations of an anti-racist society were met with reality. I will focus on three distinct groups of Black Americans between 1919 and 1945, who all contributed to the advancement of the Soviet State in agriculture, industrial development, and artistic/cultural propaganda. Several members of my study will approach their analysis by comparing American and Soviet race relations.

The first chapter explores “the Negro Question,” which provides ample background on policies directed by the Soviet Union and Comintern to the Communist Part(ies) of the United States. The chapter aims to contextualize the importance of race and oppressed minorities to Soviet socialist goals internationally. The chapter will briefly introduce the Comintern Congresses in which the question of Black participation in Communism was explored. The research collected in this chapter was done through extensive archival research, primarily at the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Analysis in this chapter was aided by the recorded minutes of speeches and documentation of correspondence between various Soviet and American communist officials. Ultimately, this chapter provides a foundational understanding of why my thesis's central figures embarked on their respective journeys from the US to the USSR and how Communist policies on race relations influenced this migratory process.
The second chapter focuses on a historical study and analysis of Oliver Golden and thirteen fellow Black agronomists as they emigrate to Soviet Uzbekistan in the 1930s. This chapter seeks to uncover missing biographical information on these men and women. Additionally, it aims to track the influence of “the Negro Question” as a motivating factor in the group's thinking. Ultimately, the chapter aims to decipher non-conventional reasons for emigration on the part of this group, as well as build out an anthology of these peoples’ lives in the Soviet Union and beyond. Research for this respective chapter was done through an extensive study of autobiographies and memoirs, familial tales, and newspaper archives from the period. Newspapers were essential to my study in this chapter and the entire thesis. Black media in America covered the sojourns of their community members extensively, with white media having little or no coverage. In particular, the New York Amsterdam News, a weekly Black-owned newspaper distributed in New York City, was crucial to my understanding. It is one of the longest running Black-owned and centered publications in the United States. Without the widespread international lens on the lives and journeys of members featured in this thesis, my work would not be possible. I owe a special thanks to the Black journalists who covered events and tales when white media did not.

The third chapter focuses on the Black and White film group as they navigated the complexities of the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. In addition to a broad historical overview of events surrounding the group’s migration, the chapter singles out individuals who had personal experiences in the USSR unrelated to the movie. Several of these individuals are already household names such as Langston Hughes. In an attempt to not focus on already-told stories, much of this will again rely on analysis of motivation and the analysis by individuals of race relations in the Soviet Union. This chapter was made possible by extensive archival material.
available at the Beinecke Collection at the Yale Library, in addition to the digitized records of newspapers from the 1930s.

The fourth chapter examines sojourners with vastly different experiences than those discussed in earlier chapters. This includes those like Robert Robinson, who had negative perceptions of the Soviet Union, and those like Lovett Fort-Whiteman, who perished in Stalin’s purges. This inclusion was integral to my project because I did not want to showcase only positive accounts. If my true efforts are to bring light to these stories, those who experienced difficulties in the USSR are equally important. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the legacies of the children and grandchildren of those migrants who stayed in the USSR. I discuss their lives and achievements in the context of Soviet racial relations briefly.

To understand the importance of American conceptions of race to Soviet initiatives, one must first examine the birth of American racism. Race is a social structure that was intentionally devised to exploit labor.6 The American race-based system is one of social stratification. Specifically, the racialization of certain peoples “developed in the context of at least three competing pressures.”7 The first was a “population expansion” policy in the United States that was fueled by a demand for cheap labor (especially in the context of the attempted extermination of indigenous populations).8 Second was “the desire of dominant groups to maintain their economic, political and cultural dominance.”9 Lastly, there was a need to understand and unify the persistent historical reality of “deep stratification” alongside an “equally persistent political rhetoric of individualism, freedom, democracy, and a meritocracy.”10 These three pressures simultaneously shaped American policies and attitudes about labor, immigration and migration.

6 Carol C. Mukhopadhyay et al, How Real is Race?: A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology, (USA: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2013), 12
7 Ibid.
8 Mukhopadhyay et al, How Real is Race, 123.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
citizenship, education, marriage, and Whiteness. As Carol Mukhopadhyay et al. argue: “Race became a central organizing principle of social relations, superseding even religion.”11

To achieve Whiteness was to achieve a higher social status. Racializing the labor force combined racial stratification with economics, ensuring those who did not possess Whiteness also did not achieve economic mobility. According to Adolph Reed, “the evolution of the racial classification system [used race] as a device for organizing labor in ways that benefited the dominant property-owning classes.”12 Looking further in history outside the scope of American slavery, these same racial classifications were continuously manipulated to pit the labor force, white and Black, against each other and keep the dominant white groups privileged in upward mobility. Those who were white and qualified as white changed over time.13 Reed writes, “[Race is] a historically specific ideology that emerged, took shape, and has evolved as a constitutive element within a definite set of social relations anchored to a particular system of production.”14 A class system existed, not based on merit but on birthright, inheritance, personal connection, and race. Race and labor became so inseparable that race became the central figure in labor organization, making up the unequal economic hierarchy. This would extend from the agricultural sector in the South to the industrial sectors in the North. Additionally, by racializing the labor force, class inequality and inherent structural oppression became masked by the shadow of race. By pitting workers against each other in the labor force based on immigration and race, workers remained entangled in interpersonal conflict. They could never unite to turn against the ruling economic classes or demand labor rights.

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11 Ibid.
12 Mukhopadhyay et al, How Real is Race, 123.
14 Adolph Reed Jr, “Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism,” 49
It is in this framework that the Soviet Union approached American Racism. Because of this, race and capitalism become indistinguishable entities, with one fueling the other. To the Soviets, the only thing which would “liberate” the oppressed minorities from the racial boundaries of capitalism was communism. Capitalism was responsible for race, and racial divisions kept capitalism afloat. Furthermore, racialized capitalism kept the workers from banding together around their common needs since race superseded class identity. The white workers might have also been poor, but they had the privilege of Whiteness behind them, which enabled them to, theoretically, achieve upward mobility. The Soviet Union embarked on its theory of “anti-racism” in a practical and theoretical manner. (Chapter one explains exactly how the Soviet Union applied this framework to a nation, such as the United States, in which race permeated every organ.) This particular work explores the connection between the Soviet Union and the recruitment of Black Americans for furthering the Communist experiment and development of the Soviet Union.

This thesis aims to provide an anthologized historical study of people whose lives and experiences have been buried under history. Additionally, the study of Black migration to the Soviet Union emphasizes the overlooked importance of internationally marginalized communities to the Socialist project. Many of these people's lives were irrevocably changed by their experiences in the USSR, some for the better and some for the worse. The experience of Black migrants in the USSR was not a monolith. This thesis attempts to showcase the diversity of political thought and experience of these groups. One cannot simply pinpoint one motivating factor for migration of a group whose political thought is vast. In essence, this research aims to remember those too often lost in academic conversation regarding the history of the Soviet Union. There are stories in this thesis that have been told before, either by the people who lived
them or academics who studied them. However, it is rare to find all of these stories bound and examined together. I am attempting to showcase that these migratory paths were not pure coincidence. The journey of Black Americans to the Soviet Union was intrinsically connected to an explicit policy position put forth by the Soviet Union in the 1920s. It is no mistake that there was such a large wave of migration in the decades that followed. These men and women might have never met, had never known each other, or had never even known about the policies of the Soviet Union which led them to make their journeys. However, these stories cannot be examined on their own. These are not just blips in histories, coincidences that enter academic conversations separately. The migratory stories of Black Americans have to be examined together comparatively. Only then is it possible to see that all of these people's paths trace back to theses about racial oppression argued in the halls of the Kremlin in various Congresses of the Communist International. These people and their stories exemplify the internationalist approach of the Soviet Union and the usage of oppressed minority groups to advance the socialist project. It does not do justice to Soviet history or the history of the Black American struggle to examine these as individual historical events. These migrations were intentional and inseparable from one another.

While this thesis will only focus on Black Americans, this is not to say the achievements of the Black community toward the advancement of Communism lie solely with them. There was a sizable African population in the Soviet Union during these years, but especially later, after the 1950s, and their stories are equally important.

Additionally, previous scholarship has been done on the migration of Black Americans to the Soviet Union, and I would be remiss not to mention a few scholars whose work shaped my research. Allison Blakley’s groundbreaking anthology *Russia and the Negro* (1986) provided the
backdrop on which my thesis is situated. His overview of Black presence in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, with the foundations of Black political thought, is revolutionary in its own right. His first-hand interviews with several members of migratory groups shed much-needed insight into my project. My work differs from Blakely’s in that I argue that the Comintern was racially conscious far before the 1928 Congress and that such colorblind deception, as Blakley paints, might not be accurate or timely. Joy Carew Gleason’s *Reds, Blacks, and Russians* (2008) provided a much-appreciated idea for the eventual layout of my work. Similarly to my research, she provides an anthologized Black migration history spanning from the 1920s to the 1990s. Focusing on similar groups, her historical study tracks these people’s lives. I have used her research as a standing point to build interpretations and bridges between stories and understand how these people’s lives are intricately connected. There are dozens of other scholars whose work was fundamental to shaping my thesis, including but not limited to Meredith Roman, Kate Baldwin, Galina Lapina, David Choini Moore, and many others. I want to acknowledge that one of the more fundamentally essential scholarships for this thesis came from the memoirs of Black migrants and their children and grandchildren. This thesis would not have been possible without those first or second-hand accounts.

There are several whose scholarship I do not use extensively in my thesis but would be remiss not to mention. These scholars include, but are not limited to, Irina Filatova, Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon, Hilary Lynd, and Maxim Matusevich. Filatova and Lynd have both written extensively on the connections between the Soviet Union and South African people and their histories. St. Julian-Varnon’s dissertation focuses on understanding race in the Soviet Union and the Democratic Republic of Germany through the lived experiences of Black Americans and Africans. Matusevich is perhaps the most prolific, having written on everything from the
experiences of African students in the USSR to the military alliance between Nigeria and the Soviet Union to Paul Robeson and his sojourn around the USSR. These authors and scholars expand the viewpoint and information available about an already understudied and relatively small academic subject.
CHAPTER ONE

The Communist International and the “Negro Question”

The Soviet Union extensively studied and was knowledgeable about Black American history and the Black American liberatory struggle. Allison Blakely defines the relationship between the Communist International (Comintern)1 and the Black American community as one of a “percipient” and the “perceived.”2 The Comintern was headed by the Soviet Union with the chief goal of promoting international Communist revolution. The thread that connected the Comintern to Black Americans was the so-called “Negro Question” the official name given to the role the Black American community could play in advancing the international Communist revolution.3,4 The Comintern, and by association, the Soviet leadership, dealt with the “Negro Question” as a theoretical and practical one that involved the formation of different working groups, policies, and theses. Maintaining ties with Communist-affiliated organizations in the United States, especially those connected to Black Americans, provided “the prism through which Soviet leaders peered at the American reality.”5 “The Negro Question” was of the utmost importance to the Soviets because of Black Americans’ presumed usefulness to Communist ideology and ideological realization. If Vladimir Lenin’s vision of spreading Communism everywhere (stemming from the historical anticipation of Marx of a united world proletariat) was to work, then Black Americans were seen as potent recipients of this ideology because of their

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1 Also called The Third International, the Comintern was founded in 1919 as a conglomeration of national Communist parties across the globe. The Communist Party of the United States, for example, was an arm of the Comintern.
3 “The Negro Question” is the official name for all policies dealing with the international Black community, dating back to as early as Eugene Debs and the Socialist party.
5 Ibid.
historical and ongoing struggle under capitalism. Black liberation became integral to achieving Soviet global objectives. As early as 1922, this political goal was included in the programming of the Congresses of the Communist International. Lenin insisted on this inclusion because the “Negro Question” was directly tied to his initiative on the Colonial and National Question, which had argued that colonized groups would give the most active assistance to liberatory movements. However, the Comintern struggled with the inclusivity of the “Negro Question” for many years as delegates argued about the merits, importance, and approach of this policy.

The foundations laid by the Comintern in the 1920s and the focus on the Black American struggle by the Soviet Union contributed to migration patterns of the 1930s. The Comintern, the Communist Party of the United States, and the Soviet Union invested time, money, and political energy into the revolutionary education of Black Americans abroad in the USSR. Furthermore, Communist ideology proved attractive to many Black people exploited by capitalism and disregarded by the US government. This mass consciousness that the Soviet Union was at least paying attention to the plight of Black people led many of them to want to experience the truthfulness of Soviet anti-racism themselves. Was a communist state genuinely going to offer Black people the prosperity and protection it claimed? In the 1930s, dozens of young Black Americans set sail to discover the truth of Soviet anti-racism, economic stability, and safety. Furthermore, the focus on the tie between all oppressed groups and the internationalist gaze that the Comintern took on global minorities would later influence some migratory journeys.

One of the first mentions of the “Negro Question” in Comintern correspondence is in a letter dated February 25, 1919, sent by John Reed, a prominent American journalist and Communist activist who had witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution firsthand, to Grigory Zinoviev,

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6 Blakely, Russia and the Negro, 105.
7 Ibid.
The Communist International and the “Negro Question”

the chairman of the Communist International. Reed writes of his motivation to help Zinoviev’s appeal to the Comintern to address the “Negro Question.” The letter concerned the formation of a Congress of the Negro People of the World, which was to be headed by the Executive Committee of the Communist International. The eventual appeal had a dual nature: a request to the larger Comintern for the creation of this Congress and a call to Black people around the world to join their efforts. The appeal stated, “Negroes of the World: Your emancipation from the thralldom of capitalism can only be achieved in unity with the workers and peasants of the whole world, irrespective of race or color.” That same year, Zinoviev wrote a letter to John Reed and several others advising them to convene the “Congress of the Negro People.” The proposal was accepted, and the Fourth Congress of the Communist International of 1922 “decided to convene a World Negro Congress in order to discuss methods of arousing and organizing the Negro masses to common action against International Imperialism.”

“The Negro Question” was debated in several Congresses of the Communist International, starting with the Fourth Congress in 1922. In November of that year, two Black Communists, both members of the African Blood Brotherhood, brought the first resolutions on global Black liberation to the floor. These two delegates were Otto Huiswoud and Claude McKay. They argued that Black Americans should be included in the fight towards

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8 See Appendix A: Figure One.
9 See Appendix A: Figure Two.
10 Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, “Documents from the Comintern Archives on African Americans,” SC Micro R-6762 Reels 1, 2.
11 See Appendix A: Figure Three.
12 Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Comintern Archive on African Americans, New York Public Library, SC Micro R-6762 r. 1,2.
13 Otto Huiswoud (1893-1961) was a Surinamese political activist and the first Black member of the Communist Party of the United States, in addition to one of its original charter members. In 1922, he served as the Communist Party’s representative to the Executive Committee of the Communist International.
14 Claude McKay (1890-1948) was a Jamaican-American poet and writer best known for his involvement in the Harlem Renaissance.
The Communist International and the “Negro Question”

Communism and considered part of the proletariat. In Otto Huiswoud’s opening statement, he claimed that,

The black question is another part of the racial and colonial question, and it has until now not received any special attention. I mean by that to say that the Second International did not devote any special attention to the black question. That is why we find in the Second Congress theses the remark that the Second International is an International of white workers and the Communist International is an International of the workers of the world.

Huiswoud’s push to position the work of the Second International, a pre-revolutionary socialist organization, as a white organization served as a successful motivator to the Comintern to include Black communists. Not only this, but Huiswoud’s and McKay's contribution to the 1922 Congress marked the beginning of a focus on racial problems as they intersect with capitalism. During the 1922 Congress, the Comintern established a “Negro Commission” and passed the first of the “Theses on the Negro Question.” These Theses are arguably the most important policies in developing official Comintern policies on anti-racism.

This was the first time that the Comintern connected the issues of the Black American struggle with that of international anti-colonial struggles. They saw Black Americans as a colonized group in need of revolutionary tactics and aid:

The Communist International notes with satisfaction the resistance of the exploited Negro to the exploiters’ attack, for the enemy of his race and the enemy of the white workers are one and the same—capitalism and imperialism. The world struggle of the Negro race is a struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

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15 See Appendix A: Figures Nine, Ten, Eleven.
17 See Appendix A: Figures Four and Five.
18 Theses of the Fourth Comintern Congress on the Negro Question (Originally published in the Worker, March 10, 1923) as it appears in Heideman, Class Struggle, 279, originally published in the Worker, March 10, 1923.
This was also the first time the Comintern made a direct link between all oppressed peoples. Representatives charged themselves and the American Communist party with educating the Black Americans that they were “not the only people suffering from the oppression of imperialism and capitalism” and to see their interests and struggles as allied with the workers in Europe and Asia. They point out that other oppressed working-class people of color were currently fighting against exploitation and imperialism in “India and China, in Persia and Turkey, in Egypt and Morocco.” The Comintern, in this Thesis, specifically points out that the conditions against which these internationally oppressed groups fight are the same as the ones experienced by Black Americans. Therefore, their aims of “political, economic, and socialist emancipation and equality” are also the same.

Referencing the history of Black oppression and struggle in the United States, the Comintern linked anti-colonialism with anti-capitalism. The 1922 Theses concluded with four objectives. First, the Fourth Congress recognized “the necessity of supporting every form of the Negro movement,” which is anti-capitalist either in aim or effect. Second, the Comintern committed to fighting for Black and white racial equality, political and economic. Third, the Comintern writes that they will use “every means at its disposal” to have trade unions allow Black workers, and in the case where it is legal but not enforced, launch a special propaganda campaign. If this does not work, they wrote they would create special trade unions for Black workers. Lastly, the Comintern will “take steps immediately to convene a world Negro congress or conference.”

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19 Heideman, *Class Struggle*, 280.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Heideman, *Class Struggle*, 281.
24 Ibid.
This push by Huiswoud and McKay was successful and swiftly implemented partly because of the connections and ties to arguments made by Lenin about the “national and colonial question” in the decade prior. In Lenin’s thesis, he argued that “there was a decisive difference between the nationalism of oppressors nations…and oppressed nations.” The first impeded class consciousness, while the latter was a struggle against the oppressed which Lenin agreed warranted support. Huiswoud and McKay’s connection to race and self-determination was therefore readily accepted. The tie between all oppressed peoples would later serve as the foundation of motivation for Oliver Golden and his group of Black Americans who emigrated to Soviet Uzbekistan to help the Uzbeks prosper under the new Soviet system.

Following the 1922 Congress, the Comintern expanded its focus on race even more by organizing the American Negro Labor Congress, a new body of the American Comintern branch focusing on radicalizing the Black working class. In December 1924, the Secretariat of the Communist International wrote a letter to the Central Executive Committee of the Workers Party of America explaining the need for Black inclusion in party membership:

The sectional life of the Negro race in America and its distinct ideology, which has given rise thereto is a fact which we for one moment cannot afford to overlook in our scheme of organizing the American working class. The Negro constitutes an important factor in American industrial life and must be prepared for the active participation in the Communist movement. It has been proposed to call an American-Negro Labour Congress at Chicago, to be held sometime during the summer. Its composition to be delegates from the various Negro trade and industrial unions, and among others, individuals wellknown [sic] for their energetic support of that cause of the Negro proletariat.

The ANLC was the creation of Lovett Fort-Whiteman. Fort-Whiteman, who had been a member of CPUSA since its inception, had attended the Comintern’s University of Toilers of the East in Moscow. Upon his return, he was disappointed to see a lack of investment on the part of the

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26 Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, *Comintern Archives on African Americans*. 
American Communist Party in building a bridge with Black workers. The CPUSA readily agreed when he brought this to the party's attention and recommended the ANLC as a solution.  

On top of the ANLC, Fort-Whiteman also worked with the CPUSA and the Comintern on a student “study-away” program in the Soviet Union. In a letter dating January 1925, James Jackson, a Black American communist, writes to one Comrade Petroff that,  

Either in the month of August or September the Far Eastern Section gave to Comrade Amter of the American Delegation a sum of money, either 2000 or 2500 to convey to the American Communist Party to be used in helping on the transportation expenses of Ten Negro students to be sent to Moscow to study in the Communist universities.

Then on June 20th, 1925, Lovett Fort-Whiteman wrote to the Director of the Far Eastern University with explicit details.

“Dear Comrade,” he wrote,

The Negro students are being selected with the uttermost care. They will be of seven men and three women all yet in their twenties in respect to age. I am giving preference to party members and those who have been associated with me for some time in my work. They are persons, who are sincere, energetic and unquestionably devoted to the Cause. I hope to have them in Russia by the latter part of August...Feel assured that the University will be satisfied with the group of young men and women I am sending, and hoping that all conveniences will have been arranged. I remain, very fraternal yours, Lovett Fort Whiteman.

Therefore, ten Black Americans went to Moscow to study at the Kommunisticheskiy Universitet Trudyashchikhsya Vostoka (University of the Toilers of the East), also referred to as University for Far Eastern Peoples, the same university which Fort-Whiteman had studied at. This delegation included Harry Haywood, Otto Huiswoud, Oliver Golden and his wife Jane, and Otto Hall. There, Oliver Golden studied Communism in depth, which would later inspire his

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27 See Appendix A: Figure Seven.
28 See Appendix A: Figure Six.
29 Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Comintern Archives on African Americans.
30 Ibid.
31 See Appendix A: Figure Eight.
The Communist International and the “Negro Question”

emigration to the Soviet Union, to be explored further in Chapter Two. From 1922 until the next Congress in 1928, these ideas became a central policy of the CPUSA and the Black Communist-affiliated parties.

