

“Black Bolsheviks” and “White Lies”. How Russia Subverts “Our Democracy”? A Black American Response

A black American response to a distortion of facts in reference to black American-Russian relations

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*A lot of nonsense has been written about the role of Putin’s Russia in subverting “our democracy.” As though our democracy had been functioning perfectly (even reasonably) well, until these shadowy Russian forces purchased a few Facebook ads that sent us all into the streets. It’s a laughable concept. I’m sorry, did Putin acquit **George Zimmerman** or **Jason Stockley**?*

*Did Putin shoot 12-year-old **Tamir Rice**? Russia did not carry out the drug war against African Americans or implement policies of mass incarceration, or pass voter ID laws in the U.S. – all of which have contributed to disenfranchising millions of African Americans over the years. The U.S. has a lot to answer for with regard to systematically denying the democratic rights of African Americans and this is not the first time they’ve tried to deflect criticism for that by blaming Russia. As a student of history I’ve mostly just rolled my eyes this time around while the Democrats attempt to make red-scare tactics that are very old, new again. But a recent entry in this canon of “Black activists are pawns of Moscow” writing is so insulting and patently false, that, as we approach the hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, it seems very important to reply.*

Last week an author named **Terrell Jermaine Starr** wrote a piece for The Root entitled, [“Russia’s Recent Facebook Ads Prove the Kremlin Never Loved Black People.”](#)

I’ve enjoyed entries from The Root before, particularly in chronicling racist attacks against African Americans that are underreported in the mainstream media. But their willingness to toe the Democratic Party line, uncritically in most circumstances, has been noted.

Starr’s piece is supposedly historical in scope but is premised upon a huge, glaring, historical fallacy: that of conflating the Russian Federation with the Soviet Union. In one sentence, Starr describes the two as essentially the same (showing you the level of material historical analysis he’s interested in engaging in) and then for the rest of the article proceeds to whitewash the history of Black communism, using the favorite arguments deployed by racists – that Blacks who supported socialism did so because they were duped, and that the Soviet Union was only interested in Black liberation insofar as it meant spiting their enemies in the White House.

These assertions deny the agency of African Americans, many of whom were amongst the

most prominent Black intellectuals of their time, who looked to the Soviet system as an alternative to American racism and exploitation. This interpretation also denies the real solidarity and support that the Soviet Union expressed in their assistance to liberation movements of many Black, brown and oppressed people all over the world. Since anti-communist propaganda is easily promulgated without evidence in this country, allow me to present some of the evidence that exposes these racist lies for what they are.

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was birthed via a revolution in 1917 and overthrown via counter-revolution in 1991. While Russians were in the majority of the population, the USSR itself was actually an extremely diverse and vibrant society for all of its existence. The Soviet Union spanned 14 time zones and comprised many independent nationalities and ethnic groups, such as Tajiks, Kazakhs, Lithuanians, Tartars – all of whom spoke different languages, practiced different religions – and suffered terrible racist oppression under the Tsar. The triumph of the socialist revolution and the very existence of this unique political formation was the result of a revolution carried out by united oppressed peoples, who rose up as one and took control of society away from their Tsarist and capitalist exploiters.

The Bolsheviks always took the task of uniting oppressed people and elevating their struggle very seriously. This was a key to their success and a guiding principle in their work. It was Lenin who pioneered communist opposition to imperialism and he who changed the Marxist formulation, “Workers of the World Unite” to “Workers and oppressed people of the world unite” as an expression of the priority they placed on the struggle of colonized people against imperialism.



“People of Africa will overpower the colonizers!” – 1960 propaganda poster by Kukryniksy

Around the world, the 1919 triumph of Lenin and the Bolsheviks was greeted by the imperialists with great dismay and by oppressed/colonized peoples with great enthusiasm, inspiration and hope. In America, 1919 was an infamous year, known for its “Red Summer” of intense lynchings, race riots and gruesome violence against African Americans at the hands of white mobs.

