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AFRICANS AND BLACK AMERICANS IN THE COMINTERN SCHOOLS, 1925-1934*

By Woodford McClellan

During the Second Congress of the Comintern (1920), John Reed passed a note to the rostrum asking, "Should I say something about the Negroes in America?" Lenin scribbled back, "Yes. Absolutely necessary." There ensued a discussion of the situation of American blacks in the context of national and colonial problems, Reed delivering two reports on "Jim Crow."²

Never short on grandiose schemes, the Comintern proposed to invite black American "revolutionaries" to Russia, but at the time—the Russian Civil War had not ended—this amounted to little more than a wish.³ In the few months of life Reed had left, however, he continued to speak out on the "Negro question," notably at the Bakú Congress of the Peoples of the East in September 1920:

In North America... tens of millions [sic] of Negroes, although legally citizens with equal rights, have neither political nor civil rights. In order to distract American workers' attention from the capitalist exploiters, [the ruling classes] incite them against Negroes and provoke conflict between white and black races. Negroes—

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¹Quoted in E. N. Maysunin, Pervobolskoe "levomol": V. I. Lenin i anglo-amerikanskie "levy" na II kongrese Kominterna (Leningrad, 1990), 126.


³The Jamaican writer Claude McKay declined Reed's invitation—issued right after the Comintern Congress—to come to Russia, but he did go later. See Allison Blakely, Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought (Washington, 1986), 82-87.
whom they burn alive with impunity—are beginning to see armed struggle as their sole hope against white gangsters.4

Several recent works, notably Allison Blakely’s 1986 *Russia and the Negro*, have examined the experience of blacks in Russia, but for decades all efforts in this area were frustrated by the refusal of Soviet authorities to release the historical records, even to Communist researchers.5 On the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, however, the Russian Federation nationalized all Communist Party property, including archives. Based on just-released documents, the present report endeavors to illuminate some episodes from the early Soviet period.

The first blacks to study in Moscow encountered contradictions and dilemmas with which they were ill equipped to cope. Drawn to Bolshevik Russia by the promise of free higher education, racial equality, and socialism, by and large they found all that, at least if we interpret “socialism” loosely, but some individuals also collided with racism on a personal level. That this happened in the street could have been anticipated, but the situation in the universities that admitted foreign students caught in theory to have been different. Established to train cadres for the new regime, and specifically designated *communist*—not “university, those institutions admitted as students and retained as faculty and staff only Communist party members or thoroughly vetted sympathizers, all sworn to uphold revolution-ary ideals, most certainly including the brotherhood of all peoples and races.

Blacks began to enroll at Moscow’s Stalin Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) in the mid-1920s. Founded in 1921 under the aegis of Stalin’s Commissariat for Nationality Affairs (Narkomnats) to train cadres for the eastern borders, the institution opened its doors that summer. Interpreting its mission broadly, from the beginning KUTV admitted East and South Asians, Arabs, Jews, and Turks and others from the Middle East. Coming under Comintern jurisdiction after the July 1923 liquidation of Narkomnats, it now began to recruit Africans and American blacks.6

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6TsGAOR (Central State Archives of the October Revolution), 5221/1/102, 53; *Zhizin Natsionalnosei*, January 13, 1921; *Izvestiya TsK*, No. 31, July 20, 1921, 12; RTsKhIDNI (Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of the Documents of Contemporary History—

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One of the first to enroll was Bankole Awoonor-Renner, an Ashanti from the Gold Coast who used the name Kweku Bankole in Russia. After attending Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, in 1924 he transferred to the Carnegie Institute of Technology. In Pittsburgh he came under the influence of the Communist Youth League, which arranged for him to continue his studies in Moscow. Awoonor-Renner went to Russia and registered at KUTV in November 1925; the following April he publicly embarrassed Grigori Zinoviev, then chairman of the Comintern.7

Zinoviev had come to KUTV to lecture on Soviet foreign policy. During the question period, “Bankole” asked, “What is the Comintern’s attitude toward the oppressed nations of Africa?” Although he spoke on Morocco and Egypt in some detail, Zinoviev said nothing about the “most oppressed people”—as Bankole described them—south of the Sahara.

Annoyed, the Bolshevik grandee pleaded lack of information. Awoonor-Renner did not press the matter at the time, but a few weeks later he sent a letter again raising the issue. On paper he did not impute anything more than oversight to the Comintern chief; privately, he detected the stench of racism.8

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Awoonor-Renner received no answer. Zinoviev did not correspond with students and anyway had far more pressing worries in 1926. In July he lost his seat on the Politburo, five months later the chairmanship of the Comintern.9

Unremarkable though Zinoviev's ignorance and indifference were, more sophistication might have been expected from KUTV officials. Setting aside ten places in Awoonor-Renner's entering class for Africans and American blacks, they included two places for women, for whom--they noted before receiving a single application--"admission requirements can be lowered."10 The archives do not indicate the extent of the proposed compromise; in any event the black women did not come.11 The admission that year of nine illiterates among ten entering Tuvin demonstrated some elasticity in the entrance requirements.12