In 1928, these policies developed further into what became known as the Black Belt Thesis, arguably the most well-known of the antiracist policies implemented in the 1920s. During the 1928 Congress, Harry Haywood continued to draw on Leninist ideas of internationalism and concluded that Black Americans could not simply be characterized as a racial group. The exploitation in the South, where most of the Black community lived at the time, was the foundational feature of American capitalism, as was discussed in the Fourth Congress in 1922. The very existence of Black people in America was due to the system of slavery, which defined the beginning of the United States. Through chattel slavery, American capitalism was born as Black slaves were forced to create goods and services to sell at a profit on the market. The white Americans owned the means of production, which at this time were human beings. Most plantations were found in the South, where cotton, one of the primary goods produced, could grow on the fertile soil of the Black Belt. While American slavery was abolished, the foundational aspects of this system of capitalism remained in the 1920s and 30s, materialized through “Jim Crow” laws which rendered Black Americans second or even third-class citizens. Involuntary servitude was no longer legal, but loopholes through sharecropping allowed Black workers to once again work the land for either meager or non-existent payments. Because of this, the Comintern considered Black Americans an internal colony, which, through a liberatory lens of Leninist theory, constituted a need for decolonization:

32 The Black Belt is a geographical name given to the crescent-shaped region in the American South that is known for its dark fertile soil. During the time of American Slavery, the epicenter of cotton production occurred in this region. Following the emancipation proclamation, the Black Belt became home to some of the largest majority-Black counties in the US.
The Communist International and the “Negro Question”

“This [decolonization] meant [the] complete and unlimited right of the Negro majority to exercise governmental authority in the entire territory of the Black Belt, as well as to decide upon the relation between their territory and other nations, particularly the United States.”

Harry Haywood was chosen to head this new policy partially because he believed that, “the Black movement was a revolutionary movement in its own right and went beyond even socialist opposition to racism...[he] was more optimistic than most other Black Communists about the possibility of uniting the Black and white working class, which was stressed in the Communist theory.”

The policy was met with some opposition from certain Black groups. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People deemed the policy “red segregation,” considering this a “reverse Jim Crowism in revolutionary garb.” Regardless of such opposition, this policy remained Soviet and Comintern policy until 1959. Haywood based his approach on Communist thought. He argued that according to Stalin’s definition of a nation, Black Americans fit the criteria: “A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”

Furthermore, the Black Question became the official party line by entrenching such thought into Leninist thinking. Lenin had once described the American Black community as a nation in 1920, stating, “…it is necessary for the Communist parties to render aid to the revolutionary movements in the dependent and subject nations for example…the Negroes in America.”

The Black Belt Thesis was received warmly in Soviet circles because it aligned with Joseph Stalin’s attitudes towards “revolution in the colonized world, which held that such

34 Blakely, Russia and the Negro, 111.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Blakely, Russia and the Negro, 112.
countries had to first go through a bourgeois-democratic revolution, and then a socialist one,“ which clearly was taken from Marx’s idea of a united world Proletariat.\textsuperscript{38} With the full support of the Comintern, the Black Belt Thesis became official policy starting in 1928. However, most on-the-ground organizing did not center around completing this goal. It mainly remained within party propaganda. There was “little political space” for the fulfillment of the Thesis, and there were more pressing, more realistic goals in sight.\textsuperscript{39} Some scholars, such as Allison Blakely, would argue that the Black Belt Thesis revolutionized the approach towards race. They argued that this was what got the Communist Party to focus on race and that the previous Congresses and Theses had only focused on class: “In addition to these considerations, the most important in dictating the new approach toward the Negro was the fact that the earlier tactic - that portrayed class struggle as the root problem for the worker - had proven ineffectual among blacks.”\textsuperscript{40}

However, as is shown here, race and its class intersections were understood at the 1922 Congress, courtesy of the push by Huiswoud and McKay. Before 1928, the Party and Comintern had begun their efforts to create a political base within the Black working class. The Comintern and the Communist Party were aware before the Black Belt Thesis of the importance that race and “the color line” would serve their political interests. Therefore, the Congress of 1928 in Moscow was not the first time the Communist Party became fully engaged with the Black American struggle. However, instead, credit must be given to the Black and white communists in America who pushed for racial inclusions in the policies of the Comintern and CPUSA prior to and during the 1922 Congress. Their efforts laid the foundations for student exchange, enticing Oliver Golden to seek a Communist education. Their determination led to the development of Communist ideology as a popular and widespread political thought amongst the Black working

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{38} Heideman, \textit{Class Struggle}, 34.
\bibitem{39} Ibid.
\bibitem{40} Blakely, \textit{Russia and the Negro}, 109.
\end{thebibliography}
class. Eventually, this ideology would reach the cultural and intellectual Black community and influence the journey of the *Black and White* film group, to be discussed in Chapter Three. The individuals discussed in the following chapters might not have made their journeys without the work of the American Communist organizers.
CHAPTER TWO

Oliver Golden and the Agricultural Group

Introduction

On October 13th, 1931, a group of twelve Black men set off from the ports of New York towards the Soviet Union in fulfillment of the two-year contracts they had signed to work on a cotton experimentation farm in rural Soviet Uzbekistan. It was the height of Jim Crow and the Great Depression, and the men aboard had various reasons for leaving the United States: political motivation in the form of advancing the Communist project, an allegiance to fellow people of color halfway across the world, the economic freedom that the Soviets had promised them, or simply a chance to see the world. Their journey would take them further than Soviet Uzbekistan and last longer than two years. Filled with success stories about inventions that would change the modern world, this chapter aims to uncover the lost histories of these men, their lives and families, their creations and achievements, and ultimately their new-found position as not only Black, but Red. These lost histories help us gauge the effectiveness of policies discussed in the previous chapter, both in theoretical and practical applications. They aid us in uncovering and understanding the experiences of Black Americans in the Soviet Union, and determine, for ourselves, the truth of Soviet anti-racism. Previous to the journey of Oliver Golden and his agronomists, there had been no contractual migration of Black Americans to the USSR, and it was due to Golden’s focus and insistence on this that such a journey began.
Organizing the Agricultural Mission: Oliver Golden and his campaign

The journey from the United States to the Soviet Union did not begin on October 13, 1931. Instead, the story starts in 1912, when 25-year-old Oliver John Golden was an agronomy student at the Tuskegee Institute\(^1\) under the tutelage of George Washington Carver.\(^2\) The friendship and mentorship he forged with Carver would ultimately lead to the creation of the group aboard the Deutschland, the ship that carried the agricultural specialists to the USSR. According to Golden’s granddaughter Yelena Khanga, Golden never graduated but dropped out after a public argument with a local white man.\(^3\) The backlash that followed, both from townspeople and university officials, forced Golden to flee.

Golden was drafted and sent to serve in France when World War I broke out in 1914. Due to his race, he could not fight amongst the white American troops and it was only in France that he was able to fight in an all-Black battalion alongside French soldiers. This was the beginning of Golden’s politicization. Fighting alongside the French, he was enthralled by the French ideals of liberté, égalité, and fraternité.\(^4\) As Carew writes: “The French saw the black American soldiers as their liberators and welcomed their presence among them. Also, these segregated units threw vastly different blacks together, and the more politicized gave their brethren new ways of analyzing their struggles.”\(^5\) It was also in France that Golden befriended James Ford, one of the later founders of the Communist Party of the United States and a

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1 Tuskegee Institute, now known as Tuskegee University, is a historically Black university founded in 1881 by Booker T. Washington. Located in Tuskegee, Alabama, it became the first institute of higher learning to employ only Black faculty, and gained national recognition for its focus on industrial learning. Today, it is the only HBCU (Historically Black College and University) to be designated a National Historic Site.
2 George Washington Carver (c. 1864 - 1943) was an American agronomist and inventor known for his work in cultivating cotton and inventions surrounding usage of peanuts. He is considered one of the most prolific Black Scientists of the 20th century. Carver headed the Agriculture Department at Tuskegee Institute for 47 years.
5 Ibid.
two-time candidate for Vice President on the Communist ticket in the 1930s. In 1920, his time in the Army was over, and he returned to America. He moved to Chicago, where he found employment as a dining-car waiter (one of the few opportunities for Black men available at the time). The job was very degrading, and he experienced racial assaults almost daily. He married a young Black woman named Jane Wilson, and regardless of his political feelings towards his employment he remained at his job to provide for his new family.

Four years later, already interested in left-leaning ideology from his life experiences, Golden met Lovett Fort-Whiteman on the streets of Chicago. Golden and Fort-Whiteman had been classmates at Tuskegee, and when reunited in 1924, Fort-Whiteman had just returned from Russia and was donning traditional Russian clothing. Golden allegedly recalled afterward, “I asked Fort-Whiteman what the hell he was wearing. Had he come off the stage and forgotten to change clothes? He informed me that these were Russian clothes and that he had just returned from that country.” Fort-Whiteman explained his reasoning behind his recent trip, and Golden, retelling the story to Harry Haywood years later, said,

Then out of the blue, he asks me if I want to go to Russia as a student. At first, I thought he was kidding, but man, I would have done anything to get off those dining cars...He took me to his office at the American Negro Labor Congress, an impressive set-up with a secretary, and I was convinced. Fort-Whiteman gave me money to get passports, and the next thing I knew, a couple of weeks later, we were on the boat...on the way to Russia.

According to Yelena Khanga, Golden’s decision to relocate was not quite as nonchalant as he made it out to be. At thirty-three and maintaining a solid friendship with James Ford, Golden was familiar with Communism. According to Khanga’s grandmother, Golden remarked that “the

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6 Yelena Khanga, Soul to Soul, 47.
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 49.
first white American to take his hand and shake it as an equal was a Communist.” By this time, the US Communist Party was deep into its efforts to reach out and recruit Black Americans into the ideology that was being propagated by the Comintern. This affected Golden’s decision to travel to the USSR in 1925.12

Oliver Golden and his wife Jane set off to study at the Communist University for Oriental Workers in Moscow (also referred to as University of the Toilers of the East). KUTV, the acronym of its Russian name, was an international university whose goal was to train young communists, specifically from minority groups within the Soviet Union and marginalized people from foreign nations. The program trained “students to return to their respective countries and overthrow the yoke of colonialism.”13 Black Americans were among these groups, considered colonially oppressed by the Soviets because of their legal and social status in the United States.14 All of this, including the education abroad and the justification for the focus, was the direct result of the 1922 and 1928 Comintern Theses. Golden was one of six Black Americans who came to the USSR in 1925, and while he was not then a CPUSA member, his time in Moscow influenced his future goals significantly.

Unfortunately, Jane Golden passed away from a kidney ailment in a Moscow hospital, shortly after arriving in the USSR. According to Yelena Khanga, “the entire student body marched out Tverskaya Street to bury Jane in a municipal cemetery…Jane was eulogized as one of the first women of her race to come to the land of socialism.”15 After Jane’s untimely death, Oliver Golden remained in Moscow until 1927. His time in the USSR had been eye-opening:

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11 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 49.
12 The exact year of Golden’s schooling in the USSR is conflicted. For the purposes of this thesis I have chosen 1925 as the year based on the letter which Lovett Fort-Whiteman wrote declaring the arrival of the first Black students in Moscow. For more, see Appendix A, Figure Eight.
13 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 49.
14 Ibid.
15 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 50.
“The Soviet Union possessed a failing economic system. Many of the country’s specialists had left after the Revolution…The new social concepts propagated by the USSR had attracted foreigners.”16 By the time of his return to the United States in 1931, “Oliver was a committed Marxist, thoroughly enmeshed in the flourishing American ‘progressive’ subculture of the twenties.”17 He was not the only one.

Bertha Bialik was the only white person to accompany Golden and the eventual group that departed to the USSR in 1931. Born in Warsaw, Poland, Bialik was the daughter of a Rabbi of the “so-called German school associated with the Jewish Enlightenment.”18 The school, and the Bialiks, were unique because regardless of their assimilation into Polish society, they remained connected to their religion and spiritual practices.19 Her father, Isaac/Yitzhak Bialik, left Warsaw in 1915 and settled in the Bronx, with his family emigrating just a few years later. At age 15, Bertha was not initially politically inclined, but according to Khanga, “her political radicalism was truly ‘made in America’.”20 Her brother, Jack, had already embarked on his political journey and invited her to participate in political demonstrations and marches. According to Khanga’s mother, Lily Golden, “She joined picket lines against strikebreakers…and was arrested a number of times.”21 To understand her grandmother’s life and the balance between her Orthodox Jewish upbringing and the Communist adulthood, Khanga writes:

Bertha Bialik came of age, intellectually and politically, in the rich cultural soil of Yiddishkeit.22 This exciting period described by Irving Howe in World of Our Fathers…[was] one where ‘Jewish intellectuals find themselves torn by conflicting

17 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 51.
18 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 55.
19 Ibid.
20 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 54.
22 Yiddish for Jewishness or Jewish way of life.
Chapter Two: Oliver Golden and the Agricultural Group

claims: those of an alien world, whether in the guise of accomplished cultures or revolutionary movements, and those of their native tradition, as it tugs upon their loyalties and hopes for renewal…The sufferings of an oppressed people rub against and contribute to utopian expectations and secularism messianic fervor.’ In short, this was a world in which my great-grandfather (Isaac) might teach Hebrew school and two of his children might just as readily be drawn to communism.”

At the time, Bertha worked in an embroidery factory and was a frequent reader of the Der Forverts. In her activism, she organized fellow garment workers and was a member of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and “the bitter struggle between leftist and rightist union factions fueled [Bertha’s] political activism throughout the twenties.”

Pearl Steinhardt, one of Bertha’s friends from these years, describes in Yelena Khanga’s book why she thinks Bertha was so attracted to communism. She explains their mutual upbringing in Poland, which was full of hatred and injustice, and the journey that many Polish Jews took to live in a better world in America. Jews, she claims, were so drawn to Communism and Socialism because it was a just cause, and Jews were committed to equal rights for everybody surrounding them. In Steinhardt’s estimation, Bialik “was always working for a cause; that was her idea of fun. Nothing was too much work in the fight for justice. She was a very, very serious person.”

Bertha Bialik met Oliver Golden in 1927 when she was 22 and he was 40. The two had been arrested at a protest and forced to spend the night in a New York City jail. It was love at first sight. Her family was horrified. At the time, for a Jewish girl to marry a gentile was shocking enough. However, for Bertha to form a relationship with a Black man isolated her from everybody in her community: “Her parents might have forgiven their youngest only daughter

23 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 56-57.
24 A socialist-leaning Yiddish-language daily newspaper founded in 1897 whose readership consisted of Jewish immigrants in New York City.
25 In the 1920s and 1930s, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union was one of the largest labor unions in the US and played a vital role in the labor history of this time. Many of the members were young Jewish or Eastern European women with socialist political leanings.
26 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 59.
27 Pearl Stienhardt, as quoted in Khanga, Soul to Soul, 60.
many great things, but an attachment to a Black man in the 1920s was totally unthinkable.”

Pearl was the only person in Bertha’s life to remain her friend. She writes,

Bertha and [Oliver] had a shared belief in equal justice for all, regardless of race, color, or creed. She didn’t fall in love with Golden because he was a Black man. It’s just that Bertha wouldn’t have let his color stop her from seeing the person inside…He was very handsome, very charming and interesting, much older and more sophisticated than we were. He had been all over the world. He could even cook! If he had been a white man, no one would have asked how someone could fall in love with him.

Not long after meeting in jail, Bertha moved in with Oliver in a one-bedroom apartment in Harlem, which was most likely the only place in the United States where a Jewish-Black mixed couple could live safely. While she made a new home with Oliver, her family stopped being a part of her life. As Khanga writes, “they left Poland to escape the virulent anti-Semitism of the Old World, only to adopt the prejudices of their new world.” She never spoke to them again, occasionally sending photos of her new life and, eventually, her daughter. According to a family friend, decades later, when Bertha and Oliver sent pictures of their daughter to her family, they were immediately torn up and thrown away. Oliver and Bertha never married. This was not due to any law prohibiting interracial marriage but rather that “like many radicals of their generation, they considered marriage a bourgeois economic institution, something they did not need to sanctify their love.” Regardless, Bertha always referred to Oliver as “her beloved husband.”

When Oliver Golden returned to New York from Moscow in 1927, he opened a co-op restaurant in Harlem. Khanga said this became a place where “leaders of the Harlem Renaissance and other great African Americans such as Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson” would frequent. In addition, Golden opened up an office at 1800 7th Avenue, from which he would

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29 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 61.
30 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 66.
31 Ibid.
32 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 70.
33 Ibid.
operate his search for “qualified and willing Blacks” to recruit for industrial and agricultural work in the Soviet Union.  

34 He did this in conjunction with Amerikanskaya Torgovlya Trading Corporation, also known as Amtorg. Amtorg was the official trade representation of the Soviet Union in the United States and dealt with all trade union matters between the two nations. Golden had noticed the movement of Americans to the Soviet Union for the advancement of the Communist State, as all of them had to go through Amtorg to sign official contracts. For example, over one hundred mechanics from Ford motors relocated to Moscow to help build the Automobile Assembly Plant there. A garment makers’ cooperative in Moscow was founded by the Textile Workers Union, which had sent 170 sewing machines, equipment, and food. A group was formed by “an American named Harold Ware…that brought 21 tractors, two cars, and other agricultural equipment to help Russian farmers. Another group went to Siberia, forming a colony under the slogan ‘Let Us Make Siberia a New Pennsylvania’.”

35 However, Golden noticed that all these migrants were white.

Golden knew that Black Americans could also participate in the advancement of the socialist experiment in the form of migratory employment. On December 12, 1930, in a letter sent to his former Tuskegee Professor George Washington Carver detailing the situation (which was typed by Bertha), he wrote:

Dear Sir, Up to date about 50 of America’s largest industrial concerns have sent 2000 of their representatives to Soviet Russia to help develop the Russian industry. So far we have not on record any Negro specialists in Russia. Soviet Russia is putting forth great efforts to develop her cotton industry. I wonder if you would consider the following proposition: I have proposed to organize a group of Negro specialists, who have had a theoretical and practical training in the production of cotton, to be sent to the Soviet Union.

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35 Ibid.

36 Golden, My Long Journey Home, 199.
Unfortunately, George Washington Carver’s reply is lost to history, but based on future correspondence, we can infer that he agreed with Golden’s proposal. On January 15, 1931, Golden wrote again to Carver saying that the plan had been finalized and sent to the Commissariat of Agriculture in the USSR for approval. The plan was to include thirty cotton experts that would be assigned to a variety of posts around the USSR for two years. Carver wrote back on January 24, 1931, agreeing with the plan and stating he would begin the search for candidates as soon as possible. A few months passed, and on April 16, 1931, Golden sent another letter, this time having heard back from Moscow regarding the final plan and contracts. He started by explaining that the delay hearing back from Moscow was due to the high number of applications that Amtorg was receiving, numbering up to thousands a day in the New York branch alone. At the height of the Great Depression, many people were looking for skilled work abroad, and this attraction was felt in the offices of Amtorg. He then went on to explain what Moscow had approved, which included a variety of different specialists, male and female, in cotton, livestock, and rice. The minimum salary was to be between three and four hundred rubles a month, (equivalent to one hundred fifty and two hundred dollars), in addition to vacation and medical benefits. Then, Golden attempted to persuade Carver to join in on the trip. He listed several reasons, such as the fact that “Russia is inviting you” and “it would be a pleasure for you to accompany your men” as well as “your going to the USSR and the success of these men will give Tuskegee an international character.” However, the most compelling reason he listed was that “You owe it to your race. Russia is the only country in the world today that gives equal

38 Roughly $4000 in 2023. The starting average monthly salary for Black male “Common Laborers” in the mid 1930’s was $56 a month, which adjusted for inflation is approximately $1100 a month. (Monthly Labor Review, US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1937). We can assume that in 1931, wages were even lower than in 1937 due to the Great Depression.
chances to Black and white alike.” Carver replied to Golden on May 7th of the same year expressing his regret at not being able to join the group because his health was worsening. He suggested that Golden come to Tuskegee to discuss this project. A few days later, Golden replied that he was going to Tuskegee. Further communication between the two men following this meeting shows that Carver recommended a young man named John Sutton to join Golden’s group.

John Wesley Sutton was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1897. His family was well known in Texas, his father being an early civil-rights activist and one of the first Black educators in Texas. John Sutton had fourteen siblings, many of whom would become household names in the decades that followed. Notably, his brother Percy Sutton served as the Manhattan Borough President for eleven years and was a prominent civil rights activist and lawyer to Malcolm X. He became known as the Father of Modern Harlem. John Sutton, one of the oldest of the Sutton siblings, started his education at Prairie View College before continuing at Tuskegee Institute under the tutelage of George Washington Carver. He graduated with a B.A. from Iowa State and a B.Sc. from Drake University. He remained extremely close to Carver throughout his early years, working as his “unofficial” chemistry lab assistant in 1919. When Oliver Golden proposed his idea for Carver, Sutton was a natural choice. According to Carew, Carver wrote Sutton with the proposal on January 26, 1931, but it took nearly seven months for Sutton to return the application to Golden. On August 19, 1931, Golden wrote to Carver, “Today, I received a letter from Mr. Sutton of Texas. He has filled out and returned his questionnaire and a

40 Golden, My Long Journey Home, 202-203.
recommendation from you. Although Mr. Sutton is an excellent agricultural expert, a recommendation from you naturally adds to his prestige."

While many group members were chosen through applications, George Tynes was the only group member that was neither recommended nor applied. Tynes was born in Roanoke, Virginia, in 1906. His father was a Black preacher, and his mother was a member of the Dakota tribe. In 1929, Tynes graduated from Wilberforce University in Ohio with a specialty in vocational agriculture. He was particularly interested in breeding fowl. During this time, however, he was known far more for his status as an All-American football player, as named by the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Regardless of these achievements, “he was unable to find work in his chosen field, and in the early 1930s, was cited as having taught in a school in Baltimore and then, later, working as a longshoreman in New York.”

Entirely by chance, around 1931, Tynes ran into Oliver Golden on the streets of Harlem, where Oliver was speaking about the Soviet Union and the vision he possessed. According to Lily Golden, Tynes asked Oliver to join the group on the spot.