The Black American political movement had entered a new era of militancy, as veterans returning from WWI were less inclined to submit to Jim Crow and more inclined to fight for their dignity, wages and rights. A new wave of radical Black intellectuals all but took over the Black political scene, many from the Caribbean and mostly based in Harlem in the 1920s and 30s. These men and women were considered some of the premier thinkers and writers of their time and of the majority of these radical African American leaders—regardless of political orientation—held the Russian Revolution in very high esteem.

According to historian **Winston James**, in his work *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, the appeal of the Russian Revolution to Black people in America at the time lay not in their having been “recruited” by Russia as the Root article asserts, but in their own independent evaluation of the Bolshevik government and where it stood with regard to equality for oppressed and colonized people.

James wrote about three major factors that attracted Black people to Bolshevism in the 1920s and 1930s. The first was the domestic policies promoting national minorities and oppressed groups that were put in place almost immediately after the triumph of the revolution. After the revolution the Bolshevik government undertook what can be described as the most far reaching and thorough affirmative action plan that any government has ever attempted, dedicating much in the way of their limited resources towards raising the standard of living for groups who had been historically oppressed and creating conditions that could facilitate greater equality for those groups.

To Black Americans, the most convincing example was the swiftness and seriousness with which the Soviets began redressing historical inequality suffered by the Jews, including immediately outlawing discrimination against them and putting an end to the violent pogroms that had plagued them under the Tsar. In 1923 **Claude McKay**, the young Black intellectual, writer and poet wrote:

“For American Negroes the indisputable and outstanding fact of the Russian Revolution is that a mere handful of Jews, much less in ratio to the number of Negroes in the American population, have attained, through the Revolution, all the political and social rights that were denied to them under the regime of the Czar (166).”

The other two factors explored by James were the “uncompromising rhetoric of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and the right of self-determination for oppressed nations (165)” espoused by the Bolshevik government and the creation of the Third Communist International, an international body that openly encouraged colonized (often Black or Brown) people to rise up against their (mostly European) exploiters all over the world.

At a point when the U.S. government had systematically ignored the pleas of Black people to pass even one federal law against lynching, when city and state governments all over the country were colluding in lynchings, race riots and allowing whites who attacked Blacks to go free, or even reap rewards – it doesn’t take a genius to figure out why many Black thinkers were genuinely excited that such a different kind of government, one that spoke to them and had taken action to support and defend its own national minorities, had come into the world.

Black and white (film)

Langston Hughes was a Black intellectual of this generation, this being the same generation that we associate with the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro. Of all the insults buried in that heinous Root article, the disrespect to Langston Hughes, inarguably one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century, is one of the most difficult to endure.

Starr paints Hughes as a dupe, someone “recruited” to champion the Soviet Union, as if the man had not traveled all over the world, studied and written extensively and was not capable of genuinely supporting a government that he believed to be on the right track. We revere Hughes’ poetry that celebrates Black beauty, he is the jazz poet laureate of Black America and we love to recite his words that affirm our deep history and continued struggle in the face of white American racism. But what about his poetry celebrating the Soviet Union? [Here’s a link to a poem that he wrote praising Lenin](#). Did they break that one out at your school’s Black history month event? Probably not. But that doesn’t change the fact that Langston Hughes was extremely sympathetic to the Soviet Union, as is abundantly evident in his autobiographical writing, including in the chapter of *I Wonder As I Wander*, “Moscow Movie.”



Langston Hughes in Turkmenistan

The Root provides perhaps the most cynical and shallow reading of this chapter possible, though I hesitate to affirm that that author of that piece has even actually read it. “Moscow Movie” tells an important story about a time in 1932 when Langston Hughes was invited to the Soviet Union by the government, to work on a major film production. This film was called “Black and White” and it was supposed to highlight the struggle of Black workers in the South and give an international showcase to the racism and oppression experienced by Black people in America. According to Langston Hughes, it was “intended to be the first great Negro-white film ever made in the world (80),” though unfortunately it did not come to fruition.

Hughes accompanied a delegation of 22 young African Americans who were supposed to star in the film, though it was odd that most in that group were not actors or performers by trade. Starr erroneously attributes this casting to racism, saying that Hughes determined that the Soviets were so racist that they assumed that all Black people could sing and dance (and play sports?) and so didn’t bother to check the backgrounds of the people they hired for the film.