An autumn 1921 survey of the first class of KUTV students acknowledged that "Not only do we have here an overwhelming peasant majority—we have the most backward peasants in Russia."13 Urging establishment of a university-affiliated nakhod (an acronym denoting remedial school for workers), in March 1922 the Narcomats' journal pointed out that the institution had to deal with students who lacked "even the most basic knowledge of mathematics . . . [and] natural science" and even with illiterates.14 The hundreds of untrained Chinese students at KUTV and later at the Communist University of the Toilers of China (KUTK) presented particularly acute problems.15 Over the years the universities and the International Lenin School (MLSh, founded 1926) repeatedly called attention to this

situation. As late as May 1937 the Politburo was still debating what to do about it.16

Most of the several dozen Africans and West Indian blacks who studied at KUTV and the International Lenin School in 1925-1936 had graduated from secondary school and coped satisfactorily with the Moscow curriculum. Perhaps half the sixty to ninety American blacks performed well; the others required special training.17

KUTV installed most of the blacks in Section 9 of the Anglo-American (i.e., English-speaking) Sector, assigning a few to the Scientific Research Institute for National and Colonial Problems (NIINKP). All of them took classes at MLSh, which in 1932/1933 offered this curriculum:18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Hours</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political economy</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of the All-Union Communist International [sic]</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leninism</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical materialism</td>
<td>120</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party-building</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military science</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current politics</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fourteen-month course involved ten months plus ten days in classroom work ("theoretical study"), two months of practical work including three days on a


10TsKhIDNI, 532/1/21, 2.

11A white woman in Awoonor-Renner's group, Sonya Kroll, was married to an American black, the CPUSA functionary Carl Reeve. Born in Odessa, she emigrated to Canada and later moved to New York. Harry Haywood knew her in Moscow as June Kroll; see his Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist (Chicago, 1978), 165.

12N. N. Timofeeva, "Komunistichesky universitet traditschitskikh Vostoka (KUTV) (1921-1923)," Narodniy Asiat i Afriki, 1979, no. 2, 32. The Tuvin are "basically a group of linguistically Turkified Mongols, [but] a number of Turkic, Samoyedic, and Kettic groups also went into the formation of this people." Ronald Wixman, The Peoples of the USSR: An Ethnographic Handbook (Armonk, NY, 2001). About sixty different ethnic groups were then represented at KUTV.

13KUTV, Izvestiya Kommunisticheskogo Universiteta Traditschitskikh Vostoka, NKN, No. 1, October [1921], 4.

14Zhina Natsionalnostei, No. 3 (9), March 14, 1922, 7.

15TsKhIDNI, 532/1/27, 12-13, and 532/1/267, 4.

16Ibid., 170/987, 51.

17Estimates based on archival evidence. A 1935 report (TsKhIDNI, 532/1/173, 4) that only twenty American blacks and ten Africans had passed through KUTV in the preceding decade is clearly in error. George Padmore (Nurse) recalled that "there were never more than a dozen African at KUTV" when he was there in 1930-31; quoted in Hooker, Black Revolutionary, 14-15. Most students stayed at KUTV from six to eighteen months.

18TsKhIDNI, 532/1/442, 3. A space for a ninth subject is blank. Originally Sector "A," in late 1933 the Anglo-American Sector became "D." NIINKP was originally the Scientific Research Association.
collective farm, and fifteen days in party organizational work. Five days were set aside for revolutionary holidays, and assignments came in the fifteenth month.19

Although it was never publicly acknowledged, the program of study included training in the principles and techniques of conspiratorial and underground political work. Hidden in the "military science" and "Leninism" parts of the official curriculum were instruction in espionage, small arms, guerrilla warfare, codes, rules of conduct under surveillance, arrest and interrogation, and so on.20

Treated as honored guests, the blacks, along with other foreign students, received preferential treatment on all fronts—board, room, and education at prestigious institutions, clothing and travel allowances, special tutors, paid vacations in the Soviet Union and at home, and fairly easy access to high officials. This was at a time when, despite improvement under Lenin's New Economic Policy (1921-1928), the Soviet standard of living remained one of the lowest in Europe, on a par with that in Sicily, the Spanish Extremadura, and Albania. The privileges set the foreigners aside from the mass of Soviet citizens and moreover continued during the first two Five-Year Plans (1928-1937), when the living standard plummeted for all save the party elite.

In the beginning the blacks at KUTV enjoyed civilized, cordial relations with Soviet students and faculty, who in those days had not abandoned revolutionary ideals, much less lost their fear of authority. Any display of racial prejudice could and on occasion did lead to expulsion from the school and the party.

But the attitudes and practices of old Russia obviously did not disappear overnight. The Russian-Ukrainian national experiences did not embrace racism and genocide on the British, Spanish, or American model, but discrimination directed against minority peoples—Tatars and other orientals, Turkic peoples, Jews—stained the record of the East Slavs, and black visitors inevitably felt its blows. Because the communists usually suppressed news of racial incidents, however, we have little information on the subject.