Two other members of the group were chosen based on their educational and professional backgrounds. Joseph Jepthro Roane was born in Kremlin, Virginia, a small Westmoreland County town, in 1905. One of 15 children, his family, “descendants of long-standing free families of color” in the county, was prosperous and well-off due to their farming business. Roane studied agronomy at Virginia State University with the intention of taking over the family business. It was after Golden came to his university to lecture about the Soviet Union and his proposal that Roane applied to join the group.

Charles Noel Young was born in Wilberforce, Ohio, on Christmas Eve, 1906. His father was Colonel Charles Young, the highest-ranking Black man in the US Army until his death in 1922. Because of his father’s service, Noel Young spent most of his early education abroad in France and Belgium. Later, Noel Young graduated from Ohio State University in 1929 with a M.S. in agriculture. He taught at Prairie View College in Texas and Langston University in Oklahoma.47

Several other members of the group have little biographical information available about them. What we know comes from a New York Amsterdam News article from October 14, 1931, identifying the other group members not previously discussed:

Others of the cotton specialists are Welton C. Curry, 24, a former football player at Virginia State College from which he graduated last June with the B.S. in agriculture degree… B.L. Hopkins, 30, Norfolk, VA., a teacher of vocational agriculture in the tidewater district of Virginia and a graduate in agriculture from Virginia State College, 1924; A.M. Overton, 24, Hartford, N.C., teacher of vocational agriculture and graduate in agriculture from the Agricultural and Technical College, Greensboro, N.C….W.C. Avant of Omaha, Neb.; Frank Faison, Jr. Greensboro, N.C., and Frank Gordon, M.S. in agriculture, Ohio State University, are also members of the party. The engineer is [Bernard] Conrad Powers of Huntsville, Ala.48

All these men and women who were aboard the Deutschland could not be more different in political ideology and education. What they had in common was their agricultural backgrounds which can be traced back to the founding of Tuskegee as an institute. Agricultural education was seen as one of the only viable paths for newly emancipated Black men in the reconstruction period. This again links their chosen career paths with the very basis of racial capitalism in America. It is no coincidence that agronomy and agriculture was such a popular field among the Black working class. But each person's motivations for their journey to the Soviet Union was

unique and not all were necessarily tied to liberatory ideations, political thought, or a ‘higher purpose.’ Some were seeking economic stability for their family. Some were eager to experience a land without racism. And some, such as Oliver Golden, had an entirely different idea in mind.

Motivations and Language

Oliver Golden's motivation for emigration was not so straightforward. Looking at the motivating factors of many other emigrants at the time, one might conclude that he must have been running from racism. One could also point to the Great Depression and hypothesize that he was seeking economic stability for his family. However, while these two factors played a part in Golden's journey, this was not the overarching reason for his emigration. Oliver Golden was called by a higher power, one of racial solidarity. He felt, according to his daughter Lily Golden, that “help needed to be given to non-European peoples of the Soviet Union - the Uzbeks, Turkmen, Chukchi49 - who had been colonized and who in American terms were ‘colored’.”50 Golden felt that Black Americans also should be given a chance to advance the Soviet experiment.

Furthermore, at this time, the Third Communist International (Comintern) had advanced well into the initiative to bring Black Americans into the revolutionary circle. To the Soviets, Black Americans were the perfect community for this ideology because Communism could liberate them. According to Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Soviet ideology, they were a group in which the evils of capitalism were fully represented, and decades after the emancipation from slavery, they were still held back by the capitalist system.

49 The Chukchi are a Siberian Indigenous group living in the easternmost section of Russia, near the Bering and Chukchi seas. The inclusion of these peoples in the listing of “colored people” is seemingly random and sticks out. Perhaps the similarity was drawn between the nomadic lifestyles of the Chukchi and the Central Asians.
By the 1930s, Oliver Golden was a Communist. Undoubtedly, he agreed with this sentiment, but the agrarian project was built on a need to prove that Black people were not only a tool for Soviet propaganda, but that they had something to offer to the success of this experiment. His wife, Bertha Bialik, describes in Yelena Khanga's book *Soul to Soul* that "it meant something special to him for a Black to help other people of color... It would mean more to an Uzbek, he thought, to see an educated, skilled Black American than to see only white specialists. It would show what was possible when people pulled themselves out of oppression." 52

What is particularly interesting is Bialik and Lily Golden’s usage of the terms "colored people" and "people of color" when referring to Central Asians. Racial terminology of the early twentieth century was ever-changing. Following the abolition of slavery, racial categorization changed rapidly with the changing social tides. In the beginning of the century, Black Americans opted to use "Negro" as a self-descriptor. This remained a popular descriptor of Black people until well into the latter half of the twentieth century. Jim Crow laws would use either "Negro" or "Colored." Colored could be in reference to Black people. However, it also was an all-encompassing term that generally included anybody who was not "white," especially for communities with no term such as "Negro" as a descriptor: "In the racialized society of the West, it has long been common for individuals to be categorized based on their physical appearance." 53 Colored became synonymous with "Negro" in many parts of the country, and there became dual

51 Yelena Khanga’s book was published in the 1990s when the term “coloured” was considered offensive. The term “people of color” arose as a suitable replacement to that and has remained the proper term till this day.
52 Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 77.
usage of the word: one to mean Black Americans, and one to generalize everybody who was "the other."\(^{54}\)

The word “Coloured” first appeared in Soviet documentation during the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922. On the table for discussion for this meeting was "the initiative for global Black liberation."\(^{55}\) Leading Black scholars such as Otto Huiswood took to the floor to argue and debate the merits of Soviet intervention in the lives of Black communities internationally. This was, as previously discussed, the “Negro Question.” Much of this theory, and the others discussed in the previous chapter, was based on Leninist thinking. Lenin, in his 1917 pamphlet entitled *Statistics and Sociology*, said,

> In the United States, the Negroes (and also the Mulattos and Indians) account for only 11.1 percent. They should be classed as an oppressed nation, for the equality won in the Civil War of 1861–65 and guaranteed by the Constitution of the republic was in many respects increasingly curtailed in the chief Negro areas (the South) in connection with the transition from the progressive, pre-monopoly capitalism of 1860–70 to the reactionary, monopoly capitalism (imperialism) of the new era, which in America was especially sharply etched out by the Spanish-American imperialist war of 1898 (i.e., a war between two robbers over the division of the booty).\(^{56}\)

The Communist International’s goal of a worldwide revolution prompted Lenin to consider several specific people groups as the optimum carriers of Communist ideology.

Being associated with CPUSA during this policy push, Oliver Golden was keenly aware of this rhetoric. During his time at the University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow, he befriended Otto Huiswood and Harry Haywood. Upon his return to the United States in 1927, he continued organizing in CPUSA, and it can be assumed that he would have been intimately familiar with the 1928 resolution. Therefore, his terminology, and usage of specific racial terms,  

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have to be examined from the perspective of Communist education. Throughout the minutes of the 1922 Theses on the Black Question, the term “Black” or “Negro” is used to describe Black people. The term “coloured” appears only once, excerpted below.

The Negro problem has become a vital question of the world revolution; the Communist International, which has already realized what valuable help the Asiatic coloured peoples in the semi-colonial countries can give to the proletarian world revolution, considers the collaboration of our oppressed black fellow beings absolutely essential for the proletarian revolution and the destruction of capitalist power. For these reasons the fourth congress declares it the special duty of communists to apply the “Theses on the colonial question” to the Negro problem also.57

The only usage of the word is in conjunction with "Asian." Seeing as the Comintern is referring to a past aid given, one can assume safely that these "coloured peoples of Asia" are, in fact, about the Central Asians. So when Oliver Golden referred to racial solidarity with "the coloured people" of Central Asia, this was nothing out of step with Comintern rhetoric.

He felt the call of racial solidarity, a concept put forth by the Comintern that there is something that connects all people of color internationally. Bound not only by his Communist convictions, he thought it was his moral obligation to help them because he was in a unique position to prove to them that they could shed the history of their oppression and make the most out of this egalitarian system. Furthermore, he felt he could help them build this new system alongside them, so they could finally play a part in shaping their future.

Apart from racial motivations, many group members were seeing a life free of Jim Crow. They had been promised a land free from racism where they could live and work safely and prosperously. At first glance, the contracts provided them hope for a country where their work and expertise would be appreciated. A question that has long been debated is whether or not the USSR lived up to its egalitarian promises. Looking at anecdotes from various group members in

57 Theses of the Fourth Comintern Congress on the Negro Question (Originally published in the Worker, March 10, 1923) as it appears in Heideman, Class Struggle, 280.
addition to decisions made in 1937, it can be inferred that many truly believed in the anti-racism of the USSR. According to a story that Joseph Roane told Yelena Khanga, he only experienced one racist incident in his eight years in the Soviet Union. Roane and his friend were in a Moscow barbershop when two white Americans who were getting a shave started yelling racial slurs at the Black men and demanding that the barbershop refuse them service. The barber took the two white Americans, half-shaven, and threw them out onto the streets of Moscow, declaring that American racism has no place in the USSR.  

What is peculiar, and becomes a trend in the following chapters, is the extent to which Black American foreigners were treated well. At some stages, their treatment became unduly preferential, benefiting the Black visitors. Langston Hughes describes how Bernard Powers bypassed a line of hundreds of Soviet citizens waiting for train tickets by using his foreign worker’s card. There were other anecdotes of Black foreigners being ushered to the front of queues, offered wives and daughters for dancing, and given gifts and the best accommodations. This was impossible in Jim Crow America, but their status privileged them in the USSR. As mentioned before, the wives were given servants to do the housework, so the women were free to enjoy themselves. In a society that prided itself on being equal, the line between foreigners and Soviet citizens was starkly unequal. When the remaining agronomists took on citizenship after 1937 and lost access to special privileges, their skin color still marked them as outsiders, but many of the social aspects and benefits of their designation as foreigners remained.

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58 Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 79
The Voyage

It was October 1931 when Golden finalized his group and the plans to go to the USSR. They were to set sail on the Deutschland from New York Harbor. The group would be joined onboard by four other Black specialists slated for other jobs; Morris Wickman, a seaman; Sam Langford and A.J. Lewis, both steelworkers; and J.W. Jones, a coal miner. Additionally, there were ten white workers on board. The New York Amsterdam News noted that the night before their journey, “the party was given a farewell demonstration at Cooper Union. Workers of both races joined in the celebration, emphasizing the “uniqueness of this interracial team.”

Of the group’s members, only Golden had previously visited the USSR. Yelena Khanga writes, “my grandfather was probably the only card-carrying Communist in the group. A few of the men certainly sympathized with Marxism (what they knew of it), while others had no particular interest in communism and no knowledge whatsoever about the Soviet Union.” In an interview with Khanga in the 1980s, Joseph Roane explained,

I hardly knew where the Soviet Union was when Golden came to my college to speak. No one called me a Communist for going, because no one in my circle knew exactly what a Communist was. I signed on for two reasons. In the first place, Amtorg was offering better pay for a month than a lot of people would make in a year in the Depression. Secondly, I was young and I wanted to see the world. I thought this might be the only chance I’d ever get.

On board the Deutschland, the group was provided with traditional Soviet Russian fares such as vodka and a Russian tutor so the group could get acquainted with the language. Furthermore, the trip offered luxuries and decadence unheard of for Black Americans at the time. Because the boat was German, traditional German foods were provided. According to Lily Golden, “Vegetables

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60 See Appendix B: Figure One.
61 Carew, Blacks, Red, Russians, 102.
62 Ibid.
cooked in the German manner, bouillon, chicken in cream sauce, fried tongue, remoulade sauce, potato salad, roast capons, pate in parsley, Californian apricot desserts, mixed lettuce salad, Bombe Surprise, cookies and cakes, Swiss and Edam cheeses, fruits and coffee. That was only one day’s selection.”

Joseph Roane says that while he and his new wife did not learn much Russian, they did indulge in the other fares:

We had just gotten married, so this was our honeymoon. The first stop was London, where we ran around looking at all of those places from storybooks and buying long underwear, because we were told it was very cold in Russia and you couldn't get it there. The wonderful thing about London was that we could do whatever we wanted, go wherever we wanted. There was no back of the bus, you could just get on and ride. For those of us who'd spent our lives in the South, always taking a back seat, this was really something. I was already glad I’d come, and I hadn’t even gotten to Russia. I’d never in my life, you see, been able to walk into a restaurant and know I would be served food, and treated like any other customer.

After a few days of travel, the ship docked in Hamburg, Germany. It was still 1931, two years before Hitler rose to power, but members of the group already felt the discomfort and hatred. Bertha Bialik said she did not feel comfortable walking on the streets in the company of her husband and the group members. The Germans screamed insults and brandished their fists at them. However, according to their daughter, this would be the last racist incident that Bertha and Oliver would ever experience.

On November 7, 1931, the ship docked in Leningrad on the 14th anniversary of the October Revolution (whether this was planned is unknown). At the port, they were met with delegations of representatives from various factories, members of the Communist Party, and of the Soviet State. For the first few days, the group remained in Leningrad and were treated like dignitaries: “They were shepherded to meetings, on visits to the museum, and on

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64 Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 79.
tours of the city. Then they boarded a very comfortable special carriage, of the kind reserved for foreigners, for their train ride to Uzbekistan."

The train ride, which was quite lengthy, provided an excellent introduction to the Soviet Union’s diversity, both topographically and interpersonally: “At each stop, local vendors from the surrounding farms, speaking languages they would not understand, offered items for sale, most of which were new to the group.” Uzbekistan was the right choice for a group eager to apply their agricultural expertise, because the territory had a rich history of producing cotton that existed before it was annexed to the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. Langston Hughes once described his own journey to Soviet Central Asia, stating,

In the autumn if you step off any trains almost anywhere in the fertile parts of Central Asia, you step into a cotton field, or into a city or town whose streets are filled with evidence of cotton nearby. The natives call it ’white gold.’ On all the dusty roads, camels, carts, and trucks, loaded with the soft fiber, head towards the gins and warehouses. Outside the town, oftentimes as far as the eye can see, the white bolls lift their precious heads.

After ten days on the train, the group arrived in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Similarly to Leningrad, they were subjected to a series of meetings and receptions until their last stop on the journey, which took them into the desert. Most of the group would be stationed at the Machine-Tractor Station and the Seed Selection Station of the State Cotton Trust in Yangiyul, while Bernard Powers and a few others were to remain in Tashkent.

The grandeurs of Leningrad were memories of the past. Golden had warned his friends that the comforts of the United States would not be found where they were going. Yangiyul was a kishlak, a small village made up of huts made of mud-dried manure situated in courtyards

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66 Golden, My Long Journey Home, 12.
67 Carew, Blacks, Red, Russians, 103.
68 Langston Hughes, A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia, (Moscow-Leningrad: Cooperative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR), 12.
69 Golden, My Long Journey Home, 12.
surrounded by fences of the same material. The population of this republic was majority Muslim, and many women were veiled and dressed in a traditional silk dress in an array of vibrant colors.\textsuperscript{70} The men wore “long cotton gowns, tied with sashes. All sported tubeteika - skullcaps – the men in black and white and the women’s of gold and silver thread.”\textsuperscript{71} The specialists did not live in these mud huts but were housed in European-style apartments. Lily Golden says, “they were not unhappy. My father had prepared them for the material hardships. And, spiritually, they felt free and independent, warmed by the knowledge that they were helping others.”\textsuperscript{72} Bertha Bialik, the only Communist out of the women in the group, was likely aware of the material hardships. When packing for the trip, she brought only two personal possessions: a Singer sewing machine and a Smith-Corona typewriter. Yelena Khanga once asked her grandmother why she had brought so little. Instead of starting her new life with a considerable amount of possessions, she explained that she knew that she was bound for a poor country and felt no desire to flaunt her wealth. When the group arrived in Yangiyul, Bertha was initially uncomfortable with the “special conditions” provided. The Soviet officials were determined to treat the group with the respect they believed scientists were treated in the United States, providing them with every luxury. Sadie Roane, Bertha Bialik, and the other wives were not employed and were given Russian servants to aid with housework. Housing, food, child-care, and healthcare were all provided for, in addition to a substantial salary equivalent to six hundred dollars per month.\textsuperscript{73} The group even had access to foreigner-only stores that carried international foods: “This was important because forced collectivization of the land created famines in Uzbekistan and many other areas during the thirties…But these kinds of privileges, taken for granted by both

\textsuperscript{70} Golden, My Long Journey Home, 13.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Carew, Blacks, Red, Russians, 106.
foreigners and Party leaders…were obviously at odds with [the Goldens’] commitment to egalitarianism.”

While the group grew sugar beets, peanuts, and other crops, the expatriate group’s work with cotton is what marks their legacy. As part of the experiment, the group was working to develop a new strain of the plant. The Uzbek growing season was very short, and most cotton developed very slowly. Therefore, for almost three years, the men cross-bred American cotton seed, which they had brought with them, with the Uzbek ones. By 1935, they were successful. Oliver Golden and his team had developed a new strain of cotton, which grew and matured 25 percent faster than the cotton back in the United States. The Americans themselves were not physical laborers. Joseph Roane recounted that, “it was backbreaking for the people who actually tilled the soil. The Uzbeks were tireless workers. They could almost make water run uphill. I’d seen something like this in the South, but irrigation didn’t pose the same kind of problem back home; we always had lots of rivers near the best growing land.” The experimentation with cotton was highly successful and continued to be the mandated practice long after the Americans left Yangiyul.

In 1934, the group’s first three-year work contract expired. All 15 members renewed their contracts for another three years, received a raise, and in most cases, were reassigned to places that needed their expertise. Joseph Roane was sent to the Caucasus to aid the Georgians with a tomato-canning plant. George Tynes, a livestock specialist, was sent to Russia to breed chickens. John Sutton continued with experimentation, working on a new type of rope. Oliver Golden relocated from Yangiyul to Tashkent, where he taught at the Institute of Irrigation and

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74 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 83.
75 Blakely, Russia and the Negro, 97.
76 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 84.
77 See Appendix B: Figure Two.
78 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 86.
Mechanization.\textsuperscript{79} Little is known about Charles Young following the second contract. He eventually returned to Ohio, where he taught agriculture and foreign languages, including French and Russian, at Ohio State University until he died in 1967. However, in 1937, with the first of Stalin’s purges, the expatriates were forced to either leave the USSR or accept Soviet citizenship and renounce their American one.\textsuperscript{80}

The time spent together as a group was highly successful, revolutionizing the Soviet approach to cotton production and setting the standard for future cultivation. It is important to note how significant the decision to renew their contracts was. Despite the material hardships in the Uzbek desert, it seems that they preferred life in Yangiyul and the USSR in general to life back in the United States. After their time on the farm ended, each individual specialist was resorted into a new field, gaining more autonomy and power within the system, something which would have been foreign to them back in Jim Crow America.

\textbf{1937: The Purges and the aftermath}

1937 was the height of the Great Terror. Joseph Stalin solidified his power after the industrialization debates of the 1920s\textsuperscript{81} and initiated a campaign of political repression, show trials, and incarceration, as well as the infamous GULAG system of labor camps in the far East. Nobody was safe from this, including foreigners. Neighbor turned on neighbor, son informed on father, and worker denounced boss. After a while, the accusations levied at individuals were a way to maintain your own life. There was heightened suspicion around everyone who was “the other,” and people who were not in possession of a Soviet passport were subject to heightened

\textsuperscript{79} Khanga, \textit{Soul to Soul}, 86.
\textsuperscript{81} The Industrialization Debates were about the future of Soviet industrial advancement, debating between the continuation of NEP or a state-centralized economy. Stalin, via his position as General Secretary, recruited loyal allies to the Politburo and seized control of the state as a result of these debates.
suspicions. Finally, Stalin declared that all foreigners leave the country or remain forever as Soviet citizens. It is of great importance to note that despite the political repression and violence of this period, the majority of the agricultural group decided to stay in the Soviet Union. They would have rather faced Stalin’s wrath than the life that they left back in the United States. However, Stalin’s reign also marked the end of Lenin’s view of Internationalism, as the Soviets moved their focus to building communism in one country. This impacted the group of Americans in the Soviet Union who had been part of the cherished group recruited by Lenin’s policies. For those who stayed and for those who left, their lives were forever impacted by this decision in 1937.

**John Sutton**

By 1934, Sutton had married a Russian woman and was expecting his first child. His work with rice, fiber, and rope landed him the role of manager of a laboratory at the Soviet Rice Institute. In a letter to George Washington Carver dated July 1st, 1932, he wrote,

> My main function is to discover some methods of utilizing to better advantage the rice plant… Of course, new and inexperienced in this sort of creative work I am very much in need of your advice and support…I suppose you have heard that I am married to a Russian girl…I speak the Russian language quite freely, read the newspapers and even write letters. My wife of course is of great aid to me in this.  

According to the return address on the envelope, Sutton had been relocated to Ceb-Kab in the northern Caucasus. Sutton’s work with rice and fiber was significant. Robert Robinson, an American industrial engineer, said, “before Sutton’s invention, Soviet rope was weak and often broke apart. But because of his work, Russia could stop importing jute and hemp and became a

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major exporter of string twine.” In later years, however, Sutton told Robinson that corrupt bureaucrats had co-opted his production. He described how many of the people he worked with were accustomed to old ways of thinking, of personal ownership. He encountered a lack of working material and empty promises from higher-ups. Despite all of these challenges, Sutton always said this was not due to his skin color but rather an antiquated system.

In 1937, Sutton left the Soviet Union: “Every non-Soviet citizen was ordered to leave the country, sometimes on forty-eight hours notice, unless he was willing to give up his American citizenship. . . . Sutton, like many of those forced to leave abruptly, left behind a Russian wife and son.” In 1939, as the war broke out, Sutton tried to bring his son Juan and wife Iylena Vasilievna to the United States but was denied, unclear by which government. Soon after, he lost all contact with his family. Only after Sutton’s death in the 1970s was his family located by government officials. Upon his return to the United States, he found it very difficult to find work, as he was now no longer just ostracized for his race, but also for his association with communism. Nevertheless, he was able to gain an M.Sc. Degree from Columbia University in 1938, and in 1946, he allegedly remarried a young woman named Bessie Brandon. After that, he became a successful science teacher in the New York Public School System and, according to Howard University archives, was “awarded [a] certificate of appreciation from the USSR Embassy for service to the USSR agricultural programs.” He died in 1978 in San Antonio, Texas.