In fact, Hughes said nothing of the sort. He addressed the peculiar composition of the delegation early in the chapter, stating,

“That most of our group were not actors seems to have been due to the fact that very few professional theater people were willing to pay their own fares to travel all the way to Russia to sign contracts they had never seen. Only a band of eager, adventurous young students, teachers, writers and would-be-actors were willing to do that, looking forward to the fun and wonder of a foreign land as much as to film-making. There were a few among them who wanted to get away from American race prejudice forever, being filled up with Jim Crow (70).”

It's important that Hughes highlighted their motives as traveling to seek a reprieve from American racism. So high was the esteem for the Soviet Union in the group, that

“When the train stopped beneath this banner for passports to be checked, a few of the young black men and women left the train to touch their hands to Soviet soil, lift the new earth in their palms, and kiss it (73),” according to Hughes.

In his accusations of racism what Starr may be referring to is where Hughes says at one point,

“Europeans as well as Americans, seem to be victims of that old cliché that Negroes just naturally sing (80).”

That is hardly an indictment of any particularly Russian racism and more of a complaint on how African Americans are represented on the world stage.

Lack of specific cultural knowledge about African Americans was a problem throughout the film's production and that is what Hughes believes ultimately damned the film. Hughes was given an early copy of the script and let them know that he did not think it was usable because there were so many errors with regard to what racism and working class struggle actually looked like in the American South. Hughes said that the author of the script was well intentioned but had never been to America. He also said that information from or by Black Americans was rarely translated into Russian in those days. Even with these critiques, it's nearly impossible to interpret Hughes as being at all bitter or resentful at the Soviets for their attempt at making this film. On the contrary, Hughes wrote with unmistakable good humour throughout the chapter and also repeatedly mentioned that they were all paid in full and well taken care of, even when it became clear the film wouldn't be made.

The reception that the students received in Moscow is really remarkable, especially considering the historical context - none of which *The Root* brings up, of course. The students were “wined and dined” in Hughes' own words, they were put up in the most lavish hotels and treated to free tickets to the theater, the opera, the ballet and dinners and parties with dignitaries and important people, almost every night. They were official guests of the state and treated with the highest honors. No Black delegation has ever been received in America with such grace. Hughes says that they were always introduced as “representatives of the great Negro people (82)” and after describing the incredible amenities at one of the elaborate resorts they were housed in, he adds “I had never stayed

in such a hotel in my own country, since, as a rule, Negroes were not then permitted to do so (93).”

On their reception by ordinary Soviet citizens, Hughes writes:

“Of all the big cities in the world where I’ve been, the Muscovites seemed to me to be the politest of peoples to strangers. But perhaps that was because we were Negroes and, at that time, with the Scottsboro Case on world-wide trial in the papers everywhere, and especially in Russia, folks went out of their way there to show us courtesy. On a crowded bus, nine times out of ten, some Russian would say, “Negrochanski tovarish – Negro comrade – take my seat!” On the streets queueing up for newspapers or cigarettes, or soft drinks, often folks in line would say, “Let the Negro comrade go forward.” (74)

This is in 1932! Nowhere in America were Black people treated like this in 1932. Hell, many of us could not get that treatment today, if our lives depended on it (and they sometimes do). This account echoes many others by African Americans who visited or moved to the Soviet Union. In **William Mandel’s** *Soviet but Not Russian*, **Muhammad Ali** is quoted as saying of his 1978 visit to the Soviet Union:

“I saw a hundred nationalities. No such thing as a Black man, or a white man, or ‘you nigger,’ or get back. People say, ‘Oh well, they just showed you the best.’ You mean all of those white folks rehearsed, said: ‘Muhammad Ali’s coming!’ .. ‘All hundred nationalities, pretend you get along. Muhammad Ali’s coming!’ ... ‘The just took you where they wanted to go.’ I know that’s a lie. I got in my car and told my driver where to go. Lying about the Russians.. I jogged in the mornings in strange places where they hardly ever saw a Black man. I ran past two little white Russian ladies who were walking to work. They didn’t look around and ask what I was doing. I can’t go jogging in some streets in America in the morning in a white neighborhood.” (85)

