

# AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WORKER IN STALIN'S SOVIET UNION: RACE AND THE SOVIET EXPERIMENT IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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ROBERT NATHANIEL ROBINSON was a twenty-three-year-old toolmaker in Detroit when he decided, like many thousands of Americans and Europeans in the early 1930s, to take a job in the booming industries of the Soviet Union. A Jamaican-born immigrant, Robinson was a reserved and unassuming man with little interest in politics. Yet within a short time after his arrival in Russia, he achieved unintended fame, becoming one of the best-known Americans residing in Russia, a *cause célèbre* for the Soviets and an object of both condemnation and admiration in the United States. For the Soviet regime he became a symbol of racial oppression under capitalism and of communism's promise of racial equality. For some black Americans, Robinson's experiences were proof that the Soviet Union was living up to its progressive ideals, at least as a haven free of racial prejudice. For many white Americans, Robinson represented one of their greatest fears: Communist exploitation of racial grievances to produce mass discontent among American blacks.

At the end of the 1920s, the Soviet Union embarked on a propaganda offensive to convince the world of the superiority of the Communist system. Stalin's regime launched a campaign to attract visitors, who were given access to select showcases

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of socialist achievement and pampered with banquets, receptions, and publicity.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the adoption of a program of rapid industrialization required importing large amounts of foreign machinery and technical expertise. Thousands of engineers and skilled workers from Europe and America went to the Soviet Union to help build the new industrial enterprises and to train a new generation of Soviet technicians.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Robinson was caught up in these related currents. He was a skilled worker hired by the Soviet government for economic reasons, but he also became a showpiece in the Soviet campaign to bolster its legitimacy, both internationally and domestically. Robinson was working for Ford Motor Company in Detroit in 1930, the only black toolmaker out of 700 in his department, when he was offered a job by Soviet recruiters who had come to the United States to hire technical workers for a tractor factory at Stalingrad. He accepted the offer because of the racist hostility of his white coworkers at Ford, the prospect of a higher salary, and fear that he would be laid off at Ford as a result of the Depression.<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after his arrival in Stalingrad, Robinson was assaulted and beaten by two white Americans in a racially motivated attack. The Soviet press used the incident to demonstrate the depravity of “American capitalist morality” and to highlight the “solidarity of workers of all nations and races” that prevailed in the Soviet Union. Newspapers in the United States and Europe also picked up the story, giving Robinson a measure of celebrity. The Soviet trial of his attackers probably inspired a similar trial in the United States in 1931, when the American Communist Party staged a public “trial” of a Finnish Communist in Harlem for failing to treat blacks at a dance with due courtesies.<sup>5</sup> In late 1934 and early 1935, the spotlight again focused on Robinson, when he was elected to a high-profile

2. Sylvia Margulies, *The Pilgrimage to Russia: The Soviet Union and the Treatment of Foreigners, 1924–1937* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 81–82.

3. According to one count, in 1932, 42,230 foreigners were employed in the USSR, most of them skilled workers. S. V. Mokin, *Internatsional'naia solidarnost' trudiashchikhsia* (Moscow: Izd-vo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1976), 133–34. On their experiences, see Andrea Graziosi, “Foreign Workers in Soviet Russia, 1920–1940: Their Experience and Their Legacy,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 33 (1988), 38–59, and idem, “Visitors from Other Times: Foreign Workers in the Prewar Piatiletki,” *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 24.2 (1988): 161–80.

4. Robert Robinson with Jonathan Slevin, *Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1988), 23–29. Robinson grew up in Cuba, where he trained as a toolmaker. Blacks in the United States were usually excluded from this kind of skilled work.

5. Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), 209–11.

post on the Moscow Soviet (City Council) and shortly thereafter received an award from the Soviet government for technical achievements. The Soviet press gave prominent attention to these events, but the attention spawned negative consequences for Robinson in the United States. The government labeled him a communist subversive; *Time* magazine condemned him as a dupe of the Soviets; a Minnesota Congressman introduced a bill to prevent U.S. citizens from accepting such awards from foreign governments; and the State Department began to create difficulties with his passport that forced him to renounce his U.S. citizenship.<sup>6</sup>

For the most part, scholars have directed their attention to the intellectuals of both races, from Langston Hughes to Lincoln Steffens, who visited the Soviet Union. Famous, sometimes glamorous, these men and women were indisputably influential, helping to shape the consciousness of white radicals and black Americans and at the same time influencing Soviet conceptions of internationalism.<sup>7</sup> Robinson was far from "ordinary": he was a highly skilled worker when such skills were very difficult for American blacks to achieve. Born in Jamaica, educated in Cuba, an immigrant first to the United States and then to the Soviet Union, Robinson's life was in many ways quite extraordinary. But his travails, and the spotlight focused on them in two countries, offer a rare glimpse into the ways that Americans who were concerned more with economic survival than with the great ideological questions of the day negotiated their lives in the Soviet Union. As David Levering Lewis has pointed out, Robinson's memoirs offered a much more negative account of Soviet life than those of other African Americans. Robinson's was the first, in Lewis's words, "to portray both Soviet institutions and the Russian people themselves as loutish, rapacious, racist and inherently expansionist."<sup>8</sup> Some specialists have suggested, somewhat unfairly, that historians have