An exception came in August 1930, when the Stalingrad party organization tried two men accused of assaulting a black from the British West Indies. The

19 Information from a 51-page brochure Osnovy sotsialni) i partiturno-vospitatelnoi raboty na cther sbolj (Moscow, 1934), marked SECRET; it is in TGAOR. It gives the total hours as 1,526. The schedule called for students to rise at 0700 hours, retire at 2300.

20 TGAORDNI, 531/1/52, "Osновные правилa комсомела диля молодых internationallыkh Komvuzov (M. L. Sh., KUNMZ, KUTV)" (Basic Principles of Conspiracy for our International Communist institutions of higher education (MLSh, KUNMZ, KUTV), dated September 5, 1930. A second, annotated copy is at 532/1/114.

assailants, white Americans, worked alongside their victim in Stalingrad; the trial sought to portray racism as an imported bourgeois evil.21

In the Comintern schools, racial problems almost always involved foreign whites, especially Americans, Canadians, and Britons, who not infrequently verbally abused black students and sometimes lashed out at them physically. Seeking to preserve a facade of harmony, the academic and civil authorities did not publicize these incidents, but by September 1932 the blacks' complaints finally prompted the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) to appoint an investigative commission.22

The commission uncovered "white chauvinism" (i.e., racism) and "political hooliganism" in the Anglo-American Sector and blamed faculty, staff, and the party cell. Mindless prejudice, complicated in some instances by sexual tensions and often fueled by vodka, lay at the root of the hostility. Comintern authorities believed that discipline, education, and more careful selection of students by the American and Canadian Communist parties would extinguish it. Two whites and one black, Gary Johnson ("Robert Ross") of Minneapolis, were expelled from KUTV, and several others warned.23

Race relations in the schools appear to have improved in the wake of the ECCI investigation, but festering black dissatisfaction with both racism and the

21 TGAORDNI, 532/1/441, 22, the blacks' letter to the Comintern: "When in the summer of 1930 in Stalingrad an American beat up a Negro just because he was a Negro the Soviet courts decreed that this American infected with imperialist ideology would be banished from the Soviet Union." See also Blakely, Russia and the Negro, 101; William Henry Chamberlin, Russia's Iron Age (Boston, 1934), 362-64. Chamberlin and his wife attended the trial. The Prokhorov made George Padmore (Malcolm Ivan Meredith Nuri), a Trinidadian black, a member of the investigating commission; see Hocke, Black Revolutionary, 355-36. The victim, Robert Robinson, who had come to Russia from New York, was "elected" to the Moscow City Council in 1934. In 1938 he published Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union (Washington, 1968). One of his assailants went to prison for two years, the other was sentenced to supervised parole; both were required to make a public apology.

22 The ECCI had a permanent member on the Lenin School's board of directors; in the late 1920s the English Communist J. T. Murphy, whose memoirs contain useful information, filled the post; see New Horizons (London, 1941).

23 TGAORDNI, 531/1/68, 5, report of September 16, 1932. Other documents in this dossier outline a conflict between a black American and a white Englishman over a woman—presumably Soviet and white—in Yalta during the 1932 summer vacation. Still others mention drunken brawls, anti-Semitism, financial chicanery, and generally dissolute behavior on the part of a few whites and blacks. See ibid., 531/1/164, 3, 4. On the identification of "Ross" as Johnson (student card No. 5174) see ibid., 532/1/123, 27. On his expulsion see his personal dossier, "Ross, Robert," 6744, 12, 14, 23-24. Johnson was to have a checkered career in Russia as an actor, lecturer, and bon vivant.
On trial in 1952-1953 for his alleged complicity in the Mau Mau insurrection, he was asked where he had studied in the USSR. Kenyatta: "Moscow University." 29

That did not correspond to the truth, but the man was defending himself in
an atmosphere reminiscent of the Moscow show trials. 30 Merely having been in
Bolshevik Russia damned him, though probably less—John Lonsdale has
suggested—that having taken an English wife. 31 Nevertheless, to have admitted
attending special Comintern schools would have been foolhardy. 32

Kenyatta’s tenure at KUTV and the Lenin School marked him with the
indelible sign of the Comintern. But because he was simply too well known—and
too independent—for underground work, he evidently received very little conspira-
torial training. Specialists may detect traces of that Bolshevik forte, political orga-
nization, in his subsequent career.

Communist officials fancied he had more than casual sympathy with their
aims. A spring 1933 note in the archives reads: "Assign Joken (Kenyatta - Kikuyu) to
his homeland through the Profintern [Red International of Trade Unions]." 33

does not mention Kenyatta. He lived in Room 100 of the dormitory at 13, Tverskaya Boulevard, complaining that KUTV had not kept a promise to give him a private room; RTbKHIdN, 532/1/438, 6, and 532/1/441, 4.

Murray-Brown, Kenyatta, 267.

According to Murray-Brown (ibid., 260-61), the "public" consisted of wives of settlers and
of government officers who applauded every point that seemed to go against Kenyatta. . . .
the government intended, no doubt, to humiliate Kenyatta and impress such Africans as were present
with the power of the colonial regime." See also Mwansa Slater, The Trial of Jomo Kenyatta,


32 Cf. Corfield Report, 219: "It was of course known that Kenyatta had visited Russia in
1929/30 when he joined the Communist Party, and again in 1933 when he attended the Lenin
School, a known training ground for agitators."