After his death, however, his brother Percy was reunited with Juan Sutton (his father, who was fluent in Spanish, had given him the Latin name for John). Yelena Khanga wrote in her book

84 Ibid.
85 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 91.
about her meeting with Percy in which the family was reunited. Percy was approached by a
Nigerian diplomat who had recently been in Moscow. The diplomat told Percy that his son was
looking for him. Percy quickly realized that the man must be talking about his nephew, and using
his political connections, he tracked Juan Sutton down. In the following years, Juan came to
America several times to visit his relatives, but as Yelena points out, his childhood was very sad.
His mother had died in the war, and he had grown up in a state orphanage. He had epilepsy and
was moved from different foster families, never knowing that his father was trying to find him.87

George Tynes

Unlike John Sutton, George Tynes never moved back to the United States and instead
became a Soviet citizen. After Yangiyul, the Soviets sent him and his family to Georgia, Crimea,
the Volga region, and ultimately Moscow. He remained the head of a large poultry research farm
outside of Moscow until his retirement in 1974. He occasionally came to the United States to
visit relatives, the first being in 1936, but he always returned home to the Soviet Union. Blakely
notes that Tynes was not sorry to go back to the Soviet Union, where “he found life to be much
more congenial for him as a Negro.”88 Tynes married a young Uzbek woman whom he had met
in Uzbekistan, and they had a child, Vyacheslav, who was born in Tashkent. Tynes and his wife
had a child in each location they were sent: “Emilia in the Cossack region in 1941, and Ruben in
the Crimea in 1947.”89 Like the other specialists, Tynes was moved around every two-to-three
years: “This provided the specialists time to help design and establish agricultural systems and

87 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 92.
88 Blakely, Russia and the Negro, 97.
89 Carew, Blacks, Red, Russians, 175.
procedures for which they were responsible, train local farmers and technicians to use the new technique, and see some results of their effort."90

As mentioned before, Tynes was an expert in fish and poultry breeding. The Soviets awarded him the title of zoo technician, and through his 40-year service, he helped produce ducks for consumption and breeding. When World War Two broke out, being a Soviet citizen, Tynes was drafted. However, because of his status as a zoo technician, he could spend his service as a collective farm director. His final posting was as the head of a brand-new experimental fish and poultry farm outside of Moscow. This, on the part of the Soviet system, was considered the highest of praises because of not only the proximity to Moscow but also because the project was designed specifically with Tynes in mind. The Soviets, it seems, indeed had an appreciation of his longtime contribution to the state. Throughout the 1950s, his home and farm would become a place of rest and refuge for many African-American expatriate communities in Moscow.91 Robert Robinson wrote, “Because of him, the Soviet poultry exhibition won first prize in an international fair in Belgium in the mid-fifties…Tynes was proud of his medals and wore them whenever he came to Moscow.”92 When Tynes retired in 1974, the Soviets assigned him an apartment in Moscow, where he lived until his death in 1982.

**Joseph Roane**

When Roane went to renew his contracts at the newly-opened American Embassy, he was the only member of the group to face any trouble.93 The diplomat working at the embassy refused to believe that Roane was born in a place called Kremlin. He insisted that such a place...
did not exist in the United States. According to Khanga, at least two cables from the State Department back in Washington were required for Roane’s story to be backed up. In 1931, Sadie and Joseph had a son, whom they named after his father. However, when they went to register his birth, they realized that middle names were required in the Soviet Union. They allowed the Soviet official to choose a name for them. Joseph’s son was then named Joseph Stalin Roane, the obvious choice at the time. In early 1937, Roane was promoted to the head of a collective farm. When Stalin’s purges started later that year, Roane and his family left the Soviet Union and returned home to Kremlin, Virginia. Roane became a schoolteacher at A.T. Johnson High School, one of the first high schools for Black students in the area. He died in 1995 at the age of 90. He was the oldest surviving member of Oliver Golden’s group.

**Oliver Golden**

For Golden’s second contract, he and Bertha were sent to Tashkent to teach at the Institute of Irrigation and Mechanization. By this time, Bertha was pregnant and was quite pleased to be near a hospital. The Soviet officials placed them in a large apartment in the House for Foreign Specialists, in the heart of Tashkent on Proletarskaya Street. While originally reserved for foreigners, the building was occupied by high-ranking members of the Communist Party and famous cultural figures. Bertha and Oliver were the only foreigners. They received a large three-bedroom apartment with a veranda, a wood-burning cooking range, and a bath.

94 See Appendix B: Figure Three.
96 See Appendix B: Figure Four.
97 See Appendix B: Figure Five.
They had three servants, all Russian, who managed the apartment as well as Bertha and Oliver’s political and personal duties. One servant cleaned and cooked daily for the family, a second sewed all the clothing, and the third was a sort-of nanny for Lily Golden, the newborn daughter of Bertha and Oliver. According to Lily, "my parents never really lived a normal Soviet life, with all its difficulties, problems, and hardships." With all these household responsibilities being delved away, Bertha and Oliver were free to focus on their employment. Just as Oliver taught, Bertha too became a well-known English teacher in Tashkent, working at the Institute of Foreign Languages and Central Asian State University. Oliver was also elected to the Tashkent City Council and used his spare time to advance civil rights outside of the USSR. According to Lily Golden, he was particularly interested in the Scottsboro trial. He and Bertha even penned a letter to the Governor of Alabama protesting the charges. By 1937, the Stalinist purges were starting, and the Golden family began noticing the effects.

Khanga tells the story of the conclusion of a family vacation in 1937. The Goldens went for a month on holiday with Paul Robeson and his family. Lily, in her books, recalls her father and Robeson arguing. Years later, she would find out that Robeson was distressed because he could not locate any of his friends. Khanga writes, "they were already dead or in labor camps, cut down at the beginning of the purges. This was the first, but far from the last time Robeson would come to the Soviet Union to find that old friends had vanished." Upon their return, they saw that the apartment across from theirs was boarded up and sealed, a telling sign that the occupants had been arrested. While the family was away, allegedly, the police had come for

99 Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, was predominantly Russian-inhabited. Throughout the Russian Empire, it had been a place of exile for Europeans. “The city became, and continued to be under the Soviet regime, a magnet for Russian intellectuals for whom life under the centralized power of the SUSR in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev was restrictive” (Lily Golden, My Long Journey Home, 16).
100 Golden, My Long Journey Home, 17.
102 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 90.
Chapter Two: Oliver Golden and the Agricultural Group

Oliver himself. When Golden heard this news, he went straight to the office of the NKVD, the predecessor to the KGB.\textsuperscript{103} He had a gun given to him previously by the NKVD to protect against the Basmachi.\textsuperscript{104} Turning in his gun, he reportedly said:

“I understand that you came to arrest me. Here I am. If it is a crime to come to the USSR to help this country, and you consider me an enemy of the people, arrest me!” The answer was: "Comrade Golden, do not worry. We have fulfilled our quota of arrests from your neighborhood. Go home, continue working, and forget about it."\textsuperscript{105}

Perhaps they were telling the truth about quotas, or perhaps an official in the party had thought it best not to arrest a well-connected, well-known Black American. After this, Lily remarks that she noticed a change in her father. He stopped telling jokes and gave up his favorite pastimes.

Some of Oliver's closest friends were arrested. Faizul Khodzayev, the chairman of the Uzbek Council of Commissars, was charged with “bourgeois nationalism.”\textsuperscript{106} Kamil Ikramov, the head of the Uzbek Communist Party, made a personal phone call to Stalin regarding the widespread arrests and was himself charged shortly after.\textsuperscript{107}

In 1940, at 53, Oliver Golden died from a heart attack and an old injury.\textsuperscript{108} Years before, his kidney had been injured by a policeman in New York during a demonstration in the 1920s. In Lily’s view, "this time, he did not have any resistance since...he lacked the will to live."\textsuperscript{109} Golden was a very popular man, a member of the Tashkent Soviet, and a well-known teacher; thousands of people came to his funeral. His grave was lost during World War Two when

\textsuperscript{103} Carew, \textit{Blacks, Red, Russians}, 161.

\textsuperscript{104} The Basmachi, which comes from the Turkic word for bandit, were local Central Asian anti-Bolshevik fighters who for varying reasons such as economics, religion, and ethnicity opposed the Soviet conquest of Central Asia. By 1931, when Oliver Golden arrived in the USSR, the Basmachi had lost most of the organizational power they possessed in the previous decade, and one can infer that the NKVD armed Golden against smaller rebel groups, of the same name, that remained in the area. There is reason to believe that because of the etymology of the word, the NKVD might have been using the term “Basmachi” to refer to general banditry in the Uzbek desert, as by this time there was no large-scale organized resistance to Soviet control.

\textsuperscript{105} golden, \textit{My Long Journey Home}, 20.

\textsuperscript{106} Khanga, \textit{Soul to Soul}, 93.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{108} See Appendix B: Figure Six.

Tashkent was overflowing with refugees, and graves were dug on top of graves. It was not until 1990 when a 15-year-old high school student located Oliver Golden's grave, following an archeological experiment by local students to discover agricultural history in Tashkent. Lily Golden and her daughter, Yelena Khanga, could take their Black American relatives to visit his grave. Bertha Bialik had already died in 1985, but "she would have liked the fact that young students, searching for lost parts of their own past, were the ones to rediscover [Oliver Golden's] final resting place."  

Was the special status of Black foreigners a conscious propagandist effort on the part of the Soviet Union? Yelena Khanga seems to think that there was no doubt that many Soviet “party hacks” had the desire to show off the foreigners as “propaganda trophies,” but overall that was not the objective of the Soviet Union, at least in the case of the agronomists. Every one of the men that sailed on the Deutschland was a specialist, highly trained in their own field, who had joined this journey of their own free will. They had ranging political attitudes towards socialism, and many sailed for the economic prospects or the safety and security of their families. Some, such as Golden, had a higher purpose or mission in mind. But on the part of the USSR, the Soviets were in desperate need of trained specialists in agriculture, breeding, irrigation, and other fields to keep in step with their economic and political ambitions. That is the central reason for the invitation and warm welcome that these specialists received. A secondary reason, Khanga says, “was the solidarity and goodwill of ordinary people in far-off regions of the country” which was in line with Golden’s own messaging. He was here to help people who had, like his countryman, suffered from racism and oppression. The Uzbeks had, as colonial interpretations

110 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 92.
111 Khanga, Soul to Soul, 112.
112 Ibid.
claim, been lifted from the oppression of the Russian empire by socialism.\footnote{This is a paternalistic and colonialist interpretation of Central Asian response to Soviet control. In fact, there was a mass resistance to Soviet presence, including the Basmachi who fought against the Red Army for years.} They now had schools, they had lived “in debt and fear…women were bought and sold…the land and water belonged to the beys.” But now, under the auspices of Communist rule, “[the Uzbeks] share the cotton.”\footnote{Langston Hughes, \textit{I Wonder as I Wander}, (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1956), 176.}

While Oliver Golden and the agricultural group were revolutionizing cotton and reforming the Central Asian economy, thousands of miles away in a different Soviet republic, there was another group of Black Americans playing their part in the Socialist experiment. They had also come to the Soviet Union eager to discover the truth of its stated anti-racist values and to contribute to the building of such a society. They were also given privileges and treatments foreign to not only Soviet citizenry but other visitors to the USSR as well. And like the agricultural group, they possessed many different motivators for their journey to the Soviet Union.
CHAPTER THREE

The Black and White Film and the Black Soviet Intelligentsia

By the mid-to-late 1920s, the Soviet Union and Communist International expanded another branch of their influence. While focusing on labor initiatives, the Comintern also invested in cultural battles. The spread of propaganda via culture was another primary tool of Communist policy. As a result, in the 1930s, there was a large wave of visitors to the Soviet Union for artistic and cultural pursuits. These individuals ranged from visual artists to poets, dancers to reporters, and all had different reasons for visiting the Soviet Union. The cultural front, specifically the dissemination of culture deemed in line with Soviet ideology, was crucial at the beginning of the young nation. In conjunction with the Soviet policy discussed in Chapter One, the cultural strategy also dealt with topics of race, specifically racism and anti-racism. One aspect of this policy focused on "anti-colonial cultural work" meant for a global audience.¹

Sergei Tretiakov, for example, wrote a play called Roar, China (1926) which was an "indictment of western indifference to colonial sufferings."² The film Storm over Asia (1928) provided a dramatic reenactment of anti-imperial revolts in Central Asia. It was an international success, and Indian students at Oxford University screened the movie before a debate “on the importance of the Soviet experiment for colonial revolution.”³ These productions and dozens of others aimed to showcase the connection between Communist Revolution and eradicating capitalism, colonialism, and racism. This focus meant that many artists frequented the Soviet Union and during their time abroad wrote poems, books, songs, plays, and other artistic interpretations of

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¹ S. Ani Mukherji, “‘Like Another Planet to the Darker Americans’: Black Cultural Work in 1930s Moscow,” in Africa in Europe: Studies in Transnational Practice in the Twentieth Century (Liverpool University Press, 2013), 120.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
their experience in the USSR. Langston Hughes, who will be discussed in depth later, wrote the book, *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia* (1934), in which he muses about the similarities between his life as a Black man in the US and the lives of various minority groups in the Soviet Union. This is almost the same interpretation that Oliver Golden had in the previous chapter, of a tie between all oppressed minority groups and the image of the Black American reflected in the Central Asians. Even though one was an agriculturalist and another a poet, their conclusions about what they witnessed and who they met were nearly identical and further prove the symmetry of all of these different Soviet focuses on race.

America was not untouched by all of this racial focus. Georgiy Grebner, a Russian-Soviet filmmaker, was undoubtedly aware of this dynamic when he drafted a script for a movie called *Black and White* (*Chernye i belye*). The script criticized American racism based on Grebner's self-study of the Ku Klux Klan. According to fragments of the script that have been found, Grebner attempted to use this film not only to depict racism in the US but also “to counter anti-black stereotypes rampant in American and European film” by presenting, as he said, “Negroes on screen as humans, for the first time.” Grebner pitched his script to Mezhrabpomfilm, a prominent Soviet film studio in the 1920s and 1930. Mezhrabpomfilm, a compound Russian designation for the International Workers Aid Film Agency, was established in 1921 in response to the catastrophes happening across the new nation. Deep amid the civil war, famine, disease, and drought struck many parts of the USSR. The Bolsheviks needed aid to maintain mass support, and the film company was established as a general communist aid organization due to the appeal of Vladimir Lenin to Willy Münzenberg in Berlin. Münzenberg was a devoted Communist who, during the war, arranged the passage of food, clothes, and

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4 The literal translation from Russian into English would be “Blacks and Whites” referring to skin colors.  
5 Mukherji, “Like Another Planet,” 121.
medical supplies to the Soviet Union. Thus Mezhrabpom began as a charity organization responsible for aiding the Soviets with material goods during the civil war.

However, post-1922, when the war was over, conditions in the country began to change. Münzenberg had viewed this opportunity as a potential for investment and switched the organization to include various forms of industrial production. The aim, supposedly, was to advance the socialist cause, and Münzenberg pinpointed the film industry as a catalyst for this. It was possible that the film industry “could help the recovery in its small way, but, more importantly, it would spread the ideological message to potential hotbeds of revolution.”

Mezhrabpomfilm quickly fell under the control of the Comintern, whose central policies revolved around the spread of the international revolution.

After Grebner's script was sent to Mezhrabpomfilm, the motion picture Black and White took root. The film was to be filmed in English with a setting in Birmingham, Alabama but was to be filmed entirely in the Soviet Union. In the script,

its heroes and heroines were to be Negro laborers. The men were stokers in the steel mills, and the women, domestics in rich white homes. The leading role, a progressive labor organizer, was to be played by a white man, who wanted Negroes and whites to be organized into one labor union, a forerunner of the CIO. And villains, of course, were the steel mill obsessives and the absentee landlords from the North, who kept the workers, both white and Black, out of the union and fighting each other.

The attempt to assemble a coalition of unionized Black and white laborers was the central policy goal of the Comintern and CPUSA. The 1928 Comintern Congress and the theses developed there, including the Black Belt Thesis, helped reorient the CPUSA on the plight of Black workers and multiracial labor struggles.

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In 1932, Mezhrabpomfilm put out a casting call for Black actors after approving Grebner's film for production.\(^9\) Articles ran in the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Amsterdam News* declaring, "Soviet Seeks Negroes to Make Film of Conditions Here. The picture will be called 'Black and White,' without the buffoonery and sentimentality of others of its kind."\(^10\) The article specifies that James Ford, the Black American Communist mentioned in chapter two, organized this search committee. James Ford proposed a group of Black performers to Louise Thompson (later Louise Thompson Patterson) to travel to the USSR to act in the film. Thompson was a known civil rights worker and a key member of the literary scene in Harlem. She was the founder of the Harlem chapter of the Friends of the Soviet Union, so her choice as head of a special committee consisting of interracial intellectual figures was natural. The editor of Marcus Garvey's *The Negro World*, Wilfred A. Domingo; Black journalist and civic activist Bessie Bearden; famous Black actress Rose McClendon; literary critic and author Malcolm Cowley; novelist Waldo Frank; and music critic John Henry Hamon were all members of the chapter. However, Thompson remained the most prominent of the organizers, undertaking the majority of the work. She unsuccessfully attempted to raise money for the eventual trip to Moscow through various charities. Finally, Thompson decided the movie's participants should pay for their travel. She approached nearly thirty people with this proposal, of which twenty-two eventually agreed.

Louise Thompson sent a telegram to Langston Hughes, "the star of the Harlem Renaissance."\(^11\) He was on a lecture tour in California when Thompson invited him to come to Moscow as a scriptwriter. "Hold that boat ‘cause it’s an ark to me," Hughes replied. He then

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\(^9\) See Appendix C: Figure One.


drew across all of America, from the West Coast to the East, and was the last person to board the ship *Europa* for passage to the USSR.\(^\text{12}\) Hughes was motivated by a wish to see the Soviet Union, which he believed was free from "the brutality and stupidity of capitalism; where he thought there was nobody hungry, no racial differences, no color lines, nobody poor."\(^\text{13}\) There was also talk about Hughes being interested in delving into cinema, which was impossible for him at the time in the US due to the segregation in the film industry.\(^\text{14}\)

Ted Posten, another member of the *Black and White* group, was a reporter for the *New York Amsterdam News*. He agreed to come because "he regarded it as an excellent opportunity to see for himself ‘the much-publicized Soviet Union and possibly write stories about it.’"\(^\text{15}\) His journalist friends helped raise 110 dollars to fund his journey to the Soviet Union. By trade, Homer Smith was a postal worker but dabbled in journalism. He “hoped to find work in a country that had overcome racism, and took advantage of the opportunity to leave America.”\(^\text{16}\) Smith was already in the Soviet Union, as an international correspondent for *The New York Amsterdam News* and *Afro-American*, when the journey was organized and agreed to meet the group in Leningrad.

The twenty-two members ranged in profession and background. Wayland Rudd was a seasoned actor and sprung to fame following his work on *Porgy and Bess* (1929), *Emperor Jones* (1929), and *Othello* (1930), all of which debuted on Broadway. Taylor Godron, a dynamic figure of the Harlem Renaissance, was a touring concert singer and had even performed for England's King George V and Queen Mary. In 1928, the *Billings Gazette* called Gordon "the Negro singer

\(^\text{12}\) See Appendix C: Figure Two.
\(^\text{14}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{16}\) Lapina, “*Black and White*: The Story of a Failed Film Project,” 215.
who put Montana on the map.”\(^{17}\) Loren Miller was new to the law profession, having only recently passed the Kansas bar. In his spare time, he was a journalist. Ted Poston, mentioned above, was also a journalist. Henry Lee Moon, a graduate of Howard University and editor of the school's *University Journal*, worked in public relations at Tuskegee. Just over a year before the search for *Black and White* cast members began, he was offered a job at the Black newspaper *The New York Amsterdam News*. He worked alongside Ted Poston, and the two became roommates before setting sail for the USSR. Several members had been involved with the arts before this trip. Thurston McNairy Lewis and Sylvia Garner were both actors and singers. Juanita Lewis was an aspiring singer. Lloyd Patterson was “a paperhanger and artist.”\(^ {18}\) Homer Smith was a well-known Black journalist writing for *The New York Amsterdam News* and the *Afro-American*. Mildred Jones was a young art student. But many other members had little to no experience. Lawrence O. Alberga was an agricultural worker; Matthew Crawford, an insurance clerk; Constance White, Katherin Jenkins, and Leonard Hill were social workers; George Sample, a law student; Frank C. Montero and Mollie Lewis graduate students; and Allen McKenzie (the only non-Black member) was a salesman.

For a film depicting the struggle of Black laborers in the United States, it seems bizarre that not one of the invitees was remotely close to the Marxist definition of a worker (proletariat), save perhaps Alberga. They were artists, writers, journalists, and public intellectuals. Regarding their political affiliations, since “the group was expected to bring back an unprejudiced report on the Soviet Union,” only a few of them harbored sympathetic feelings toward the Communist


party. At the start of the group's journey, the committee issued a letter of confidence in the project, saying that,

a pictorial event of great artistic and social significance is heralded by the completion of its plans. The American Negro has never been portrayed on screen or stage in his true character. This film, *Black and White*, to be produced by the Mezhrabpom Film Company of Moscow, will be the first departure from the traditional pattern. It will trace the development of the Negro people in America, their work, their play, their progress, and their difficulties - devoid of sentimentality as well as buffoonery. Meanwhile, Hollywood producers continue to manufacture sentimental and banal pictures and particularly cling to traditional types in portraying the Negro.

The insistence that the film was to be “devoid of sentimentality…[and] buffoonery” is already an intentional departure from the depiction of Black people in the American film industry.