6. See below for details, including sources.

7. See, e.g., Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters in Black and Red, 1922–1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), an excellent study of Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, W. E. B. DuBois, and Paul Robeson, and Alison Blakely's pioneering *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1986). David Engerman's insightful *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) covers the spectrum of American intellectual opinion before World War II.

8. David Levering Lewis, "Visible Man: Black in Stalin's Russia," *Washington Post*, 15 May 1988. But see also John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel*, ed. Stephen Kotkin (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989 [1942]).

ignored Robinson's account precisely for that reason.<sup>9</sup> The memoir was published in the Reagan years by a publishing house, Acropolis Books, with connections to the CIA, and its accuracy has been questioned.<sup>10</sup> But the stridently anti-Soviet tone of the memoir appears to have been a genuine reflection of Robinson's opinions. Reporter Daniel Schorr, who met Robinson in the 1950s, found him deeply disaffected.<sup>11</sup> Comparing Robinson's account with contemporary press coverage backs up the substance, if not always the precise details, of his version of the events that brought him fame in the 1930s.

This article analyzes Soviet and U.S. press coverage of Robinson's experiences as a black American worker in the USSR during 1930–1935, when he was the focus of considerable attention in both countries.<sup>12</sup> For the Soviet regime, Robinson offered a useful opportunity to distinguish its own "socialist virtues" from the evils of "capitalist" race discrimination. The Soviet Union's mass industrialization campaign was accompanied by pervasive propagandizing to inculcate Soviet values and exhort workers to new standards of achievement. Robinson's case was used to impart lessons to Soviet workers about the unity of the working class and the superiority of life in the Soviet Union, as well as to showcase the country's racial egalitarianism to international audiences. At the same time, the case became a way to express ambivalence about the large foreign presence in Soviet industry. Foreigners provided indispensable technical know-how in the early years of the industrialization drive, but most were temporary migrants without great sympathy for communism who brought foreign mores and habits of thinking into Soviet society. The Robinson incident furnished an opening not only for the education of Soviet masses but for foreign workers as well.

9. Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kirill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 220.
10. Acropolis publisher Alphons Hackl had ties to the CIA. *Covertaction Information Bulletin* 21 (1984): 26. On the CIA's earlier involvement in book publishing, see Grant S. McClellan, *Censorship in the United States* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1967), 130, and Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* (New York: Dell, 1975). Martin Duberman interviewed Robinson while researching his magisterial biography of Paul Robeson and found Robinson "earnest" but parts of his testimony questionable (see Duberman, *Paul Robeson* [New York: Knopf, 1988], 483, n44).
11. Daniel Schorr, *Staying Tuned: A Life in Journalism* (New York: Pocket Books, 2001), 60–61.
12. Meredith Roman offers detailed coverage of Soviet views of the 1930 attack in "Racism in a 'Raceless' Society: Racial Violence at the Stalingrad Giant of Socialist Industry and Images of Soviet Racial Equality, August 1930," *International Labor and Working-Class History* No. 71 (Spring 2007): 185–203. Roman's article came to my attention while this one was going to press.

For Americans, however, the case was considerably more problematic. International condemnation of U.S. race discrimination made many white Americans uncomfortable. The Depression's devastating effects on the attractiveness of the U.S. model of economic development, in contrast to the apparently successful state-directed industrialization of the USSR, made the 1930s a distinctly challenging era for Americans' long-standing faith in their country as a beacon to the rest of the world. Though American opinions of the Soviet experiment varied widely across the religious and political spectrum, Americans' views of Russia have long been underpinned by a belief that the United States had a mission to bring enlightenment and progress to a backward country.<sup>13</sup> Americans' faith in their country's superiority was not easy to defend when it came to Soviet condemnation of racial discrimination, for in the eyes of much of the world, the Soviets enjoyed considerable success in gaining the moral high ground on racial matters. Indeed, by the 1950s and 1960s, international opinion would provide an important rationale for the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations' support for civil rights initiatives.<sup>14</sup>