33 RTbKHIdN, 532/1/440. 1. The Profintern connection stemmed from Kenyatta’s
participation in the July 1930 conference of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro
Workers in Hamburg; see "Report of the Proceedings and Decisions of the First International
Conference of Negro Workers" (Hamburg, 1930); Corfield Report, 42; Murray-Brown Kenyatta,
164, 165, 171, 199, 359; Robin Cohen’s introduction in A. Z. Zasmanovich, I. I. Potekhin, and
Edgar for this latter citation. See also Hooker, Black Revolutionaries, 18, 21-22, and Rolf
Hainich, Schwarze Haut im roten Griff (Dusseldorf, 1962), 54-61.
AFRICANS AND BLACKS IN THE COMINTERN SCHOOLS

This evidence notwithstanding, to date no proof of Kenyatta's membership in the Communist party has surfaced in the Soviet archives or anywhere else. On the contrary, the "absolutely secret" November 1932 KUTV document cited above identifies five of twelve individuals as members of the American, British, or German parties, but states that Kenyatta and the remaining six had no party affiliation.\(^34\)

After the failure of Soviet-inspired revolts in Bavaria, Hungary, Hamburg, and elsewhere in the first few years after the Bolshevik Revolution, Moscow pursued a "united front" policy, that is, collaboration with some, but not all, socialist parties.\(^35\) Until the emergence of the "popular front" policy of uniting the anti-fascist masses in 1935, it was standard communist practice to work with "bourgeois" parties and politicians, and non-party national leaders, particularly in Asia and Africa. The Soviets courted Kenyatta as they had wooed Sun Yat-sen, Kemal Ataturk, Reza Pahlavi, and others, with little success.

For a time, Kenyatta made use of the Soviet Communists. Bourgeois nationalist to the core, he achieved his purposes and left their care. Judging from the archival record, he had nothing more to do with them. Edwin Mofutsanyana called Kenyatta "the biggest reactionary I have ever met" and told an American scholar,

When . . . he was . . . [in Moscow] we used to call him a petty bourgeois. He used to say, 'I don't like this petty thing. Why don't you say I'm a big bourgeois?'\(^36\)

Mofutsanyana, known at KUTV as "Greenwood," also attended the meeting with Manuilsky. In its secret records the university recorded his real name as "Elvin Tobo," thus coming fairly close: his middle name was Thabo.\(^37\) A mine

\(^34\)RTkhDNI, 532/1/439, 6.

\(^35\)The final Soviet-era statement on the united front was A. Ya. Vatlin, "Formirovanie takzhi edinogo fronta: novye aspekty," in F. I. Finov, general editor, Komintern: Opisy, Traditsii, Uroki. Material nauchnoi konferentsii, posvyashchennoi 70-letiyu Kommunisticheskogo Internatsiala (Moscow, 1989). Only 100 copies of this collection were published; I am indebted to Professor Finov for my own. Related recognition of the strength of fascism produced the 1935 switch to the popular front.


\(^37\)RTkhDNI, 532/1/163, 35, undated roster for the Africans of the 9th Section. Robert Edgar kindly shared information on Mofutsanyana, whose biography he is preparing, and confirmed the identity of "Greenwood" and "Elvin Tobo." See further L. Rytov, "Ivan Postekhov: A Great Africanist," African Communists, No. 54 (1973), 95. With Mofutsanyana were "Hitlon" (Nikita Sobin), "Nelson" (Hllele Selie Tamba), "Raymond," and "Henry"—all of whom came directly from

clerk and a leader of the South African Communist Party, he had narrowly escaped assassination on 14 January 1929. At KUTV he occasionally lectured on the significance of that day in Zulu history.\(^38\)

The introductions complete and Manuilsky—"a little red-faced, dark-haired, humorous and good-natured Ukrainian"—settled in his chair, Kenyatta ignited a general discussion of the image of the Negro in Soviet society, attacking the portrayal of blacks in the play "Geisha" at the Teatr Obozreniya (Revue Theatre).\(^39\) Walter Lewis ("Vels"), a barely literate black Communist from Birmingham, Alabama, said that although he personally had never experienced "white chauvin-

Africa. Also in the group were the Africans "Sonye" (or "Sonae," real name Thomas Odhoro, who came via England; "Robert" (Pierre Kaimak or Kaimak), via France; "Rose" (Zou Magone), also via France; and "Charlie Lafayette" (Samuel Freeman) from Monrovia; see RTkhDNI, 532/1/439, 6. A document listing allies (ibid., 532/1/163, 19) has "Smith Kaitlon" (Hilton Smith?) in the group; he is identified at ibid., 532/1/439, 6 as Nathan Varne Gray or Grey from Africa, born 1912, worker, non-party. Brian Bunting refers to a B. Nikin, who was perhaps "Nikin Sobin." See Bunting, Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary (London, 1975), 58, 117. Bunting notes (p. 73) that Kotane used the name "Nikin" when he went to the USSR in 1935.