Similar to the departure of Oliver Golden and his group, the journey of such a large group of Black Americans, particularly well-known ones, was covered in the media. *The Chicago Defender*, in an article titled "Stars Now on Way to Russia to Make Film Black and White," described a group of twenty-two talented Black youth: “Actually possessing less stage experience than the general run of stage folk, they plan to fit better into the Russian scheme of talking picture production, which stars no one, but casts from life, according to type.” This method of filmmaking was Soviet through-and-through. This idea of depicting the masses signified a separation from the bourgeois, celebrity-based nature of Western film production, namely Hollywood. By utilizing “regular” people to depict the ordinary, this Soviet film production method fit neatly into the new socialist ideal of the ordinary man. The article stated that production would take four to five months. The *New York Times* also published an article that reported that a group of Americans had set sail for Russia to make a movie about Black

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19 Lapina, “*Black and White*: The Story of a Failed Film Project,” 214.
21 “Stars Now on Way to Russia to Make Film Black and White,” *The Chicago Defender*, June 1, 1932.
people: "The Soviet scenario plans to picture realistically the American Negro at work and at play and to trace the story of his development since the middle of the last century." Poslednie Novosti, a French-based emigré newspaper, reported on July 4, 1932, that,

A party of Negroes twenty-two strong has left America. They are all under contract to Moscow to participate in a new film about Negro life which is beginning to be filmed in Moscow. Some scenes of the films will be shot in the cotton-growing regions of Turkestan, since the film will show episodes from Negro life on the American plantations. Of the whole Negro troupe, only one belongs to the Communist Party.

Even the Communist press ran the stories with some embellishments. Rabochyi i teatr (Worker and Theatre), a leading Soviet artistic publication, expressed their distaste at the American capitalistic coverage of the project: “The headlines of the big papers bomb the small-type announcement…'Bolshevik propaganda,' 'The hand of Moscow,' 'Preparing for a Negro uprising,' 'Death to the Black dogs of Scottsboro.'” Leonid Ierikhonov, the author of this article, contrasted this painting of the project with that of The Daily Worker. In typical Soviet rhetoric, Ierikhonov highlights the coalition of Black and White "workers, farm laborers, students, performers, musicians, writers, and scholars" who have come together to make this project a reality by sending telegrams to The Daily Worker. In a reinterpretation of motivations, Ierikhonov writes that the group members declared

that they want to work in a creative field of the building of socialism - the cinema - in a Socialist manner, in the same system as every shock-worker in industry…They promise to return home and turn their churches into museums, their palazzos into houses of cultures, and their towns and street into the barricades of the class struggle.

26 Ibid.
Similar to the arrival of the agronomists, the Black and White group’s arrival to the Soviet Union did not occur without fanfare. Upon arrival in Leningrad, they were met with a rendition of The Internationale. They were treated to a feast at the Oktyabrskaya Hotel. According to Langston Hughes, the meal ran "all the way from soup on through roast chicken and vegetables right down to ice cream and black coffee." 27 What is omitted from his testimony but described in Dorothy West's letter to her mother was that "we were given a fine dinner costing $7.00 a piece," a price tag that Soviet citizens could never afford. 28

From here, the journey took them to Moscow, where they were met with the directors of the cinema company and a handful of Black Americans who were at the time working in Moscow, including Lovett Fort-Whiteman, one of the authors of the adapted screenplay; Emma Harris who was the "Mammy of Moscow;" Homer Smith; and Robert Robinson. Upon arrival, according to Homer Smith, Harris exclaimed, “Lord a’mighty, my people have arrived.” 29 Naturally, there were representatives from the party and ranking officials who greeted the visitors. 30, 31 Twelve hours later, the Black film group was sitting in the leading and largest hotel in Moscow, the Grand Hotel. They were treated with respect and dignity. According to an article in the Afro-American, a weekly Black-owned newspaper in Baltimore,

More curious Russians looked and smiled, but the ogling was not contemptuous nor were the smiles sneering. Waiters rushed choice food to the banquet table, set in the middle of a dining hall which, in former days, only the elite were privileged to entirely. All of this was new, like a pleasant dream, like waking from a nightmare, like another planet to the

30 Ibid.
31 See Appendix C: Figure Four.
darker Americans. Homeland - where for generations their ancestors had been born, had killed and fought and died - was never like this.\(^{32}\)

This article was published by Chatwood Hall, the pen name of Homer Smith, one of the group members. He describes the realization that they were in a land completely foreign to the one they had just come from. In this new world, “blind, unspeakable prejudice and class distinctions are ruthlessly hunted down and exterminated without benefit of quarter or counsel of toleration.”\(^{33}\)

The morning after their arrival in Moscow, the group was brought in to meet the film director, Karl Younghans, at the Mezhrabpom Film Studio. According to Homer Smith,\(^{34}\)

There were raised eyebrows and puzzled expressions and whispered asides among the Russians. These were the toiling masses of American Negroes? There before the astonished Russians stood twenty-two men and women ranging in color from dark brown to high yellow. 'We needed genuine Negroes and they sent us a bunch of metisi,' one disturbed Russian remarked in an undertone. Another puzzled official shook his head after shaking hands with several members of the group. 'Their hands, so soft, they don't feel like workers' hands'.

Contrary to their expectations, none were working-class laborers. These were college-educated intellectuals whom the Russian speakers would refer to as the *intelligentsia* or white-collar workers. The lack of calluses on their hands was precisely because none of them had ever had to experience hard labor, which was what made them part of this group in the first place. These artists and writers lived primarily in the northeastern states where Jim Crow was not as prevalent. The life that the script of *Black and White* claimed to represent was not the life these young Black Americans were familiar with. They were intimately familiar with racism, as that was still widespread even in the Northern US. However, the Soviet Union did not realize that the Black experience was not monolithic. They had expected these Black Americans to have the experience

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
that the Soviets had been told all Black Americans were subject to: lynching, the Klu Klux Klan, segregation, share-cropping, and other atrocities.

Joy Gleason Carew described this as a “case of racism in reverse,” explaining that the very features that set them apart negatively in the United States were the ones that were coveted and valued for this production. This was partially based on the visual aspect of the film: “The Black people needed to look Black on screen,” and the entire idea of hiring Black actors was to bypass the need for blackface. The second reason, Carew says, is class. The Soviets had a preconceived notion of supposed class solidarity that stretched across the Black-American community. They presumed that all Black people were working class. But this group standing in front of them ran contrary to this conception. They were college graduates, professionals in their field, and northern urban residents, among whom not a single one identified as a worker. Carew writes that “although they welcomed the international solidarity inspired by the Soviet experiments, within the denigrating context of the racist United States, the label worker did not sit so well.”

Additionally, Carew claims that the Mezschrabpom had expected the Black Americans “to demonstrate other stereotypical behavior, such as singing and dancing.” For a film project advertised as “without sentimentality and buffoonery,” it seems confusing that they would rely on such heavily stereotypical ideas of Blackness. This shows how the very perceptions of Black people by the Soviets were entirely based on stereotypes. This theory is upheld by anecdotes told by Hughes in his book. He writes,

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36 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
The first rehearsal of the music was funnier than anything in the script… The Mezhrabpom officials were victims of that old cliche that all Negroes just naturally sing…Being mostly Northerners, only a few of us had ever heard a spiritual outside a concert hall, or a work song other than ‘Water Boy’ in a nightclub…They were too intellectual for such old time song, which to them slacked of bandannas [sic] and stereotypes.  

The Mezhrabpom was not the only group that approached this project with false information. The Americans, too, experienced unexpected realizations during their journey. Notably, they did not expect to find other Black people in the Soviet Union. Some of the poets in the group had heard about Alexander Pushkin, the Afro-Russian poet, and expressed pleasure at seeing him so publicly celebrated. According to Carew, “Others, especially those in theater, had heard about the nineteenth-century Black American Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge, who was known as the ‘African Roscius’ and was celebrated throughout Europe.” The group did not anticipate meeting living Black Russians, as they had never been told of other Black people living in the Soviet Union. Hughes wrote, “Among the crowd of Russian actors and writers who greeted us at the Moscow Station were also four Negroes; a very African-looking boy named Bob, a singer called Madam Coretta Arle-Titz, a young man named Robinson who was a technician, and Emma Harris.” Harris and Arle-Titz had both been in Russia since the early 1910s. According to Carew, Bob most likely refers to Robert Robb, who was a “political trainee in the 1920s.” Robert Robinson was an industrial specialist recruited to the Soviet Union in the 1920s. And there were plenty more, many of which the film group would never meet.

Another thing the film group was misinformed about was their treatment. Many had heard about living conditions in the Soviet Union and brought additional provisions from home. They packed extra food, toilet paper, sugar, coffee, and soap to tie them over for their stay and to

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39 Carew, Blacks, Reds, and Russians, 126.
40 Ibid.
41 Langston Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1956), 82.
42 Carew, Blacks, Reds, and Russians, 126.
share with their hosts and the friends they might make. They were wrong: “The people around them were not showing signs of suffering; they were not ‘pale and undernourished or in need of the canned goods [they] had brought.”43 Like other high-profile visitors to the Soviet Union, the film group was treated to special services. This meant they were chauffeured around, provided with foods unavailable to Soviet citizens, and could visit and stay at places typically reserved for high-ranking party officials.

While the group adjusted to their new lives in the USSR, negotiations and filming preparations occurred. When Lovett Fort-Whiteman had first handed the script over to Hughes, the latter was horrified: “The writer meant well, but knew so little about his subject and the result was a pathetic hodgepodge of good intentions and faulty facts. With his heart in the right place, the writer’s concern for…freedom and decency had tripped so completely on the stumps of ignorance that his work had fallen flat.”44 Herein lied the problem. The storyline was entirely about America but was written by a writer who had never set foot in America. The few texts that he had read about American racism were not nearly enough to put together a realistic and factual depiction. Instead, “the result was a script improbable to the point of ludicrousness.”45 For example, one scene was meant to show how a “poor but beautiful colored girl might be seduced by a wealthy young white man in Alabama.”46 The girl was serving drinks at a party at the home of a steel mill director when this white aristocrat came to her and said, “Honey, put down your tray; come, let’s dance.”47 In the eyes of the Soviets, this was a plausible situation, but “in Birmingham, if the master is white and the maid colored,” this would never be possible.48 After reading, Hughes went straight to the Mezhrabpom officials to inform them that no decent and

43 Hughes., Good Morning Revolution, 67.
44 Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander, 76.
45 Ibid.
46 Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander, 78.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
believable movie could be made from this. Despite Hughes's suggestion that the script be scrapped, the officials informed him that the Comintern had approved the story despite any factual misgivings. Additionally, many in the cast were reluctant to give up job opportunities that paid significantly more than they were making at home. After a few weeks, the Comintern asked Hughes to rewrite the script, but he refused, saying that he knew next-to-nothing about the South, had never worked in a steel mill, and was unfamiliar with labor unions.

After many weeks of waiting for filming to begin, the Americans were sent to Odesa in early August.49 The group was placed in a luxury seaside resort and spent their days frolicking in the water and sunbathing. Curiously, the director Carl Junghans did not join them in Odesa, staying behind in Moscow.50 During this time, the group started to hear rumors that the film project had been canceled. On the 8th of August, this rumor was confirmed. Mezhrabpom cited technical difficulties as the official reason for cancellation, but this remains an unproven fact.

There are several different theories as to why the film project never occurred. Boris Babitsky, the official head of Mezhrabpom, told the group that “one, the scenario was unsatisfactory; two, some members of the cast were unsuitable; three, a Negroid-looking national group in Soviet Turkestan that was to be used in mass scenes had yet to be trained; and four, Mezhrabpom lacked the technical facilities for the project.”51 This might have all been true, but the ultimate reason was political. While scholars agree that politics played a hand in the downfall of production, they differ in naming which political event was responsible.

The most well-supported claims have been advanced by Galina Lapina, who writes that production of the film was prevented by a man named Hugh Cooper, “an American consultant

49 See Appendix C: Figure Five.
50 Shortly after this, Junghans returned to Germany, where he started making films for the Nazi Party.
engineer who had been invited to the USSR to build the hydro-electric station on the Dnieper.”

Cooper was interested in preserving peace between the US and the USSR at a time when formal diplomatic relations had not yet been established. Cooper attempted to meet directly with Stalin. In a series of letters between Stalin and Politburo member Lazar Kaganovich documented by Lapina, it becomes evident that Cooper was warning against the film’s production because it would impede any diplomatic processes that were taking place at this time, as well as his participation in investment and technical projects. On August 1, the Politburo had allegedly met to discuss Cooper’s warning and the fate of the Black and White film. On August 2nd, the Politburo passed a resolution that included a provision to keep quiet the complete refusal to release Black and White, as well as naming party officials to oversee a review of the movie and to make “serious changes in accordance with the exchange of opinions that has taken place.” American journalist Eugene Lyons later wrote that the Kremlin immediately responded to Cooper’s warnings. The project was immediately canceled, while the public and the American film group were fed false statements about a possible postponement and then about defects in the script. However, it was clear to everybody that diplomacy and politics were the underlying reason: “The interests of the U.S.S.R. as a functioning state had collided with the interests of the U.S.S.R. as the vanguard of the world revolution. The real needs of a real state received preference over the hoped-for revolution.” By this time, the internationalist gaze and fight for worldwide revolution had been retired in favor of Stalin’s “socialism in one country” approach, and this may have played a part in the abandonment of this project.

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52 Ibid.
After the cancellation became public, Cooper met with the American Consul in Berlin reporting his success. “Col. Cooper believes that the negro venture in Russia is totally at an end,” he wrote, after detailing carefully the steps taken to observe the film’s productions, its participants, and the State’s reaction to his warning.57 The film participants were also aware of Cooper and his agenda. Dorothy West reported that one night when Henry Moon and another film member were at a bar in Moscow, they heard Cooper say that he would pull out of his current industrial project if the Soviets went ahead with this film.58

When the group in Odesa found out about the cancellation, they did not take the news lightly. According to Hughes,

Hell broke loose. Hysterics took place. Some of the girls really wanted desperately to be movie actresses. Others in the group claimed the whole Negro race had been betrayed by Stalin. Some said the insidious hand of American race prejudice had a part in it all — that Jim Crow’s dark shadow had fallen on Moscow, and that Wall Street and the Kremlin now conspired together never to let the world see in films what it was like to be a Negro in America.59

An article published on August 12 in the New York Herald Tribune claimed that the film was suppressed “for fear that its appearance would prejudice American opinions against the Soviet Union.”60 The article noted concern for the actors’ fate and financial security. However, it became clear in the following days that Mezhrabpom had no intention of breaking their contracts with the Americans. The group was to be fully paid for their participation and continue receiving housing and ration cards. The group split into two factions. The majority of the group, which happened to be all of the communists and socialists, accepted this and started planning for the future. This faction included Thompson, Hughes, Miller, Crawford, West, Smith, and McKenzie.

59 Hughes, I Wander as I Wonder, 95.
The rest left the Soviet Union before their contracts were up and returned to the US.⁶¹ From there, many of them ran articles in various newspapers criticizing how the hand of American racism had finally spread to the USSR. Interestingly, Claude Mckay wrote a letter to Langston Hughes on May 10, when he first found out about the possible cancellation of the film.⁶² He writes, “Saw in the newspaper that you were in Russia and that the film had been postponed - they say for political reasons… Well in America we have no negro films… for social reasons.”⁶³ This quote perhaps exemplifies best the dichotomy between Soviet race relations and American race relations. While in the United States, structural and institutionalized racism barred any Black person from participating in the film industry, in the Soviet Union, it was quite different: bureaucracy, and a structured political line, caused films such as this to be canceled. However, between the lines, McKay seems to be pointing out that at least in the USSR such a movie had attempted to be made.

The group that remained in Moscow was treated to a tour around the various Soviet Republics. They traveled to Soviet Uzbekistan, where the Soviets had prepared a program for them. It seems important to note that the Soviets had told the group to choose anywhere in the USSR to travel, and the group had specifically chosen Uzbekistan, in part because it was populated by people of color. Hughes even admitted this in his writing: “It did not take us long to agree among ourselves that the portions of the Soviet Union we would most like to see were those regions where the majority of the colored citizens lived, namely…Soviet Central Asia.”⁶⁴ This, once again, ties back into the idea of the bond between all oppressed minority groups, as the Soviet Union and Comintern claimed. They were to visit a new tractor factory, a silk mill, a

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⁶¹ See Appendix C: Figure Six.
⁶² See Appendix C: Figure Seven.
⁶³ Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, “McKay, Claude” in Langston Hughes Papers, Box 109, folder 2042-2044.
⁶⁴ Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander, 102.
concert of Uzbek, Tajik, and Jewish music, the Uzbek Opera House, a training college, the Trade Union, and several collective and state farms. They were ushered to meetings with local communists and party leaders.\textsuperscript{65} The group was accompanied by Otto Huiswood, now working at The Negro Worker, the official newspaper of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers. In various independent writings, the group later mused about their experiences riding south. On the train, they were not segregated or “Jim-Crowed” even when heading through parts of the Soviet Union that were “darker.” Afterward, everybody except Hughes returned to Moscow to pursue their ventures. Hughes continued south in Central Asia, eager to discover how life for a previously oppressed racial minority fared under communism. Thompson, Miller, Sample, and Crawford all returned to the United States satisfied with their journey to the Soviet Union. Dorothy West remained to continue her writings. Mildred Jones was hired as an actress in other Soviet films. Homer Smith continued working in the post office and writing articles under his pen name Chatwood Hall. Lloyd Patterson settled down and married a young Russian artist. Wayland Rudd took up acting on the Soviet stage. McKenzie joined Mezhrabpom to work on films. However, by the end of 1933, only Smith, Patterson, and Rudd remained in the Soviet Union.

\textbf{Langston Hughes’s Journey to Central Asia}

Much has been written about Hughes’s adventures in Central Asia, including his book, \textit{I Wander as I Wonder}. The fourth chapter of the book is dedicated to going “South to Samarkand.” At this time, all visitors to the Soviet Union were required to hold a permit that did not extend to the region of Central Asia. According to Hughes, the group (and later he) was able to visit this region because one of the girls involved with \textit{Black and White} had “attracted the eye of the

\textsuperscript{65} Lapina, \textit{Black and White: The Story of a Failed Film Project},” 241.
Soviet head of foreign press relations for the Kremlin, Constantine Oumansky.”66 A letter found at the Yale University Archives shows the level of attention the official party heads gave to Hughes. The Secretariat of the International Association of Revolutionary Writers (Mezhdunarodnaia organizatsiia revoliutsionykh pisatelei), also known as MORP, presumably writing to officials in Moscow, said that this letter

Certifies to them that the revolutionary Negro writer Langston Hughes, a member of the expanded secretariat of the MORP, is headed on a creative journey for three months, from October to December 1932 along the following route: Moscow - Tashkent - Samarkand - Bokhara - Ashgabat - Merb - Bukhara - Tashkent - Stalinabad - Amu-Darya - Samarkand - Moscow. The Secretary of MORP appeals to all institutions and public organization with an urgent request to provide Comrade Hughes with all kinds of support, both in terms of material and everyday life, providing him with accommodation, food, means of transport and translators, and in terms of assisting him in familiarizing him with the economic and cultural buildings along the line of his route. In particular, we draw attention to the need to ensure the great L. Hughes, as a foreigner, has a great number of translators.

Signed, Secretary of MORP, V. Vandursky, C. Tretyakov, Paul Detrich.67

Thus, Hughes traveled across Central Asia, meeting with party representatives and even other foreigners, as well as visiting various kolhozi (collectivized farms). His journey is well documented with photos taken both by Hughes and of Hughes.68 In Ashgabat, he met Arthur Koestler, a Hungarian journalist and writer who was then part of the German Communist Party. During one curious exchange between the two men, Koestler inquires why Hughes was not a member of the Party. Hughes answered by saying “that what [he] had heard concerning the Party indicated that it was based on strict discipline and the acceptance of directives that [he], as a writer, did not wish to accept.”69 In other words, his position as a creative writer was incompatible with political directives. Throughout his journey, Hughes kept a diary documenting

66 Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander, 102-3.
68 See Appendix C: Figures Eight through Fourteen.
69 Hughes, I Wander as I Wonder, 121-22.
day-to-day happenings, which today can be found in fragments at the Beinecke Library. For example, on September 25, 1932, he wrote,

> Today we are really in Asia - yurts [and] camels. We pass the north end of the Aral sea. At Kayalinsk in the late afternoon we hold a Gorky meeting, in honor of his 40 years as a writer. A Jewish poet, a Russian train worker, an Uzbek, and myself spoke, here in the desert. Tonight we had a meeting with some of the Russian passengers on the train: a librarian, 3 Red Army men, and some workers.”\(^70\)

In addition to these encounters, Hughes also remarked that “having been around the world, [he had] learned that there is at least one Negro everywhere.”\(^71\) After the train stopped in Tashkent, amidst the crowd gathered to meet him was Bernard Powers, a member of Oliver Golden’s agronomist group. Towards the end of Hughes’s travels in Central Asia, Bernard Powers and Hughes ventured out to Yangi-Yul to celebrate Christmas with the other Black Americans who were the central members of the agricultural group discussed in chapter two. Hughes describes the miserable journey to Yangi-Yul on a train that did not even stop at the station but only slowed down. Joseph Roane, Oliver Golden, and Charles Noel Young met Powers and Hughes at the station to take them to the collective farm. “I am afraid I failed to hide very well my lack of joy at seeing at last a large group of fellow American negroes away out in Asia,” wrote Hughes before describing how he was nevertheless “most miserable” on Christmas Eve.\(^72\)

While his adventures have been carefully documented in *I Wonder as I Wander*, a book circulated widely in the United States (published by Hughes after being targeted as a Communist sympathizer during McCarthyism), Hughes wrote another book in Central Asia. *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia* (*A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia*), published in 1934 by the Cooperative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR, is exceedingly hard to come by

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\(^70\) Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, “Series II: Personal Correspondence, Russian Letters 1931-1967.”