The Root tries to paint a picture of a USSR where the same racism that existed in Jim Crow America infected everyone there, but there simply is not enough evidence to say that was the case. They cite the experiences of one Black American man (Robert Robinson), thoroughly. But what about the experiences of the estimated 400,000 African students who were educated for free in the Soviet Union between 1950-1990? These Black youth attended technical schools, Lumumba University and the special Lenin school for leadership, they lived and traveled all over the Soviet Union and upon graduation, they would return to their homelands with skills necessary to aid in the new independence governments. Mandel interviewed quite a few Black Soviets for his book, including other African Americans who moved to the Soviet Union- and the picture they paint is very different from the one in Robinson’s account. Providing no evidence, Starr also asserts that interracial relationships would naturally be a problem in the Soviet Union, saying “both Russian and white American men weren’t cool with their women messing with black men.” Since he introduced the term “bullshit” just before that line, I’m going to call bulls...t on that.

Langston Hughes’ account features many stories of the men in his group dating Soviet women and not a word about anyone batting an eye at such pairings – which in 1932, would have gotten someone lynched in the United States. Please stop projecting American racism onto the Soviet Union, when you just don’t have the evidence to back that up. As W.E.B. Dubois wrote on his third visit to the USSR in 1949, “of all countries, Russia alone has made

race prejudice a crime; of all great imperialisms, Russia alone owns no colonies of dark serfs or white and what is more important has no investments in colonies and is lifting no blood-soaked profits from cheap labor in Asia and Africa.” The material basis for widespread Jim Crow style racism just wasn’t there.

Hughes was aware that the western press celebrated the failure of the movie and spread many rumours that they knew to be false concerning the Soviet government maneuvering against the Black students. He writes that Western journalists, who saw them spending money and carousing in Moscow nightclubs, filed stories in the U.S. about how they were going unpaid and neglected.

Hughes wrote that some in his group suspected that the movie was scrapped because the Soviets were sacrificing the Black struggle to appease the American government – but Hughes himself did not believe that. He was one of the only members of the group who saw the script and he was unequivocal in stating that more than anything else, it was the script that caused the project’s failure. Hughes also repeatedly mentioned the context of the international campaign in defense of the Scottsboro Boys, a Black struggle that was most certainly not being dropped by the Soviets, as all this was going on.

The Root miscasts this excerpt from the life of Langston Hughes to support their conclusion that “the Soviets’ attempts to curry favor with the black struggle” was “insincere and downright fraudulent.” I would counter that this anti-communist propaganda is actually “insincere and downright fraudulent” but allow me to present further evidence on the genuine solidarity expressed by the Soviet Union. Sticking with the theme, let’s keep talking about film.

Focus on Africa in film

In the book *Focus on African Film*, noted film scholar **Josephine Woll** describes “The Russian Connection” between the Soviet Union and African film, an invaluable alliance in making postcolonial African cinema a reality. As alluded to in the previous section, the Soviet Union expended a lot of resources on aid and development for African nations, who were in the process of throwing off their own colonial oppressors and beginning their independence after World War II. These countries were severely underdeveloped, as chronicled by Walter Rodney and the Soviet Union was a key ally in providing material support, education and technology to allow these countries to thrive without being beholden to their former colonial masters. It’s worth noting that the greatest victory for Black liberation to occur in my lifetime, the fall of apartheid in South Africa, involved a great deal of material and political support from the Soviet Union, which was integral to the success of that movement.

Film was another area in which the Soviet Union provided Africans with crucial foundational support. **Ousmane Sembene** of Senegal, widely considered the “father of African film” was educated in the Soviet Union. This was also the case for other pioneering African filmmakers, like **Souleymane Cissé** of Mali and **Abderrahmne Sissako** of Mauritania/Mali and **Sarah Maldoror**, the French daughter of immigrants from Guadeloupe who made many films about African liberation. In addition to technical know-how, the Soviet Union also provided the essential film and production equipment, distribution and promotion, to bring African cinema onto the world stage.