\(^39\) T. Murphy, New Horizons, 247.

\(^40\)RTkhDNI, 532/1/441. 1. Moscow's Sheliputin Theatre presented the first Russian performance of the English composer Sidney Jones's operetta "Geisha" in 1897. The Dmitrov Operetta Theatre in Moscow gave the first Soviet performance in November 1922. The songs "Chin Chin Chinaman" and "The Dear Little Happy-Happy Happy" strike an offensive chord today, but the black group's letter to the Comintern indicated anger over some ill-conceived—by modern standards—exotics in production rather than libretto. See S. S. Mokulsky, et al., eds., Teatrarnaya entsiklopediya, I (Moscow, 1961), col. 136.
uim" in Russia, he too wanted "Geisha" removed from the repertoire.41 The group as a whole detailed its objections in a letter to the Comintern: "Like certain Toothpaste and Shoe polish trusts here," they wrote, the production absolutely distorts the physiognomy of the Negro—exaggerated red lips with eyes painted white[,] awful costumes[,] etc. Only minstrels and clowns paint their face[s] and lips as shown in the above mentioned cases, and not Negro slaves, servants and workers under any form of society.42

Roddy Lister ("Johnson"), a black American worker and Communist, picked up this theme. Accusing the Kamerny Teatr (Chamber Theatre) of insulting blacks in its presentation of "Negro" (The Negro), an adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones," he demanded it be withdrawn.43

Monroe Vallade ("Bradford Bennett"), a Communist agitator in Harlem before coming to KUTV, informed Manuilsky that "[black] comrades have often told me... children call them 'monkeys.'" He believed the title of Nataliya Sat's play at the Detskoye Teatr (Children's Theatre), "Negriyonok i obezyana" (The Negro Child and the Ape), reflected insulting stereotypes. The black group urged renaming it "The Negro and His Pet."44

The KUTV blacks expressed outrage at the cancellation of the film "Blacks and Whites." Commissioned by the Comintern and the Berlin-based, but Kremling-controlled, Rote Hilfe, the English-language production was to have depicted racial

41RTKhIDNI, 532/1/441, 5. Lewis is identified at ibid., 532/1/439, 6, and 532/1/440, 3-4. "Vels" is Russian for Wells.

42Ibid., 26. The "trusts" used caricatures of blacks in their advertising. I have corrected minor spelling errors in the quotation; the latter is in English.

43Ibid., 3. Lister is identified at ibid., 532/1/439, 6; the documents do not specify his objections. On the production of the O'Neill play, see I. A. Trezky, ed., Ruskyy sovetksyy teatr, 1926-1932 (Leningrad, 1982), 349-50, 356, and N. A. Gorchakov, Istoriya sovetskogo teatra (New York, 1956), 194-95. Langston Hughes, who went to Moscow in 1932, noted that the Kamerny was then the "theatre du soubete," I Wonder As I Wander (New York, 1964), 200.

44RTKhIDNI, 532/1/442, 2, 23; 495-261-1862 (Vallade's personal dossier); and 532/2/85, 1. Evidently only the title of the popular play offended the blacks. Langston Hughes, unable to obtain a ticket, wrote that it "concerned a handsome little Negro boy, presented most sympathetically, I was told." I Wonder As I Wander, 200. Nataliya Sat mentions the play only once in her memoirs: Novely moe zhid, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1970), 359. Vallade, who did not specify his objections, held student card No. 4426. On his background see RTKhIDNI, 532/1/82, 9, 17 August 1929. KUTV evaluation noting he had been a member of the CPUSA since 1927. Vallade appears to have been from either the British West Indies or Liberia.

and labor conflicts in Birmingham, Alabama.45 Twenty American blacks and one white had responded to the call for actors, who were to receive passage to Moscow and good wages. Langston Hughes signed on as a consultant on a scenario prepared by a "famous Russian writer" who, Hughes discovered, had never been in the United States.46

The Soviet press cited "technical reasons" for the "suspension" of production, but Western newspapers claimed the Comintern, "abandon[ing] work among Negroes," had shelved the film permanently. Vallade insisted on a clear statement: Would "Blacks and Whites" be produced or not?47

Giving no specifics, Manuilsky acknowledged that white American engineers working in Russia had urged cancellation of the film. In fact, Colonel Hugh L. Cooper of New York, supervising engineer of the gigantic Dneprostroi hydroelectric complex, met with Vyacheslav Molotov and threatened to delay completion if plans for "Blacks and Whites" went forward.48 Manuilsky must have known the outcome if not the details of Cooper's meeting with Molotov, but he continued to dissemble, telling the black students, "I can't tell you that we've rejected this film."49

45In Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem (Westport, Conn., 1983), 155-56. Faith Berry indicates that a "Cooperating Committee for Production of a Soviet Film on Negro Life" had a role in the planning of the film. She identifies the "militant, Jamaican socialist W. A. Domingo" as chairman and (p. 345 n.7) Malcolm Cowley as a member of the "inter racial American planning committee seeking volunteers for the film." To date the Moscow archives have not yielded any information on this group.