\(^71\) Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 104.

\(^72\) Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 180.
in the United States. One could see this book as the political consciousness first draft of the eventually heavily revised *I Wonder as I Wander.* Certainly, this 1934 book paints the Soviet Union much more positively than its later counterpart. Only one copy of the original publication in America exists, nestled carefully inside the Beineke archives, heavily annotated by Hughes himself. Apart from that edition, there have been reprints and reproductions done by independent scholars such as David Kikosz, but the lack of original text in the West is no accident. Only 1500 copies were ever printed, and only one copy (Hughes’s personal) ever made it to the United States. However, how it was printed does not reflect the final edits of Hughes.

From close readings of *I Wander as I Wonder* coupled with *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia,* one can pick up on the racial distinctions and connections that Hughes draws between his native United States and the Uzbek people he encounters. The similarities are strikingly similar to the ones that Oliver Golden drew in 1931.

*A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia* begins with a chapter entitled “Going South,” which immediately connects Langston’s experiences as a Black man in America to his time in Central Asia: “To an American Negro living in the United States, the word South has an unpleasant sound, an overtone of horror and of fear.” He describes briefly the history of chattel slavery, which today has evolved into “the worst forms of racial perceptions - and economic exploitation.” He paints a dichotomy that while the color line is the hardest and the fastest in the South, and that “Jim Crow rules,” and he is treated “like a dog,” it remains the home of nearly two-thirds of the Black American population. He writes that there is no need to describe

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74 Langston Hughes, *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia,* (Moscow-Leningrad: Cooperative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR, 1934), 5.
75 Ibid.
76 Langston Hughes, *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia,* (Moscow-Leningrad: Cooperative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR, 1934), 5.
the construct in color lines in the Soviet Union, but that he decided to go “South under the red flag” to discover and compare the lives of Central Asians against those of the “coloured and oppressed people I had known under capitalism.”

This book follows the exact timelines as *I Wonder as I Wander* but offers a more analytic and theoretical lens on his experiences. For example, he starts by writing about the train which took him to Central Asia. He remarks that he has never been not conscious of his race before. In the American South, the train cars are segregated. In the Soviet Union, it is the opposite: “In the car ahead of mine there is a man almost as brown as I am….Some Asiatic factory worker has been to Moscow on a vacation, I think….I ask him what he does. He is the mayor of Bukhara, the Chairman of the City Soviet.”

To Hughes, this was exciting information. He makes a note that “in the Soviet Union dark men are also the mayors of cities.” In fact, the man tells him that in the Soviet Union and Central Asia in particular, there are many cities “where dark men and women were in control of the government.” In further comparison to his homeland, Hughes thinks about Mississippi, where over half of the population is Black, but “nobody hears of a Negro mayor, or of any colored person” leading the government. Furthermore, they cannot vote or even ride in the sleeper car as Hughes does.

The color comparison is thought-provoking regarding Hughes's Western lens of race. Similarly to Oliver Golden, he paints a direct line between his Blackness and the parallel nature of the Uzbeks without much substantiation. The color line, which exists and permeates every aspect of American life, is extended by Hughes beyond the West. In *I Wonder as I Wander*,

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77 Hughes, *A Negro...*, 6.
78 Hughes, *A Negro...*, 7-8.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
Hughes points out that Central Asia “was a colored land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites.” In fact, throughout both books, Hughes repeatedly uses American racial language to describe people, things, and surroundings:

‘Colored’ Soviet citizens, to ‘yellow-brown’ Uzbek, a ‘parchment-colored’ writer, another man whose ‘complexion was about the color of canary bird’s feathers,’ the ‘mulatto-brown’ Bokhara desert, a ‘golden’ little boy, younger Turkoman, ‘quite chocolate of skin,’ ‘colored Orientals,’ and another ‘brown-skin’ Uzbek.

While never outwardly calling the Uzbeks ‘Black,’ it becomes clear throughout the passage described above that Hughes finds parallels in their experiences. As David Chioni Moore notes, “Throughout the book, Hughes continues to suggest these color links: two dark-skinned peoples, Soviet Central Asia and the Black Atlantic Afro-diasporic, are joined by their darkness but are divided by their divergent fortunes under different economic systems.”

While a poignant and artistic comparison, it remains a Westernized lens on race relations in Central Asia. The history of Central Asia might hold various comparisons to that of the African diaspora, but upon further inspection, the similarities are surface level. The Russian Empire’s system of oppression was less racialized than Hughes makes it seem. Pre-revolution Central Asia had a plantation-style system under the Russian Empire. “The beys controlled the water,” and you must till their lands to receive the water. Regarding the Beys and their control over land or water, it is essential to point out that they were also Central Asians, not white. There was an imperial force for whom was reserved the distinction of white, and that was the Russian Empire, but the colonization of Central Asia came at the same time as the abolition of serfdom. Selfdom was different from American slavery in that it tied people to the land but was not a

82 Hughes, I Wander, 116.
85 Ibid.
race-based system. Some scholars have argued that the color line and racial boundaries came out of American slavery as a way to perpetuate profit. Ralph Bunche, for example, writes that “for dominant groups and powerful industrial nations, the definition of race is usually cut to suit the pattern of their economic and political policy,” meaning that the racial boundaries are responsible for creating the color terminology Hughes is using are a direct result of American slavery. For Central Asians, there was an oppressive imperial force between the Russians and the native populations. However, in their own societies and political structures, the “class divisions” between wealthy individuals and peasants were not acknowledged, and at this time the peasant population of Central Asia generally lacked the “class consciousness” that the Soviets sought to exploit.

In contrast, it is crucial to examine color terminology in Central Asia, where such a system did not exist. David Chioni Moore directs this research. While traveling in Central Asia, many of Hughes’s poems were translated into Uzbek. It is interesting to see how many racialized terms are quite literally lost in translation. “I am a Negro” which is the first text in The Weary Blues (1925), was translated during this time. The second stanza begins with “I’ve been a slave/ Caesar told me to keep his doorsteps clean,” but according to Moore, when Hughes’s translator, Sanjar Siddiq, translated this line, the word “Slave” became “Qarollar,” which coincidentally is the same Uzbek word that was later used to translate “sharecropper.” Furthermore, he also translated “Negro,” “Black,” “colored,” and “African” all into the Uzbek word for Black, therefore, losing many nuances between the original English words. Today, the Uzbek language has evolved to have separate words for each of those, including sharecropper and slave, and

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87 Douglas Northrop, Veiled Empire, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 75-76
89 Ibid.
Moore does not note what the official translation for Black in Uzbek would have been in 1932. Comparing the extensive color vocabulary of Hughes when pertaining to Central Asia against the baseline Uzbek variety, one can hypothesize that the Uzbek would have disagreed with Hughes’s strict comparison of the two peoples. Of course, one has to remember that Hughes was not a historian or a sociologist but a poet, and his analysis reflects the creative nature of his career. However, to accept Hughes’s color analysis as fact is not giving justice to the unique and separate history of the Central Asians, their oppression under the Russian empire, and their economic struggles. There are comparisons to be made, especially concerning sharecropping, the cotton industry, and governmental representation. However, this requires pointing out differences in the history of the liberatory struggles of the Central Asians against that of the Afro-diaspora. They are not identical histories, nor are they identical racialized groups. It does injustice to characterize all the struggles of all oppressed global minorities as identical. This need to bind together struggle directly results from the Comintern policy on the ties between all oppressed peoples.

The next chapter of Hughes’s 1934 publication, “A Visit to Turkmenia,” also points to a poignant comparison of Central Asia and the South of the United States:

In the autumn, if you step off the train almost anywhere in the fertile parts of Central Asia, you step into a cotton field, or into a city or town whose streets are filled with evidences of cotton nearby…Outside the towns, oft-times as far as the eye can see, the white ball lift their precious heads.

Of course, Hughes writes, the same can be said of the Southern United States, where cotton fields made up the majority of production. He tells a story about how the Black segregated section of the Red Cross distributed food to the poor Black workers on the plantation. He describes the inequity of the sharecropping system, where the workers of the plantation work for
next to nothing while the owners profit off their labor and become exceedingly wealthy.

Share-cropping is “the mass robbery and exploitation of Southern Negro workers in the American cotton fields. Ironical name - for cotton is a crop that the Negro never shares.”90 The system, which rests on an exploitative contractual system, ensures that “the Black field-hands are kept in slavery on the big plantation of America. A system for getting free labor, white cotton, and culture. A modern legal substitute slavery - this share-crop system.”91 Regardless of all of this, he writes that it is astonishing how American capitalists have the gall “to accuse the Soviet Union of forced labor.”92 In the Soviet Union, landlords were a thing of the past. “We were afraid once but not now. The beys are gone,” a certain Soviet peasant tells Hughes.93 The peasants tell Hughes that the Central Asians were oppressed as a minority under the Empire. But that all changed under the Soviet Union. “Before, there were no schools for our children; now there are. Before, we lived in debt and fear; now we are free. Before, women were bought and sold, but that is gone. Before the water belonged to the Beys; today it’s ours. Before, life was never certain - now it is!”94 Per the prior acknowledgment that the Central Asians might not have viewed their pre-revolutionary lives as “oppressive” by Soviet standards, the quotes above are subject to scrutiny. These claims reflect official Soviet rhetoric and probably were not the prevailing opinions amongst Central Asian peasants at the time, many of whom were still very distrustful of Soviet interference in the region.

Perhaps a more apt analysis of Hughes’s experience in Central Asia does not focus on color lines but economic and class structure. A society that under the Russian Empire rested on worker exploitation to make profits for the landowners, which involved sharecropping and strict

90 Hughes, A Negro..., 14.
91 Ibid.
92 Hughes, A Negro..., 15.
93 Ibid.
94 Hughes, A Negro..., 19.
class divisions, can be and should be, compared to the system under which the United States presently exists. From there, the differences in socialization of enslaved Black Americans and non-racialized serfs should be examined in addition to the struggles for liberation which came with the Socialist Revolution. Hughes aptly points out the stark similarities in production, which rests on cotton in both societies, in addition to the education segregation, exploitation by landlords, and the oppression of women. However, one must highlight the differences, particularly in color lines, to draw such a comparison. It does injustice to the history of struggle in Central Asia to apply Westernized views of race to a society that, at the time of Hughes’s writing, is not applicable.

This argument matters because it ties directly into the positionality of the Comintern. The link that Hughes perpetuates between himself and the Central Asians is precisely what the Comintern aimed for; for all oppressed minority groups to see their struggles as linked. It is important to be able to read through the lines of Hughes’s analysis to see how much of it is influenced by Soviet thinking and be able to look more closely at the nuances of oppression which global minorities face.
CHAPTER FOUR

Other Sojourners and the Legacies of Black Soviets

The previous chapters have painted a mostly positive side of the Black migrant experience. However, not all of the experiences of Black Americans in the Soviet Union were as positive as the ones described. Several stories ended in misfortune. Lovett Fort-Whiteman was the only documented Black sojourner who died in the Soviet Union during Stalin's purges. Fort-Whiteman had risen high in the CPUSA after becoming a delegate in the Fifth Congress of the Comintern. He was the founder and head of the American Negro Labor Congress, and after his removal in 1927, he again went to the USSR as a delegate of the Sixth Congress. After this, he remained in Moscow, settling down and marrying a young Russian woman named Marina. He started working as an English teacher at a newly-opened Soviet Anglo-American school. When Black and White first appeared as a project, Fort-Whiteman signed on as a screenwriting consultant. He was one of the original authors of the script Langston Hughes found ludicrous. To Fort-Whiteman, this script fulfilled everything he had strived to achieve within the Communist Party. Homer Smith, in his book, describes Fort-Whiteman as one of the “early Negro pilgrims who journeyed to Moscow to worship at the ‘Kaaba’ of Communism.”

Fort-Whiteman joined the Party and became steeped in Communist ideology by focusing on race: “He considered himself a leading theoretician on the Negro problem in the United States and the colonial question in Africa.” He greatly supported the Black Belt Thesis, championing it through multiple official party lines. After this move to Moscow, his focus on race did not lessen. This focus was his great downfall. He publically and avidly insisted that the American Black

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2 Smith, Black Man..., 79.
community in the USSR should never forget that they were Black saying: “The group should maintain a high degree of consciousness of their color and always remember that they were Negroes.” For the Soviet Communist Party, this was unacceptable. Under Soviet Party rules, you were always a Communist first, and for Fort-Whiteman to suggest otherwise was a deadly offense. Many other Black Americans in the Soviet Union also disagreed with him. Smith writes, “as a matter of fact, a Negro in Russia had no reason at all to think of color. Most not only wanted to, but were fast forgetting about their color, escaping if you will.” The USSR’s emphasis on anti-racism was at least successful at “the almost total lack of color consciousness.” Fort-Whiteman, in all his proselytizing of Communism, had continuously propagated the idea that the Communist Party must acknowledge the importance of race in the plight of Black Americans, not just class. As discussed in the first chapter, this question had long been debated in Comintern circles.

Nevertheless, this was a faux pas for Fort-Whiteman, a party member and possibly a courier of Soviet Party transportation funds. Soviet Party officials even wrote a note on an essay Fort-Whiteman had published, warning that he was “shifting from the Communist to the petty-bourgeois nationalist point of view.” William Patterson, a prominent Black Communist in the US, penned a letter to the Comintern arguing for Fort-Whiteman's relocation to “somewhere where contact with Negro comrades was impossible.” In letters sent months later, Patterson alleged that Fort-Whiteman had a “rotten attitude towards the party and was preoccupied with the corruption of the Negro elements,” meaning the emphasis on race and racial differences had

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3 Smith, *Black Man...*, 81.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
made Fort-Whiteman forget the true purpose of Soviet communism.\(^8\) This was enough for the
government and secret police to open an investigatory file on Fort-Whiteman. Under Stalin and
particularly during the purges, an accusation of anti-party thinking was enough to destroy a
person. Moscow-based journalist Joshua Yaffa writes,

According to the accounts of unnamed informants, Fort-Whiteman had been overheard
saying that the work of the Comintern had amounted to “empty talk,” that Stalin was a
“minor” figure in the Bolshevik Revolution, and that Communists held their “white
interests dearer and closer” than those of Blacks. Fort-Whiteman, one source claimed,
considered himself a natural “leader of the people” who would return to the U.S. and
create a movement among African Americans outside Soviet influence.\(^9\)

The accusation by Fort-Whiteman that Stalin was a “minor figure in the Bolshevik Revolution”
was certainly enough to land him in trouble with the Soviet party, as this was a popular talking
point among Trotskyites. Furthermore, it seems essential to place Fort-Whiteman’s criticisms in
the global context. During this period, the Comintern adopted the Popular Front theory, which
encouraged cooperation between the Soviet Communist Party and non-Communist parties
internationally in order to stop the rise of fascism. This meant collaboration between the USSR
and Western nations such as Britain and France. Because of this policy, the Soviet Union was
forced to tone down its criticism of the mass colonialism of Africa by the British and the French.
Hand-in-hand went the toning down of campaigns to target racism abroad, which would be
hypocritical towards the actions of the Western colonialists. There was an air of truth in
Fort-Whiteman’s accusations, who had seen the Soviet Union turn away from the hyperfocus on
liberatory struggles of global minorities towards a placatory view of colonialism.

In 1936, around the time Stalin’s purges began, Lovett Fort-Whiteman disappeared.
Homer Smith describes visiting Fort-Whiteman's apartment and being told by his wife Marina

\(^8\) Yaffa, “A Black Communist’s…”.
\(^9\) Ibid.
that he was not there, and she “begs [him] never to come here looking for him again.”

Fort-Whiteman was exiled to Semipalatinsk, a distant outpost in Eastern Kazakhstan, where his troubles continued. He found employment as an English language teacher and boxing instructor. However, a young man testified that Fort-Whiteman had tried to recruit him as a boxing pupil by recommending foreign books. The boy testified that Fort-Whiteman had told him, “come join my club, we will earn a lot of money, travel across the Soviet Union and go abroad.”

Fort-Whiteman spent the next eight months in a Kazakh prison. In August 1938, he was found guilty of anti-Soviet agitation, slandering the Party, and “cultivating exiles around himself while instilling a counter-revolutionary spirit.” He was sentenced to five years in a labor camp and was never heard from again. Records show that he was sent to Kolyma, which the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn described as a “pole of cold and cruelty.” Part of his labor involved mining for gold and building roads on the tundra. He fell behind on his work, and his food was withheld as punishment. He was reduced to a Dokhodyaga, Russian for goner or weakling. Yaffa reports that “he died of starvation, or malnutrition, a broken man whose teeth had been knocked out.” His death certificate reads that in the early morning of January 13, 1939, his frozen body was delivered to a hospital in Ust-Taehzny. His cause of death was listed as “weakening of cardiac activity.” Lovett Fort-Whiteman is the only known Black American who died under Stalinist purges. A man who lived his entire life in service of communist ideals was killed for attempting to maintain those same ideals. He was buried in a mass grave with thousands of fellow inmates.

10 Smith, Black Man..., 83.
11 Yaffa, “A Black Communist’s...”.
12 Ibid.
14 Yaffa, “A Black Communist’s...”.
15 Ibid.
Robert Robinson is another Black migrant who disagreed with the positive assessment of the Soviet Union. In the dedication of his autobiography *Black on Red*, he writes, “because of the generosity of Uncle Sam, I am able to live out my later years in freedom.”16 This best sums up the forty-four years Robinson spent in the USSR: He spent almost every second trying to leave. His account of life as a Black man in the USSR differs from any others written about in this thesis. He did not see the USSR as a haven of anti-racism and spent his time paranoid and afraid of the state and its actions. He writes, “During all my years there….I never dared to trust anyone.”17 He alleges that he was constantly being spied on, with friends and coworkers reporting his every move and sound, every hour of the week.

Robinson’s account of his life is at times contradictory. He was a highly successful industrialist, so much so that he was credited with the success of Sputnik and received dozens of medals and honors from the Soviet state. He lived a comfortable life in the Soviet Union, with a large apartment and access to luxury resorts on the Black Sea. Nevertheless, despite all of this, Robinson writes: “[I was] never accepted as equal. I was valued for my professional abilities; nevertheless I was an oddity and a potential asset to the Soviet propaganda apparatus.”18 This was the most significant fault Robinson found within the Soviet system. He believes that because of his race, the Soviets treated him as a propaganda tool for his four decades in the nation.

Robert Robinson's story of involvement with the USSR begins in 1930 at Ford Motor Company in Detroit, Michigan, where he was employed as a floor sweeper before graduating from technical school to become the first Black toolmaker in the company. He experienced racism from his bosses as well as from his fellow employees. One day a group of Soviets

approached him and asked if he would go to the USSR to teach young people how to make tools. Robinson agreed and quickly signed a one-year contract that promised 250 dollars a month, “rent-free living quarters, a maid, thirty days paid vacation a year, a car, free passage to and from Russia, and they would deposit $150 out of each month's paycheck in an American bank.” Once in Russia, he was placed to work with a group of white Americans. This marked the beginning of his troubles. One night, the group attacked him while Robinson walked along the Volga River. Robinson fought back and fended off the attack. The Soviet media sensationalized this story in the press: “The Stalingrad newspaper ran an editorial denouncing American racial prejudice and warned the American specialists not to export their ‘social poison’ to Russia.” Robinson was hailed as a hero and for days was lauded for his effort to fight back. He was extremely uncomfortable with the situation, even more so when the Soviets decided to have a public trial. The two white assailants were found guilty and immediately ordered to leave the USSR. “I was now an even greater hero to the Russians,” writes Robinson, “I represented good conquering evil.”

As mentioned, Robinson was awarded several medals and awards throughout his time in the USSR. In 1932, an article ran in the *Afro-American*, a US-based newspaper. The article read,

Negro wins high honors in Soviet industry for inventions. Because he has given his factory, the Kaganovich Ball Bearing Works in Moscow, twenty inventions and rationalization plans in the past year, Robert Robinson, colored American specialist, has received special commendations and awards from the Soviet government. Robinson is counted among the “heroes of labor.” His picture has appeared in the “Pravda,” central organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and his portrait hangs in the palace.

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19 See Appendix D: Figure One.
22 Ibid.
23 See Appendix D: Figure Two.
from which the pictures of royalty have been unceremoniously removed…Not only has Robinson been given distinction for his invention and rationalization plans, but because of the high quality of his work which ranks him as a shock-workers, he is called by the Russians an ‘Udarnik’.24

In December 1934, Robert Robinson was elected to the Moscow Soviet by his fellow factory workers and accepted the position.25 A few years later, in 1937, an article in the Philadelphia Tribune described his situation:

Among the elected representatives of the people at the recent plenum of the Moscow Soviet was the colored American worker, Robert Robinson, who was elected a deputy at the last elections by the workers at the giant First State Ball Bearing plant…He once worked at Ford’s in Detroit, where the usual American race prejudice prevented full outlet for his talent and capabilities. …. [He] now holds the honored position of a deputy in the Moscow Soviet and is recognized as an outstanding worker in Soviet industry. Several Soviet plants have borrowed him for temporary periods to help them with certain technical problems of production.26

His election led to difficulties with the American embassy and troubles returning home. To ensure his safety in the Soviet Union, he decided to become a Soviet citizen. For the next thirty-five years, Robinson found himself suspecting every action, every friend, and every friendly interaction for fear that the Soviet State was after him. He was repeatedly denied exit visas, and it was not until he befriended the Ugandan foreign minister that he could secure a way out of the Soviet Union. He recounts,

I lived as an American citizen during my early years. For the next forty-four years, I lived and worked in the Soviet Union, side-by-side with its people. Having now been blessed with the opportunity to live out the rest of my life as an American citizen once again, I have written this account so that anyone who wishes may learn what life in the Soviet Union is like.27

25 See Appendix D: Figure Three.
27 Robinson, Black on Red, 427.
Robinson had every right to critique the USSR based on his experiences. Still, many things that occurred to him are unclear if they were done to him because of his race or because it was the general practice of the USSR, especially for foreigners. Even Robinson, throughout his memoir, does not fully answer this question. There are times when he describes racist incidents done to him, but it is uncertain if he chalks up his inability to leave the USSR to his race. On the other hand, all the positive things that happened to him, which Robinson describes as propagandist tools, also cannot be entirely chalked up to race. Robinson was a highly-gifted engineer and inventor who exceeded his production quotas and aided the Soviets in the space race. His medals and honors were given based on merit. Robert Robinson’s story is undoubtedly essential and sheds light on the negative experiences in the Soviet Union. His position as a Black man and as an American foreign specialist played a central role in the attention and praise given to him by the State. This is a central question that runs through all the stories of the migrants. Were the goodwill and privileges extended to Black Americans all part of Soviet propaganda?