Dr. Woll seems to believe that the motives of the Soviets were clearly political, but also

genuine. Woll wrote:

“The Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath, radically altered how, why, and for whom films were made. Financial profit still mattered but it competed with other goals: educational, political, promotional. The new regime in post-tsarist Russia, like the new leaders of post-colonial African nations, willingly allocated part of its budget to subsidizing cinema because it recognized how effective the medium could be as an instrument of propaganda; and most Soviet filmmakers in the 1920s, though they had individual and often compelling aesthetic agendas, readily supported the politics of revolution (225).”

In the U.S. we tend to be very cynical of the word “propaganda” but in revolutionary times, propaganda is necessary and the Africans needed aid in producing theirs. Ousmane Sembene clearly agreed; he was adamant about telling compelling political stories through his films and he fully recognized the potential for his films to “help decolonize Africa (225).”

The Soviet Union trained and equipped these African directors, so that they could bring the beauty and the struggle of their people to the world stage. The work of these revolutionary African filmmakers can be seen as a happy ending to the saga that was begun with “Black and White.” While we never got the Soviet sponsored film about Black struggle in the U.S. that they wanted to produce, we have since seen a variety of films out of different African countries that highlight their struggle in similar, but undoubtedly much more accurate, ways.

Conclusion

I realize that this was a lot to write in response to a small article that was probably not even this carefully considered by the author himself. But the legacy of the Soviet Union with regard to Black struggle is unique and inspiring and should be celebrated, not horrifically distorted and denied. In *Paul Robeson Speaks*, the great Black American actor says:

“Mankind has never witnessed the equal of the Constitution of the U.S.S.R. . . . Firstly, because of the significance it has for my people generally. Everywhere else, outside of the Soviet world, black men are an oppressed and inhumanely exploited people. Here, they come within the provisions of Article 123 of Chapter X of the Constitution, which reads: “The equality of the right of the citizens of the U.S.S.R. irrespective of their nationality or race, in all fields of economic, state, cultural, social, and political life, is an irrevocable law. Any direct or indirect restriction of these rights, or conversely the establishment of direct or indirect privileges for citizens on account of the race or nationality to which they belong, as well as the propagation of racial or national exceptionalism, or hatred and contempt, is punishable by law.” (1978, 116)



Paul Robeson in the USSR

While our current President appoints KKK members to the Department of Justice and calls Nazi murderers “very fine people,” while his opponent Hillary Clinton called our children “super predators” and campaigned for them to be locked up en masse- we have to appreciate how significant it is that a national government - in 1919 - put laws on the books like ones described above. They outlawed racism. They invested heavily in Black education and Black artistic expression. They gave guns to those fighting imperialists and fascists all over the world. What more could you want? Terrell Jermaine Starr and The Root may be confused about which government cares about Black people, but I can’t say that I am. I’m proud to be a socialist and I’m proud of the legacy of friendship between my people and the USSR.

As I mentioned in the start of this article, calling Africans who fight for their liberation “Commies” or “dupes” is nothing new. **John Hope Franklin** referred to this in *From Slavery to Freedom*, saying that the response to Black self-defense against race riots in 1919 caused such speculation:

“Many American whites freely suggested that foreign influences - especially ... Bolshevik propaganda after the 1917 Russian Revolution — had caused blacks to fight back. Perhaps there is some truth to that... However, black Americans all along the political spectrum (from conservative, to moderate, to radical left) ridiculed the claim that their new assertiveness was the result of ‘outside agitation.’ American blacks needed no outsiders to awaken their sense of the tremendous contradiction between America’s professed beliefs and its actual practices (362)”.

That remains as true today as it was when written. Additionally, I’ll close with one more statement from that time, which also remains true, for myself at least. The militant Black Harlem publication *The Crusader*, under the leadership of fiery Black Communist Cyril Briggs declared in 1919: “If to fight for one’s rights is to be Bolsheviks, then we are Bolsheviks and let them make the most of it!”

Sources

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