46Black, Russia and the Negro, 93-96, 102; Smith, Black Man in Red Russia, 22-23; Haywood, Black Bolshevik, 383-84. Hughes described the scenario as "a pathetic hodgepodge of good intentions and faulty facts" and commented, "an absurd scenario, tone-deaf Negroes [the film was to be a musical], and for a labor organizer, a dancer!" I Wonder As I Wander, 76, 90. In general on "Blacks and Whites," see 69-99. Hughes does not identify the Russian scenarist, whose identity I have not discovered. The Comintern and Rote Hilfe had hired the German Karl Yungbluth to direct the film.

47RTKhIDNI, 532/1/441, 2; see also Haywood, Black Bolshevik, 664 n. 7. Also on "Black and White" see Arnold Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, 1 (New York, 1986), 235, 236, 242-51.

48The fullest account of the Cooper episode is Berry, Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem, 164, 168-70, which draws on American diplomatic documents—but accidentally omits the crucial footnote. Berry provides no source for her assertion (pp. 165-65) that Raymond Robbins also tried to halt the film. Concentrating on the technical side of construction, Anne Dickason Rasweiler's The Generation of Power: The History of Dneprostroi (New York, 1988), does not mention Cooper's intervention in "Black and White."

49RTKhIDNI, 13.
That the Comintern chief did not leave the matter there testifies to the organization’s anxiety over this matter. In an effort to pacify the blacks, Manuilsky invoked the smug bureaucrat’s ultimate ratio, national security:

comrades, I put this question to you: if the Soviet Union were to be confronted by the danger of a major war, and . . . in the interests of preserving the dictatorship of the proletariat, were to be interested in at least the benevolent neutrality of America, would it have the right to maneuver occasionally on this or that issue? . . . You know the tone we’re using with Japan at the moment. See here, you know Russian, you’ve read Stalin’s speech. We’ve begun arming ourselves . . . 50

He did not explain how cancelling “Blacks and Whites” would thwart Japanese aggression. The students considered it futile to argue the point, however, and proceeded to other complaints. Vallade protested Soviet Russian-English dictionaries that produced such English variants of the Russian word negr (Negro) as “nigger” and “darkey” and gave “piccaninny” as the English word for Negro infant. The young men charged that even the party journal Pod znamenem marksma (Under the Banner of Marxism) presented the “Australi[a]n Negro” as a “synonym of ignorance.” 51

The students accused the authors of their Russian language textbook of “portray[ing] . . . [Negroes] as people who talk only with their hands and bodies.” Vallade bitterly observed that people in the street, ignorant even of the existence of African languages, jeered at blacks and asked them to say a few words in “Negro.” 52

Pierre Kalmek (“Robert”), a sailor from one of the French African colonies who had “been everywhere,” said he had come to Russia thinking it the homeland of the oppressed. Disappointment struck him:

I’ve come up against greater chauvinism [racism] here than in capitalist countries, and I’ve been in Italy, India, and other countries. No one spat at me there the way they . . . [do] here in Moscow. People have spat on me three or four times. They did so yesterday when we went to the “Amo” factory. And last year, when I was going around the country as a MOPR delegate, in the cafeteria at the Vysnosh Volocheck station the secretary of the . . . [regional] branch of MOPR came up to me and said, “What’s this? A monkey?” 53

Samuel Padmore (“Hamilton”) and Nathan Verne Gray (“Smith”), both from the Gold Coast, claimed that a mulatto colleague found greater acceptance in Russia because of his color. Kalmek said a woman in the KUTV cafeteria had pointed at him and said with a laugh, “Now that’s a Negro.” Mofutsanyana observed sadly that when he walked the streets of Moscow, children called out to each other, “Come see the Negro!” Samuel Freeman (“Charlie Lafayette”), a non-party worker from Monrovia, said that “the dirtiest Russian in the street, and the most educated, can laugh at me, a Negro.” 54

Manuilsky switched to what evidently passed for dialectics:

Comrade Robert says he’s never seen such chauvinism as in the Soviet Union. But what’s the basis of this chauvinism? First of all, the creation of such artificial economic relations under which a ruling nation or race exploits another nation . . . . When in the USA whites have the right to Lynch Negroes, but Negroes don’t have the right to Lynch whites—that’s chauvinism. 55

Perplexed by this odd logic, Kalmek protested that no one spat on whites in Moscow streets but conceded that anyone doing so in the presence of a police officer would probably be arrested. Grateful for the reprieve, Manuilsky grandly raised the stakes: anyone spitting on “Comrade Robert” in the future, he declared not once but twice, would be thrown into a “concentration camp.” 56

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50 Ibid., Manuilsky referred to Stalin’s January 7, 1933, speech, “Itogi pervoi plenitserii” (Results of the First Five-Year Plan), which took note of the Russian occupation of Manchuria and the increasingly tense situation in Europe; see Stalin, Sochineniya, XIII (Moscow, 1951), 180-81. Franklin D. Roosevelt was to be inaugurated a few weeks later; the Soviets wished to avoid a misstep that might threaten the expected granting of diplomatic recognition. See Malcom Muggeidge, Winter in Moscow (Boston, 1934), 17-18. The New York Herald Tribune quickly grasped the connection between events in Manchuria, Roosevelt’s election, and “Blacks and Whites”: see Hughes, I Wonder As I Wonder, 96-97.