While we will return to the question of Soviet motivations in the concluding chapter, it is important to recognize that many other Black sojourners and their children reported positive experiences of this treatment in the Soviet Union. An elderly woman named Margaret Glasgow, who worked in the electric repair shop of the Stalin Automobile Plant in Moscow, wrote a letter to the newspaper *Za Industrializatsiyu*28 detailing her life in the USSR.29 She says, “I’ve quite forgotten that I’m Black. I simply feel like a human being, that’s all.”30 When she first arrived in the USSR, she explains that she thought she would be met with hostility from the white people, “but to my joy I found the opposite.” She continues, “‘Comrade’ – that was the first word I

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28 Likely a mis-transliteration. In Russian the spelling is За индустриализацию which would be transliterated as Za Industrializatsiyu.
29 *60 Letters: Foreign Workers Write of Their Life and Work in the USSR*, (Moscow: Cooperative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR, 1936), xix.
30 *60 Letters*, 13.
heard… I felt at home, among my own folks, in my own country.”

Glasgow was also the mother of Lloyd Patterson and grandmother of James Patterson, discussed later, and Lloyd persuaded her to emigrate after coming for the Black and White film described in the previous chapter.

Many of the descendants of the migrants have stories to tell and impressive lives of their own. Oliver Golden’s daughter Lily Golden became the first Black woman to graduate from Moscow State University with a degree in African American history in 1957. She became a teacher and a well-known researcher. She worked for the Institute of Oriental Studies until the Soviet Academy of Sciences established the African Institute in 1959, where Golden worked for over thirty years. She married Abdul Kassim Khanga in 1960. Khanga was the former vice-president of Tanzania and was killed in 1968 by Zanzibar police in the conflicts that arose following the Zanzibari revolution. They had one daughter together, Yelena Khanga. In 1988, Golden moved to the US and became a well-known activist, fighting for racial justice and other minorities. She taught at Chicago State University and lectured across the globe. She moved back to Russia in 2003 to be closer to Yelena. She died in 2010 in Moscow at the age of 76.

Yelena Khanga became a celebrity in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1997, she shocked many Russian viewers when she became the host of a talk show called Pro Eto (About It), which became the first show on air to talk exclusively about sex. Yelena also made history by becoming Russia’s first Black female television host. Kate Baldwin says Khanga “embodies the routes of identification and transnational cultural flows” of the USSR and beyond. She was the embodiment of the original Leninist policy of internationalism and living proof that at least part of that experiment worked. Her show, which ran for several years, helped to normalize the conversation about sexuality. Baldwin claims that “with Khanga’s stalwart help,
the show has supplanted Russian prudery with fact-based discussions of sexually contracted diseases, aids, bisexuality, sadomasochism, masturbation, geriatric sex, and non-hetero identifications.”  

She is also the author of *Soul to Soul*, an exploration of her family that begins with her great-grandfather and his experience after emancipation. She remains a prominent figure in Russia and one of the last living descendants of the agricultural sojourners.

The effects of these journeys to the USSR can be seen today. In an interview with Yelena Khanga, she shared an anecdote from her time living in New York City:

> When I was in the US, I studied at NYU; psychotherapy. [And] as part of my practice [I] was to be in hospitals. And since I knew Russian, a lot of Russian patients were sent to me. And one of those old, very old ladies came and she talked about how difficult it was for her as an immigrant, first generation, and all that. And I said, “well I understand you have a language barrier,” and she said, “no, I don't.” She says “I had a fantastic English teacher in Uzbekistan. Her name was Bertha Bialik and thanks to her I feel very comfortable with the US.”

Bertha Bialik was, as mentioned, Yelena Khanga’s grandmother and Oliver Golden’s wife, who was the sole white sojourner among the agriculturists. While her husband cultivated cotton, she taught English to many of her neighbors and eventually landed a teaching job in Tashkent. There are other descendants who grew up and worked within the Soviet Union and post-Soviet republics. Slava Tynes, the son of George Tynes, became a prominent reporter in Moscow, occasionally detailing life as a Black Russian. Emilia Tynes, his sister, runs a nonprofit called Metis, which offers aid and support to children in mixed-race families.

Lloyd Patterson was a member of the *Black and White* group, discussed in the previous chapter, who also stayed in the USSR. While his name might have been relatively unknown, the same cannot be said about his son, James Patterson. Lloyd Patterson settled in Moscow and married Vera Arlova, a young Russian artist. They had three children together: James, Lloyd

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34 Phone Interview with Yelena Khanga, September 9th, 2022.
Junior, and Tom. Patterson was an interior decorator by trade and quickly found work in Moscow painting decorations for the Hotel Metropole. He and Arlova worked together to decorate sets for various theaters and movie companies, including Mezhrabpom. Later, Patterson joined MOPR (International Organization for Aid to Revolutionary Fighters) and went around the USSR lecturing about the Black struggle in the USA.

In 1936, Grigorii Alekandrov directed a film called Circus. Circus was everything that Black and White attempted to be. Circus tells a story of a young white American circus member, Marion Dixon, who is chased out of her town by a lynch mob after giving birth to an illegitimate Black baby. Her circus troupe ends up performing in Moscow, where she falls in love with a Russian performer. Her boss, out of anger, exposes that she has a Black child, expecting the Soviet audience and the Soviet performers to react in disgust. Instead, the Soviets welcome Marion and the young Black child with open arms and affection. The young boy was played by none other than James Patterson. As Rimgaila Salys comments, “In his role as little Jimmy in Circus, James Patterson embodied the cinematic ideal of racial tolerance officially propagated under High Stalinism.” During a military parade, Stalin reportedly noticed James in the crowd and specifically pointed him out. As journalist Vladimir Abarinov reported Patterson saying:

35 Rimgaila Salys, “The Pattersons: Expatriate and Native Son,” The Russian Review, 75, no. 3 (July 2016), 444.
Because Stalin loved Lyubov Petrovna Orlova, an actress, then he changed his desire, then he became my defender. Stalin, in general, an evil man, killed so many people, did not like Jews, later became my defender. He wanted to make me Hannibal, he wanted to make me like Peter the Great, who received Hannibal, an African child as a gift, and this African child grew up, became his assistant and participated in all battles. He loved Peter Hannibal as his own son. And Stalin expected to make me Hannibal. I'm afraid he didn't succeed because I'm not an evil person, I wouldn't approve of his behavior.  

World War Two began a few years after the movie’s success, and Arlova and the children were evacuated to Sverdlovsk while Lloyd Patterson stayed behind in Moscow. He was injured during a bomb explosion but soon returned to work. However, on March 9, 1942, Lloyd Patterson died from his injuries. After the war, Arlova and the children moved back to Moscow. James was enrolled at the Soviet Naval Academy but was later denied admission because of the year of education he lost during the evacuation. However, this was enough time for him to develop a love of the sea. James Patterson never acted again but remained a household face and name for decades in the Soviet Union. He became a naval officer and a poet, moving with his mother to the US after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He maintains that he never meant to stay in the US permanently but wanted to see his father’s homeland. He speaks no ill of his former life and continues to write poetry about his experiences in the movie and beyond.

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I don't remember myself, I don't remember the details. I don't remember the excess of acting abilities. But I remember singing something excitedly Two old ladies at my children's cradle. And they bowed over me, different color-skinned people, Something very similar and different. And their hands rocked me the same way, And the simple warmth of their eyes radiated. One sang a song close to me since childhood, Another sang English songs to me. I lay and listened to these pouring sounds.

Я не помню себя, я не помню подробностей. Я не помню избытка актерских способностей. Но я помню, как что-то взволнованно пели Две старушки у детской моей колыбели. И склонялись они надо мной, разнокожие, Чем-то очень похожие и непохожие. И меня одинаково руки качали, И простое тепло их глаза излучали. Напевала одна то-то с детства мне близкое, Напевала другая мне песни английские. Я лежал и внимал этим льющимся звукам.

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38 Ibid.
And I was the only grandson for both.
I don't remember myself, I don't remember the details.
I don't remember the excess of acting abilities.
But I remember singing something excitedly
Russia and Africa are at the cradle.

И я был для обеих единственным внуком.
Я не помню себя, я не помню подробностей.
Я не помню избытка актерских способностей.
Но я помню, как что-то взволнованно пели
Мне Россия и Африка у кольбели.

This is one of Patterson’s better-known poems about his memory of filming *Circus*. It seems to summarize very well the objectives of Soviet anti-racism policies and propaganda. If the Soviets were genuinely striving for a “New World,” then this was precisely what they envisioned. A world where a mixed-race baby would be sung to sleep, in different languages, by women of different races. Perhaps it demonstrates the reality of anti-racism in the USSR or proves that, just like a film, it was all for show. Was the goodness and acceptance that most Black Americans felt in the USSR a mirage that only Robert Robinson could see through? Or was the experience of Robert Robinson not an accurate categorization of life in the Soviet Union, but rather a “one-off,” and instead, the experiences of Yelena Khanga, Margaret Glasgow, and Lily Golden exemplify the success of the USSR? Was it possible that all the anti-racist policies and goodwill shown to Black Americans were all propaganda, and all the success and safety enjoyed by many Black Soviets were just a result of a successful propaganda campaign? These questions cannot be answered without a gross overgeneralization of either side and are ripe for further study.
CONCLUSION

The Black community in the Soviet Union was small in the 1920s and 30s, but the impact of this community was significant and many of its members established families and careers and became household names in the USSR. Their achievements range from agricultural innovations to space-race inventions to published works and movies that became cult classics. These people represent a little-known chapter in both Black American history and Soviet history. Their experiences were not a monolith; some chose to stay in the USSR while others left. Some attempted to leave but were unable. The trajectories of these men and women can be traced back to the decision of Soviet and Comintern leaders to link international socialist revolution, anticolonialism, and criticism of anti-Black racism to the very early days of the Soviet Union.

For this thesis, my concluding thoughts shall refer only to the period studied here, from 1917 to 1939. In addition, as mentioned in the introduction, this thesis focuses solely on the lives of Black Americans and not on the African community in the Soviet Union. Therefore, the conclusions I draw are specific to Black Americans. Through the extensive study of memoirs and other writings by these Black Americans, it becomes clear that their experiences in the Soviet Union were drastically different from their lives in the United States. Because my research only centered on two decades, I cannot comfortably use these experiences to make generalizations about Soviet conceptions of race and anti-racism. However, while reviewing the memoirs and stories of these Black Americans, it becomes clear that they did not see institutionalized and systemic racism as a prevalent part of their new lives abroad. Many Black Americans, such as Langston Hughes and Oliver Golden, who migrated to the USSR in this period compared their experiences abroad with their lives in the United States. At the time, US society was undeniably
racist toward Black Americans, and many feared for their lives daily. Furthermore, most could not vote, be employed in many industries, live in specific neighborhoods, marry outside their race, or receive an equal college education. Therefore, after their experiences in the USSR, they comfortably concluded that the Soviet Union was a safer and better place for Black Americans, which is highlighted by many of their decisions to stay permanently in the USSR.

This is to say that institutionalized anti-Black racism did not exist in the manner it did in the United States. “What has most impressed Negroes about Russian [Soviet] society is the absence of institutionalized racism,” writes Black American historian Allison Blakley in his conclusion. He continues: “There may be racist individuals; but if detected these persons are subject to crushing public opprobrium.”¹ In the United States, the very positionality of Black people at that time was subject to the overwhelming systemic racism that permeated every aspect of public and private life. There is no time when that racism was not felt and it was very much an observable and apparent part of American life. Furthermore, it is clear how intentionally racist America was and remains. The Soviet Union and its various branches and departments, on the other hand, did not intentionally target and inflict violence on Black people based on race. This is not to say that no groups were targeted in the Soviet Union between the wars; other foreigners, Jews, and racialized populations across the Soviet Union faced well-documented discrimination and oppression, notably after Stalin’s rise. However, in day-to-day activities, Black American migrants to the Soviet Union were not discriminated against at the hands of the state. They were not barred from employment, housing, marriage, or access to any institution based on their skin color.

However, one could argue that the very treatment of Black Americans as a “vanguard” of the revolution is a form of racism, just in a different form. One phenomenon which I have noticed throughout my research was the misperception by Soviet officials of what a Black person looks like and should be. This first happens to Claude McKay and Otto Huiswood. As Kate Baldwin points out in her book *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain*, Huiswood was “too light skinned to afford the crucial racial distinctions between black and white that could herald the Soviet Union as the true model for global internationalism.” The notion that McKay was the preferred delegate because he was darker in skin tone than Huiswoud is a form of colorist prejudice on its own. A similar occurrence happened with Langston Hughes and the *Black and White* film group when they first met with the Soviet director and film crew in Moscow. Chapter three describes how taken aback and puzzled the Soviet filmmakers were to find a group of Black Americans who ranged in skin tone and did not resemble the stereotypical Black manual laborer which had been propagated to them by the state. The entire policy created around the “Negro Question” and the notion of Black Americans as the “vanguard” of a global Black struggle adopted first at the 1922 Comintern meeting was originally put forth by McKay and Huiswood. However, the Soviet response to the proposal may have rested on a stereotypical, misguided, and perhaps prejudiced view of Black people from the start. Understanding how these stereotypes influenced Soviet policies and propaganda around anti-racist is worth further examination.

Furthermore, one can interpret the very positionality of the Soviet leadership as one in proximity to Whiteness. They saw themselves as the champions of anti-colonial and anti-racist policies, charged with spreading the liberatory cause of communism to oppressed minority

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groups internationally. The very designation by the Soviets of Black Americans as a vanguard of global struggle implied the USSR as a central, paternalistic figure. In this sense, Soviet leaders can be accused of holding onto a hierarchical relationship between Whiteness and Blackness similar to that which the Soviet Union critiqued in the United States. One possible interpretation is that the Soviets saw themselves as the white liberators of Black Americans, possibly feeding into the same system they had fought against.

The propagandist value of pointing out stark differences in race relations between the US and the USSR was certainly recognized by the Soviet state. This propaganda and hyperfocus on Black Americans can be interpreted as disingenuous and tokenizing. However, even if propaganda played a part in these decisions, the clear fact remains that according to the men and women studied in this thesis, their lives in the Soviet Union were safer and more prosperous than in Jim Crow America. The two need not be mutually exclusive. They could work their trade, and in the cases of Golden and the agronomists, oversee entire projects from a managerial position. They could teach, travel, be elected to office, and marry regardless of race. Paul Robeson, upon arrival to the Soviet Union, remarked, “I was not prepared for the feeling of safety and abundance and freedom that I find here.”

It is important to note that this assessment only rings true for the group of Black Americans studied in this thesis and only from 1919 to 1940. Post-WWII Soviet Union looked drastically different, and those policies are subject to further study. In addition, the assessment of a lack of institutionalized racism is only applied to Black Americans. By the late 1950s, there was an influx of more than 40,000 African students, who, arriving in the context of African independence from colonialism, often pushed back against personal experiences of racism and

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any suggestion of their hosts’ patronizing assumption of superiority.\footnote{Maxim Matusевич, “Black in the U.S.S.R.: Africans, African Americans, and the Soviet Society,” \textit{Transition}, no. 100, 2009, 56-75.} It is very clear that the Soviet Union’s attitudes toward Black American intellectuals and technicians in the interwar years and attitudes toward African students decades later were vastly different. There was little policy overlap, which makes sense when put with the years of Soviet involvement with each group. While the height of Black American migration to the USSR took place in the time period studied in this thesis, it does not coincide with the peak of African migration, which came after Stalin’s death. Furthermore, Africans were recruited to the USSR for vastly different reasons than Black Americans: while the Americans came for employment in various industries, Africans came for education. In the archives pertaining to the Comintern documents about Black Americans from the time period I study, it is clear that Black \textit{Americans} were considered the vanguard for revolutionary thought, and Africans, in general, were rarely mentioned. The only linkage Kate Baldwin possibly points out is the idea of Black Nationalism: because Black Americans were considered an internally colonized group, possible ideas were floated about Black nationhood, as demonstrated by the Black Belt Thesis.

But because there was no concrete link between Africans and most Black Americans, it is very possible that Africans in the Soviet Union \textit{did} experience institutionalized racism in the Soviet Union, and one famous example is the murder of Edmund Assare-Addo in 1963 and the protests that followed, on which there was extensive media coverage. This is a path that I intend to follow in further scholarship, and I hope to compare the experience of Black Americans versus those of Africans in an attempt to puzzle together the Soviets’ perceptions of both groups.

However, what is peculiar about the positive stories told in this thesis and the framework of a Soviet “safe-haven” is the ones that do not fit the narrative perfectly. The Soviet Union, in
its internationalist perspective, noted itself as a haven for minority groups because of its focus on anti-racism, clearly for propaganda purposes. However, I found myself questioning the dichotomy of treatment between minority groups. Other minority groups faced discrimination, if not racism, in the Soviet Union. There was prejudice against ethnic minorities and religious minorities, such as against Central Asians and Caucasians. There was rampant anti-Semitism and targeting of certain people groups during Stalinist purges. Depending on one's definition of race, one can argue whether these incidents disprove Soviet anti-racism or instead prove Soviet ethnic discrimination, which I plan on focusing on in the future. For my thesis, I am not defining ethnic discrimination as racism. However, one has to decide and figure out how to make sense of a state that treated its Black American visitors with the utmost respect and privilege, based on its outward anti-racism policy and propaganda, compared to the treatment of minority groups native to the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the Soviet Union was free of the institutionalized anti-Black racism that they critiqued the United States for in the period studied in this thesis. However, on the other hand, it was not a “haven” for all.

Many of the people studied in my research lived, worked, and died in the Soviet Union. Many have children and grandchildren who remember the stories of their American relatives. When I asked Yelena Khanga what she thought the central motivation for Black Americans’ migration was, she replied, “They were promised a land of happiness.” In my year of research, I discovered that many found what they sought. They left a land full of racial strife, both personal and institutionalized. Oliver Golden could not live safely with his Jewish wife in New York, let alone make enough money to provide for her. Langston Hughes was barred from making movies due to his race. John Sutton was brilliant and talented, but employment opportunities were closed off to him. Their new life in the Soviet Union was not perfect. They still suffered economic,
material, and personal hardships. Nevertheless, in the Soviet Union, they were safer at the hands of the Soviet state than the American government.

Soviet anti-racism and anti-colonialism as a policy remained central to internationalist goals until the Second World War. when Soviet anti-fascism eclipsed it. Slowly, the USSR moved away from the worldwide revolutionary goals set by Vladimir Lenin and the Comintern delegates in the beginning and looked towards Stalin’s “socialism in one country.” There became a stark divide between the Black American communists and the Comintern following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which was never reconciled. Following the Second World War, the USSR once again turned its eyes on the Black world, but now focusing on the active decolonization efforts of the African continent. From there began a student exchange which other scholars have begun to explore, as the policy which dealt with them is significantly different than the policies described here. However, the roots planted in the 1920s and 30s in Black leftist organizing in the US evolved, and traces could be seen throughout the twentieth century. Black Marxism became and remained a dominant political thread throughout the century, with the Black Panthers and leaders such as Angela Davis connecting once again with the revolutionary ideals of the Soviet Union in the 1960s.

The exploration of this topic still needs to be completed. The artistic and cultural depictions of Soviet and American race relations are apt for further study. Understanding American racism as depicted in Soviet childhood mediums, such as books, poems, and artworks, was integral to understanding the broader scheme of Comintern's intentionalist goals. Future studies will encompass this, extending the period studied and including the African student-exchange program.
I have attempted to showcase just a sliver of life for the Black community in the Soviet Union. I understand I have focused solely on Black Americans for a brief period of time. There are still many people and journeys to be uncovered. The similar questions I have applied to these groups of sojourners must be applied to the Black Soviet community as a whole, including non-American Black people. These questions are best summed up by a quote from William “Bill” Davis, one of the seventy-five tour guides at the American National Exhibit in Moscow in 1959: “Who are the Negroes in Russia? How did they get there? How are they treated? How do they live? Are they free?”

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5 Carew, Blacks, Reds, and Russians, 184.
Appendix A: Images for Chapter One

Sourced from Microfilm of Documents from the Comintern Archives on African Americans,” Sc Micro R-6762 r. 1,2, Schomburg Center - Research & Reference, New York Public Library
Negroes of the World! Your emancipation from the thralldom of capitalism can only be achieved in unity with the workers and peasants of the whole world, irrespective of race or color. The workers of Europe and the workers of Negro America are uniting for the struggle and the revolution. The peoples and the victims of imperialist conquest, in Africa, in China, and the Far East, are uniting in the same task.

The peasants and workers of India are in revolt, the peoples of Korea are defying their masters. The peoples of Persia and Afghanistan are refusing to bow to the will of Western tyranny. Turkey is challenging the might of the vindictive Eastern Powers. The Communist International is the organization of the revolutionary workers and peasants of the world. It holds out the hand of solidarity and calls on you to join in the struggle for the emancipation of the working class.