51 Ibid., 532/1/441, 2, 22-24.

52 Ibid., 532/1/441, 2, 23-24.

53 Ibid., 532/1/441, 3. MOPR, the Soviet division of Rot Front, is an acronym for International Organization for Aid to the Fighters for Revolution.

54 Ibid., 532/1/441, 6, 8. Langston Hughes found racism in Soviet Russia but also encountered an astonishing—perhaps not wholly sincere—egalitarianism: “On a crowded bus, nine times out of ten, some Russian would say, ‘Negrochanski tovarish—Negro comrade—take my seat!’ I Wonder As I Wonder, 74.

55 Ibid., 532/1/441.

56 Ibid., 11-12.
The blacks had other grievances: Kenyatta and his colleagues lamented the KUTV faculty's poor command of English.\(^{57}\) Seconding another Kenyatta complaint, the food, Samuel Padmore—one of three cooks in group—said he would not criticize the Russian national dish, kasha, but potatoes and macaroni are international foods. Here they prepare them so that there's no taste left at all and one eats them just to sustain life. You have to cook macaroni with tomatoes and onions, and it's necessary to clean a chicken and not serve it up with the feathers on.\(^{58}\)

The group letter said:

The stipend is insufficient, because of the high cost of living, to meet the monthly . . . minimum needs of the students such as laundry, cigarettes, toothpaste, bath etc . . . . Then the laundry takes very long to wash clothes—and the students having no . . . change has to wear the same clothes for sometimes three weeks. The taller don't repair our clothes as they should, we have to wait six months or maybe more to get . . . [them] repaired. Food is sufficient but prepaire badly and makes waste, feathers on the chicken, stones in the rice . . . .

Rooms are insufficiently heated. For a building and a dormitory with so many students a good shower bath with warm water can easily and economically be installed and should be installed.

We recognize the difficulties of socialist construction in the Soviet Union. . . .\(^{59}\)

Kenyatta summed up the tenor of the meeting, charging that the "Comintern really neglects Negroes from the colonial countries."\(^{60}\) Pursuing Manuilsky's request that they put their complaints in writing, two days later the students did so in a lengthy letter "TO THE COMINTERN," appending formal resolutions (see appendix).\(^{61}\)

In 1934 another ECCI commission found the situation in the Anglo-American Sector improved. KUTV and MLSh, it boasted, had overcome "white chauvinism, drunkenness, and . . . anti-Semitism: Negro and white students live together amicably. The majority of the Negroes and other comrades display healthy self-criticism." There being "no fortresses the Bolsheviks cannot storm," as Stalin liked to boast, the racial problem had been solved.\(^{62}\) We may weigh this claim alongside the routine communist description of the Soviet Union as the freest country in the world.

The Soviet leadership unequivocally condemned racism and racial discrimination, but insensitive and not infrequently ignorant lower-level officials—culls of a lumpenproletariat suddenly thrust into power—often perpetuated stereotypes and prejudices. Moreover, a party that had no clear program for eradicating discrimination directed against Soviet minorities had no idea how to deal with blacks.

The episodes and attitudes enumerated here reveal a more antagonistic situation with regard to race relations than either Soviet reports or—more surprisingly—most black memoirs and other accounts have indicated. The racism they experienced in Soviet Russia stunned and disillusioned the students and other black visitors precisely because it so blatantly contradicted the new regime's official posture.\(^{63}\) That regime's pandering to the prejudices of American engineers and other specialists—a broader subject merely touched on here—so vital to the fledgling Soviet economy did not endear it to the blacks.

But Soviet authorities did take complaints of mistreatment and discrimination seriously. A ruthless regime that launched a savage war against its own people in this period, through the collectivization of agriculture, did not sanction private violence; if any lynchings of blacks took place, they have not been recorded.

So far as the Comintern schools were concerned, the atmosphere for blacks, if far from ideal, ranked as the best anywhere in the world from both the educational and the personal standpoint. No other country then offered blacks such opportunities. Moscow obviously had its own agenda; but Jomo Kenyatta's career

\(^{57}\)Ibid., 4, 24.

\(^{58}\)Ibid., 8. Not to be confused with George Padmore (Malcolm Nurse). Samuel Padmore is identified as "Hamilton" (Russian "Khamilton") in ibid., 532/I/339, 6: born in 1906, of worker origin, non-party. Those familiar with cafeterias and canteens in Soviet educational institutions will recognize the truth of the comments quoted here.

\(^{59}\)Ibid., 532/1/441, 25. The minor spelling and grammatical errors are in the original.

\(^{60}\)Ibid., 4.

\(^{61}\)Ibid., 22-25.

\(^{62}\)Ibid., 531/1/164, 3-4.

\(^{63}\)Langston Hughes wrote of his excitement at the prospect of going to "the land where race prejudice was reported taboo, the land of the Soviets." See I Wonder As I Wander, 73.
after he left KUTV — MLSh indicates that Moscow got both more and less than it bargained for.

There can be no denying or minimizing the pain of racism in Soviet Russia. The black students' dissatisfaction with material conditions, however, reflected the quasi-bourgeois background of some of them and in general a certain insensitivity to both cultural differences and the difficulties that confronted Soviet society. Educated by colonialists and missionaries, the Africans and West Indians clearly had some appreciation of Western comforts, and even poor black Americans were appalled by the miserable Soviet standard of living—which students from Asia and the Middle East ignored or passively accepted.⁶⁴

Like their Western counterparts, Soviet communist and state universities occupied the same moral ground—with all its hypocrisies—as the societies they served. The special communist institutions of higher education provided no paradise, but they did admit, educate, and generally coddle small numbers of blacks. For all their own shortcomings, and despite the perverse agenda of the regime which controlled them, those schools played a generally positive role in the growing worldwide assault on racism and colonialism.

⁶⁴Ho Chi Minh, Deng Xiaoping, Sukhe Bator of Mongolia, the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, and many other prominent communists and non-party leftists attended KUTV and other Comintern schools in the inter-war period. Treated as privileged guests, and committed to the communist cause, they rarely complained about living conditions.

APPENDIX

RESOLUTIONS IN CONNECTION WITH DEROGATORY PORTRAYAL OF NEGROES IN THE CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE SOVIET UNION.

WHEREAS it is generally known that the Soviet Union is the only nation in the entire world, which advocates and do stand for social emancipation of, and equality with, the negroes; and

WHEREAS any action of the Soviet Union, expressed or implied, possessing the least tendency to propagate derogatory information about the genuine character of the negro would tend to create suspicion and alienation of the friendly feelings which are already existing between the negro's of the world and the people of this Union; and

WHEREAS correct and respectable information about the true character and physiognomy of the negro's are at present obtainable in this Union, and ought to be unbiasedly disseminated by the cultural institutions of the Soviet Union; and

WHEREAS, on the night of the 13th instant, in the "Revue Theatre," Tverskaya 15, City of Moscow, the negro's were depicted in the most degrading manner (painting them to appear unlike real monkeys [sic], an act which is now-a-days becoming extinct even in capitalist countries, thereby causing the negro's who were present to feel that the people of the Soviet Union also think about the negro's in a chauvinistic trend of mind; therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED:

1. — That we the undersigned workers/negro comrades, Students of the Comminist University (K.Y.T.B. [Russian initials]), Moscow, do hereby record our bitter dissatisfaction with and fore the disgraceful characterization given the negro's in the Theatre mentioned above, or hereafter to be given them in and by any other educational institution within the province of the Soviet Union.

2. — That we hereby call upon the Authorities of the said Union, in order to obviate serious misunderstanding in the future, to decree or order the total elimination of such portrayals of the negroes from their cultural institutions, and that forever.

3. — That copies of these Resolutions be transmitted to the Union Central Executive Committee, Communist International, the Executive Committee of the International Trade Unions, and the Executive Committee of the International Labor Defense, Moscow, U.S.S.R.
BOOK REVIEWS


Ahmad al-Kabir (c. 1836-1897) was the son of al-Haji 'Umar (c. 1797-1864), who had created in the Central Sudan one of the most extensive of the nineteenth-century Muslim empires. This empire, which had absorbed a number of rival states, was invaded by the French and incorporated into their empire. Later, of course, the French empire came unstuck, and new states were formed in its place.

A great deal has been written in the past quarter-century about the nineteenth-century Sudanese empires, from that of the Mahdi in the east, through that of Shekyh Usman dan Fodio in the center and 'Umar in the east. Most of this literature stresses the same factors: lineage and ethnicity, education, religious and ethical debates, accomplishments, especially wars, and state-building. The sources for these studies are of two radically different kinds. First, there are those of European travellers and soldiers. Written in English or French for metropolitan audiences, these generally stretch the prospects of commercial advantage over the taut frame of existing Islamic power. Much could be said about their authors, especially about their Orientalist and masculinist orientations, but so far little has.

On the other hand, there are the texts composed by "Africans." It is necessary to put this word in quotations since its meanings are problematic. Certainly the Muslim authors of the majority of texts contained in the present study never called themselves by any such name. The African texts are generally written in Arabic, or at least using Arabic script, and directed to local Muslim audiences.

These two different sources yield quite different views. The first, a travel narrative, radiating a kind of twitchy concern about "fanatical" Islam (refiguring contemporary constructions of "terrorists" and "fundamentalists"),1 sought to penetrate the workings of its power as far as possible. The second, written within the formalism of the canon, forwarded claims of legitimacy and stressed the need for piety in a disordered world. Neither has much to say about the social. For writers, Christian and Muslim alike, categories such as "Fulbe" or "Hausa" remain

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1 Keith Hart has written: "The most effective challenge to the old political order was posed by Islam, in the shape of populist marabouts not unlike the Ayatollah Khomeini." This is a typical mirage of Occidental fundamentalism in which unfamiliar subjects seen at huge distances seem similar. See Hart, The Political Economy of West African Agriculture (Cambridge, 1982), p. 43.