The Communist International is the organization uniting all workers in the gigantic struggle. Members of the revolutionary workers and peasants of the world, already the Communist International has united the peoples of Asia, the victims of imperialist conquest, in the battle for liberty. The peasants and workers of India are in revolt. The workers of Korea are defying their masters. The peoples of Persia and Afghanistan are refusing to bow to the will of Western tyranny. Turkey is challenging the mighty East. The Communist International holds out the revolutionary hand of solidarity and calls on you to join in the struggle for the emancipation of the working class.
Figure Three: Letter from Grigory Zinoviev (Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Comintern) to Comrades Reed, Fraina, Gurvitch, Janson, and Scott regarding the “Congress of the Negro Peoples” dated 1919. See Page 20.

Sourced from Microfilm of Documents from the Comintern Archives on African Americans,” Sc Micro R-6762 r. 1,2, Schomburg Center - Research & Reference, New York Public Library.
The Fourth Congress of the Communist International discussed the Negro problem and adopted a resolution calling for a World Congress of the Negroes.

The Negro problem was one of the burning issues of the day. In the United States, where the most cultured section of the Negro race lives, discrimination, disfranchisement, and restrictions. The victim of lynching in the past 35 years, the American Negro has looked to governmental action and liberal opinion to put an end to his humiliation and martyrdom. But governmental inaction has failed him and liberal opinion means little. The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill was shelved and lynching remains the popular sport as before.

There is no story of human exploitation and degradation more horrible than the history of the mistreatment and massacre of the black race by the whites. The slaughter of 8,000,000 natives by the Congo by the Agents of King Leopold, the Christian monarch of the Belgians; the extermination of the Moro by the Moro’s government; the brutal march of French imperialism into Tunis, Morocco; Italy into Tripoli; the wild invasion of South Rhodesia by the British vermin; these are a few chapters in the bloody story. The inhuman slavemakers to provide for the American market, which meant the breaking up of villages and tribes, the separation of families, the martyring of hundreds of thousands of natives, who met their death on the endless journey to the coast, there they were put on trains, nailed and sick, to be flogged, starved and killed — are another chapter. The brutal treatment in America, here, despite the Civil War, the Negro is still without rights; the beating, reduction to passage, the disfranchisement of most of the race, the lynching and periodical race riots, and finally the subjection of the predominantly Negro populations of the West Indies to the rule of imperialism, white occasional massacres — these are further chapters in the crucifixion of the whole race.

The total population of the Negro race is approximately 100,000,000, the majority of whom are in Africa. In the western hemisphere there are about 12,000,000 Negroes, their state of civilization being far higher than that of the African Negro.

Figure Four: Resolution published by Israel Amter (founding member of the Communist Party of the US) following the Fourth Congress of the Comintern (1922), undated. See Page 21.

Sourced from Microfilm of Documents from the Comintern Archives on African Americans, Sc Micro R-6762 r. 1,2, Schomburg Center - Research & Reference, New York Public Library
were scabbing. This had the usual results - race hatred, rioting and future mutual distrust.

During the War, when there was a big demand for labor, nearly 500,000 Negroes migrated to the North of the United States. They were employed in shipbuilding, steel, food and other industries. At the end of the War, when the returning soldiers resumed their positions, the Negroes went back home. The prosperity in America called forth another trek of the Negroes to the North. Hundreds of thousands again are moving northward. Out of some 1,000,000 plantation workers, in one week, in Mississippi, 100,000 have already left for the North. 5,000 textile workers were removed from South Carolina to the textile centers of New England. This is beginning to produce an shortage of cheap labor in the industries which the plantation of the South.

On the other hand, it is facing the workers of America with the question that they must answer. Capitalism cannot use cheap labor. The doors are practically closed to European labor. The dearth of cheap hands is causing the introduction of more highly improved machinery. But the existing prosperity has created such a demand for production that cheap labor must be supplied at any cost. The Negroes are flooded with agents of the steel, automotive and rubber industries, those recruiting among the "8,000,000 Negroes who are loyal to the government", as the demand a Negro University recently styled them. For American industry, they represent the most desirable, inexpensive form of labor imaginable. That they will be used to reduce the wages and lower the conditions of the white workers is clear. But they will also be used in future attempts to introduce "open shop" is also possible, just as they will furnish the strikebreakers in future labor disputes.

There is only thing that will prevent this: that is that the white workers, in their own interest, throw down the bars, and admit a special Negro to their union. More in fact; unless they make a special effort to overcome the justified prejudice that the Negroes steal and induce them to join the unions. Otherwise, we shall have bloody repetitions of the race riots, shootings, rapes and burnings at the stake - fomented on some slight pretext, but always having an economic basis.

Figure Five: Resolution (continued) published by Israel Amter (founding member of the Communist Party of the US) following the Fourth Congress of the Comintern (1922), undated.

See Page 21.

Sourced from Microfilm of Documents from the Comintern Archives on African Americans, "Sc Micro R-6762 r. 1,2, Schomburg Center - Research & Reference, New York Public Library"
Figure Six: Excerpt from Resolutions proposed by the African Blood Brotherhood, dated February 18, 1924. See Page 24.

Sourced from Microfilm of Documents from the Comintern Archives on African Americans,” Sc Micro R-6762 r. 1,2, Schomburg Center - Research & Reference, New York Public Library
Central Executive Committee,
Workers' Party of America,
1113-West Washington Boulevard,
Chicago, Illinois.

Dear Comrades,

At this time we have the American-Negro question up for discussion with the purpose of instituting some definite action thereon. The sectional life of the Negro race in America and its distinct ideology, which has given rise thereto, is a fact which we for one moment cannot afford to overlook in our scheme of organizing the American working class. The Negro constitutes an important factor in American industrial life, and must be prepared for the active participation in the communist movement.

It has been proposed to call an American-Negro Labour Congress at Chicago, to be held sometime during the summer. Its composition to be delegates from the various Negro trade and industrial unions, and among others, individuals wellknown for their energetic support of the cause of the Negro proletariat.

Such an organization as proposed, it might be suggested, at once brings into being a medium in which our Negro comrades can work and through which the Workers' Party can be able to influence the Negro masses.

We ask of you an immediate reply on this matter, setting forth definitely the Workers' Party's attitude on the proposed project.

Yours -

Figure Seven: Letter from Grigory Zinoviev, to the Central Executive Committee of the Worker’s Party of America concerning the “American-Negro Labour Congress,” dated December 1924.

See Page 24.

Sourced from Microfilm of Documents from the Comintern Archives on African Americans,” Sc Micro R-6762 i. 1,2, Schomburg Center - Research & Reference, New York Public Library
The American Negro Labor Congress to fight

All Racial Prejudice.

Jim-Crowism.

For Equal Pay for Black and White Workers.

Against Discrimination in Labor Unions.

Against Lynching.

For a United American Workingclass.

The American Negro Labor Congress

Director of University

For Far Eastern Peoples,

Moscow, Soviet, Russia.

June 20th, 1925.

Dear Comrade:

The Negro students are being selected with the utmost care; they will be of seven men and three women all yet in their twenties in respect to age. I am giving preference to party members and those who have been associated with me for some time in my work. They are persons who are sincere, energetic and unquestionably devoted to the cause. I hope to have them here by the latter part of August or the first of September. I am using the utmost care in respect to selecting, in a way that it does not weaken the work here.

Feeling sure that the University will be satisfied with the group of men and women I am sending, and hoping that all convenience will have been arranged, I remain,

Very fraternally yours.

[Signature]

Lovett Fort-Whitehman

Figure Eight: Letter from Lovett Fort-Whiteman to the Director of the University for Far Eastern People regarding the arrival of ten Black-American students, dated June 20th, 1925. See Page 24. "Sourced from Microfilm of Documents from the Comintern Archives on African Americans," Sc Micro R-6762 r. 1,2, Schomburg Center - Research & Reference, New York Public Library
Figure Nine: Claude McKay with other Communist Leaders in front of the Bronze Horseman statue in Saint Petersburg, Russia, USSR, in 1922. See Page 21. Sourced from the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
Figure Ten: Grigory Zinoviev, Claude Mckay, and Nikolai Bukharin in a meeting at the Kremlin, 1922. See Page 21. *Sourced from the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.*
Figure Eleven: McKay addressing the Third International in the Kremlin, Moscow 1922. See Page 21. Sourced from the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
Appendix B: Images for Chapter Two

TWELVE TECHNICIANS TO AID SOVIET: SON OF LATE COL. CHARLES YOUNG WITH ...
The New York Amsterdam News (1922-1938); Oct 14, 1931; ProQuest
pg. 2

Figure One: Newspaper clipping from The New York Amsterdam News from October 14th, 1931, reporting on the departure of the Agricultural group from New York to the Soviet Union. See Page 46.

Sourced from ProQuest, digitized archives of the New York Amsterdam News
NEGROES HELP IN RUSSIAN FIGHT FOR COTTON

NEGROES HELP IN RUSSIAN FIGHT FOR COTTON

TASHKENT, Uzbek. S. S. R., Oct. 21—(By Loren Miller for The Associated Negro Press)—Twelve members of the film group that came to the USSR to work in the film, "Black and White," arrived here recently on the first lap of a tour that will take them over ten thousand miles of Soviet territory. The tour is provided by M. schubert Film which was scheduled to make the picture.

The specific purpose of this tour is to acquaint members of the group with the progress that the Soviet Union has made in the solution of its national problem. This part of the country is expected to prove very interesting because the people here are distinctly dark—Mongols, Turks and other dark-skinned natives.

Another point of interest for the group is the fact that this is the cotton growing region of the Soviet Union. Since the revolution, the country has bent special efforts to increase its cotton production.

Those efforts have taken for ton of the importation of many American cotton specialists, among whom are a number of Negroes.

Cotton growing here is tied up with irrigation and again Negroes have been called upon, there being here one well known Negro irrigation engineer. That the efforts to increase the cotton yield have brought results is shown by the fact that cotton has leaped far ahead of its pre-war figures and is expected to show another gain this year.

I have collected a great mass of data relating both to the cotton industry and the manner in which the old national hates and suspicions have been dissipated. Tomorrow I have scheduled a conference with the Negro specialists and hope to present to the reader a complete story of these matters.

Among those who arrived here were Dr. Nat Crawford, Oakland, Cal.; Louise Thompson, social worker, New York; Alan McKenzie, salesman, Mildred Jones, New York artist.

Figure Two: Newspaper clipping from the Atlanta Daily World written by Loren Miller, a member of the Black and White film group. The article details the cotton production of Oliver Golden and his agronomy group. Dated October 21st, 1932. See Page 50.

Sourced from ProQuest, digitized archives of the Atlanta Daily World
Figure Three: Newspaper clipping from the *New Journal and Guide* detailing the birth of Joseph Roane’s son, the first Black baby born in the Soviet Union. Dated March 18th, 1933. See Page 55.

*Sourced from ProQuest, digitized archives of the New Journal and Guide.*
Figure Four: Newspaper clipping from the *New Journal and Guide* detailing the promotion of Joseph Roane to head of a collective farm, alongside the life of the family in the Soviet Union. Dated June 26, 1937. See Page 56. Sourced from ProQuest, digitized archives of the New Journal and Guide newspaper.
In America for the first time in five years, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph J. Roane are shown with their son, Joseph, Jr., in an informal pose at the home of Mr. Russell’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. R. E. Russell of 1809 Hakeley Street. Mr. Roane is an agricultural specialist in Russia with headquarters in Moscow. The couple have been in Russia since 1931 shortly after Mr. Roane graduated from Virginia State College. Mr. Roane is on a three-month leave of absence, and together with his wife and son will spend a brief period here. Joseph, Jr. was born in Russia and speaks the language fluently. Mrs. Roane is the former Miss Sadie Russell.

Figure Five: Newspaper clipping from the *New Journal and Guide* detailing the return of the Roane Family to the United States. Dated September 11th, 1937. See Page 56.

*Sourced from ProQuest, digitized archives of the New Journal and Guide newspaper.*
Cotton Expert, Dies in Russia

By AUSTIN WORTH
Moscow Correspondent, CNA

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan, USSR.—Oliver Golden, 45, agricultural specialist, recently died here following a brief illness from kidney trouble.

Golden was an instructor in the Scientific Research Institute for Mechanization of Agriculture, where his death is considered a tremendous loss. He was buried in the local cemetery, with teachers and students of the Institute, members of the Communist party and social and trade union organizations participating in the funeral services.

Golden was born in Memphis, Tenn., but lived for a number of years in New York. He was a graduate of Tuskegee Institute. He is survived by his wife, Mrs. Bertha Golden, Jewish, and their six-year-old daughter, who was born in the Soviet Union.

In 1931, Golden went to the Soviet Union as the organizer and leader of a group of thirteen colored American cotton specialists invited by the Soviet Government. He worked for several years in the Tashkent Central Cotton Selection Station.

Figure Six: Newspaper clipping from the Afro-American detailing the death of Oliver Golden. Dated August 24th, 1940. See Page 58. Sourced from ProQuest, digitized archives of the Afro-American Newspaper.
Appendix C: Images for Chapter Three

Soviet Seeks Negroes to Make Film of Conditions Here: Picture Will Be ...  
*The New York Amsterdam News* (1922-1938); Mar 9, 1932;  
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News  
pg 7

**Soviet Seeks Negroes to Make Film of Conditions Here**

*Picture Will Be Called "Black and White," Without the Buffoonery and Sentimentality of Others of Its Kind*

Authorized by the Moskrobpol Film Company of Moscow, James W. Ford, who recently returned from the U. S. S. R., has organized a committee here for the purpose of securing a cast of from twelve to twenty Negroes to participate in the production of a film in Soviet Russia depicting the life of the Negro in this country.

Because of the widespread interest in the American Negro in the U. S. S. R., Mr. Ford explains, the Moskrobpol company proposes to produce a photoplay which will portray realistically the life of the Negro people in America. The scenario for this film, to be known as "Black and White," is devoid of sentimentality as well as of buffoonery, and traces the development of the Negro people in this country, their work, their play, their progress, their difficulties.

As the Russian films do not feature movie stars, the actors need not all be professionals. Many of the most successful of the Soviet photoplays have been produced without the use of experienced movie actors. The aim is to show mass movements rather than to exploit the heroics of an individual.

While the Moskrobpol Film Company assures employment to actors sent over and will pay well in Russian rubles for their services, it is not in a position to pay the transportation of the cast. In order to devise means of raising funds for the passage of the actors the co-operating committee for the production of the film has been organized. W. A. Domingo is chairman; Mr. Ford, secretary-treasurer; Henry Lee Moon, assistant secretary, and Miss Louise Thompson, 435 Convent avenue, corresponding secretary.

Figure One: Casting call for the *Black and White* film put out by Louise Thompson in the *New York Amsterdam News*, dated March 9th, 1932. See Page 64. *Sourced from ProQuest, digitized archives of the New York Amsterdam News.*
Figure Two: Front and back of a photograph of nineteen members of the Black and White film group aboard the ship Europa on the way to the USSR. The back details the names and configuration of the members. Dated June 17th, 1932. See Page 64.
*Sourced from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library archives on Langston Hughes.*
Figure Three: Dorothy West and Langston Hughes aboard the SS. Europa, 1932. See Page 65. 
Sourced from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library archives on Langston Hughes.
Figure Four: Members of the Film Group in front of a banner that read “Towards the Leninist National Policy,” presumably dated 1932. See Page 69. Sourced from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library archives on Langston Hughes.
Figure Five: Members of the film group relaxing on the beach in Odesa, Ukraine SSR, 1932. See Page 74. Sourced from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library archives on Langston Hughes.
Five of 22 Americans in Russia Start for Home: Eight Take Positions ...  
HALL, CHATWOOD  
Afro-American (1895- ); Oct 8, 1932; ProQuest  
PP. 7

Five of 22 Americans in Russia Start for Home


By CHATWOOD HALL  
(Special to the AFRO)  
MOSCOW, U.S.S.R. — Five members of the group of 22 colored Americans who came to the Soviet Union in June to participate in the revolutionary motion picture, "Black and White," departed a few days ago on the first leg of their return to the United States.

This vanguard of the returning "picture-ites" is composed of Henry Moon, Thurston Lewis, and Theodore Poston, of New York City; Frank Montero and Leonard Hill, of Washington, D.C.

Three Sign Protest

Three of those who left today signed, before leaving, a minority report to the Comintern (Third International) denouncing the postponement of the motion picture as a backsliding and kowtowing to the so-called great American dollar.

In other words, the signers of this report inferred that the Soviet Government and the motion picture company have pigeon-holed the film in deference to American recognition and trade connections. However, in an official statement in official Soviet government newspapers, Mescrapom Film denied this and declared the work will be completed next year.

Those members of the group remaining in Russia until the end of their contracts (October 20) are leaving on September 20 for an extended tour of the Soviet Union under auspices of Mescrapom Film and the Soviet Government. On their itinerary are Tashkent, Samarkand, Buhhara, a boat trip on the Caspian Sea to Baku, tours in the Soviet republics of Georgia and Armenia, and a trip to the huge Dnestro屯 hydro-electric station.

Mescrapom Film has put forth great efforts and much money to provide the group with every convenience and comfort, such as accommodations in the best hotels, better food than the Russians eat, and innumerable trips to places of interest from a standpoint of Socialist construction and development.

Figure Six: Newspaper clipping from the Afro-American written by Chatwood Hall, pen-name of Homer Smith, detailing the return of several Black and White film group members to the United States. Dated October 8th, 1932. See Page 77. Sourced from ProQuest, digitized archives of the Afro-American newspaper.
My dear Langston,

I wanted to write long ago, but I was very hard at work trying to get from under the accursed Depression with no success. You little was written and reached me (exactly six weeks later) when I was very ill. I came down with a bad attack of head trouble with my whole body run down, just after completing my novel "Banana Bottom". I was down for two months and I have not quite recovered.

I envied your being away off there in Soviet Asia and wished I were there too. Saw in the newspapers that you were in Russia and that the film was passed--they say for political reasons. Well in America we have no Negro films--social reasons.

I hope we are going to meet sometime somewhere.
Figure Eight: Langston Hughes (middle) with the Writers Union of Soviet Central Asia, 1932. See Page 79. Sourced from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library archives on Langston Hughes.
Figure Nine: Langston Hughes and Arther Koestler picking cotton on a collective farm in Soviet Uzbekistan, 1932. See Page 79. Sourced from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library archives on Langston Hughes.
Figure Ten: Langston Hughes and an unnamed Uzbek poet, 1922. See Page 79. Sourced from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library archives on Langston Hughes.
Figure Eleven: Photograph taken by Langston Hughes titled “A class for the liquidation of illiteracy, Turkmenistan,” 1932. See Page 79. Sourced from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library archives on Langston Hughes.
Figure Twelve: Front: Postcard reading “Let’s go to the Tashkent Club,” depicting three Central Asian women.

Sourced from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library archives on Langston Hughes.
Figure Thirteen: Photograph taken by Langston Hughes, titled “an Uzbek Factory Worker, Central Asia,” 1932. See Page 79. Sourced from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library archives on Langston Hughes.
Figure Fourteen: Photograph taken by Langston Hughes, titled “Russian Child and Turkemen Child,” 1932. See Page 79. Sourced from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library archives on Langston Hughes.
Appendix D: Images for Chapter Four

Figure One: Robert Robinson at the Ball-Bearing Plant, date unknown. See Page 92. Credit to Lev Nosov as cited in Russia Today’s article “Trading Lynch Mods for Stalin” by Oleg Yegorov, dated May 1st, 2018.
Negro Wins High Honors in Soviet Industry for Inventions

MOSCOW, U.S.S.R.—Because he has given his factory, the Kaganovich Ball Bearing Works of Moscow, twenty inventions and rationalization plans in the past year, Robert Robinson, color American specialist, has received special commendations and awards from the Soviet government.

Robinson is counted among the “heroes of labor.” His picture has appeared in the “Pravda,” central organ of the Communist party of the Soviet Union, and his portrait hangs in the place from which the pictures of royalty have been ceremoniously removed.

Largest Factory

The Inventor, organ of the government and one of the most widely circulated papers in the world, carried a laudatory article in its issue of October 16 describing Robinson’s work, with his picture.

Robinson’s inventions have been made in the polishing department where he is employed. The factory is one of the industrial giants of the First Five Year Plan and will make more than 24,000,000 ball bearings per year when it is completely equipped and running.

Is Shock Worker

Not only has Robinson been given distinction for his invention and rationalization plans but because of the high quality of his work which ranks him as a shock-worker, he is called by the Russian a “Udarnik.”

The development of these shock workers is one of the phases of Socialist industry and competition. The best workers in each factory are singled out for special honor and distinction in Soviet plants, much as is the soldier in the ordinary army. To win the coveted distinction of being a “Udarnik” is one of the greatest prides of the Soviet worker.

Robinson has the distinction of being a shock worker in what is regarded as one of the most important of Soviet industries. The Soviet Union is making a special drive in the field of automobiles and tractors, and work in the automotive industry is stimulated by all possible means. For that reason, Robinson’s work looms even larger.

Figure Two: Newspaper clipping in the Afro-American detailing the award designated to Robert Robinson, dated November 19th, 1932. See Page 93. Sourced from ProQuest, digitized archives of the Afro-American newspaper.
MOSCOW, U.S.S.R.—(CNA) — Following his election by workers from the Moscow First State Ball-Bearing Plant, to the Moscow Soviet (City Council), Robert Robinson, Jamaican-American worker, was last week inducted into office.

According to Mr. Robinson's biography, read before a huge, respectfully silent crowd in the immense hall of the district soviet, he was born in the West Indies. His father was a plantation worker and his mother, a laundress for a family owning a great industrial concern.

As a great concession to faithful servants, the boy was allowed to enter this factory. At the end of six years he became a toolmaker.

Later, while young Robinson was working in the Ford plant, a Russian automobile delegation visited the plant and urged him to come work in the Stalingrad Tractor Plant. He accepted. That was 1930.

Then came a call from the ball-bearing plant in Moscow. Robinson made inventions, improved the plant's technique, rose to high rank in the factory, became the instructor of a group of highly skilled guage grinders. Prizes and honors were showered on him, culminating in his election to the Moscow Soviet.
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