#### AFRICAN AMERICANS AND SOVIET COMMUNISM

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union saw racial inequality as a potentially important weapon in the struggle against capitalism and imperialism.<sup>15</sup> It espoused the cause of racial egalitarianism, including social and political equality for blacks, as part of its efforts to gain international support.<sup>16</sup> It continually exhorted its U.S. affiliate, which was funded directly by Moscow, to develop the revolutionary potential of blacks.<sup>17</sup> Its racial program for the United States was unpopular—adopted in 1928, it called for self-determination for black Americans in the South with the ultimate goal of creating a “Negro Soviet Republic”—but

13. David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.
14. Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
15. On funding, see Klehr et al., *Soviet World*, 140–42; on policy about blacks, see Roger E. Kanet, “The Comintern and the ‘Negro Question’: Communist Policy in the United States and Africa, 1921–1941,” *Survey* 19.4 (1974): 89; and Wilson Record, “The Development of the Communist Position on the Negro Question in the United States,” *Phylon Quarterly* 19.3 (1958): 306–16.
16. Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 55.
17. Draper, *American Communism*, 321, 334; *Communist Propaganda Among American Youth: An Example of Material Used* (Washington, D.C.: Chamber of Commerce of the United States, 1935), 16.

the American Communist Party made strenuous efforts to support its claims that full racial equality prevailed within the organization.<sup>18</sup> The party had a special “Negro Department,” supported African American newspapers, and undertook special studies of African American problems.<sup>19</sup> African Americans, including William Patterson and Harry Haywood, were promoted to high positions within the party apparatus, and the party created several subsidiary organizations devoted to Negro problems, such as the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, which were, at least nominally, under black leadership. In 1932 an African American, James W. Ford, was the party’s vice-presidential candidate. Despite these efforts, the party never attracted significant black membership, in part because racism and paternalism among the mainly white leadership were never fully eradicated.<sup>20</sup>

The party did, however, play an important role in publicizing, both in the United States and abroad, the injustices suffered by American blacks. It contributed significantly to the defense of the Scottsboro boys, nine black youths sentenced to death for raping two white women in 1931, as well as a number of other cases involving discriminatory treatment of blacks.<sup>21</sup> Mark Solomon’s study of the relationship between blacks and Communists in this period rightfully concludes that the Party’s achievements were significant, and that in decrying lynching, organizing hunger marches, and pressing for racial equality, it won the admiration of many progressive Americans.<sup>22</sup> The importance of the Soviets’ emphasis on the race question lay not so much in recruiting blacks to their cause but in using racial injustice as a powerful critique of American society as a whole. Soviet propaganda, both at home and abroad, depicted racism as an integral part of the American system: racism was described as “a fundamental feature of the social,

18. Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party*, 63, 65, 74. The new policy was approved by the Comintern despite the opposition of the three black American delegates. Dreamed up by Marxist ideologues who knew little or nothing about actual conditions in America, the policy is a classic example of an ideologically inspired program imposed by Moscow despite its patent irrelevance to local conditions. Although Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement had enjoyed some success in the 1920s, most blacks saw themselves as Americans and were more interested in integration into American society than in establishing a separate nation.

19. Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party*, 25–26.

20. *Ibid.*, 62, 116; Draper, *American Communism*, 513.

21. Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party*, 115, 86–91.

22. Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–1936* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

industrial and political organization of the United States.”<sup>23</sup> Soviet propaganda also emphasized the eradication of racial prejudice as one of the achievements of Communism. In the 1930s in particular, the Soviets spent a great deal of energy trying to convince black visitors to the Soviet Union and their compatriots at home that the Soviet Union represented not simply a “workers’ paradise” but a paradise for all races.

The claim to be free from Western-style race discrimination was partly true. The Soviet constitutions of 1918 and 1936 declared equality of rights of all citizens.<sup>24</sup> Soviet ethnic and national categorizations did not align with the racialized thinking that prevailed in the United States and Western Europe.<sup>25</sup> The Russian word *chernyi* (black), for example, was often used to refer to non-Slavic peoples such as Chechens, while Africans and blacks were called *afrikantsy* (Africans) or *negry* (Negroes), but there was no category corresponding to “white.”<sup>26</sup> (The Soviet Union had no native population of African descendants, with the exception of a small community in the Abkhazia region.)<sup>27</sup> As Francine Hirsch argues, the Soviets had a concept of race, but the Soviet position was that “social conditions, and not racial differences, determine[d] human development.”<sup>28</sup>

American blacks began to come to the Soviet Union in significant numbers in the 1920s and 1930s, attracted by visions of a society free of racial prejudice and

23. Quoted in *ibid.*, 59.

24. I. P. Tsamerian and S. L. Ronin, *Equality of Rights between Races and Nationalities in the USSR* ([Paris]: UNESCO, [1962]), 27–29.

25. On Soviet concepts of race, nationality, and ethnicity, see the provocative article, Eric D. Weitz, “Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges,” *Slavic Review* 61.1 (2002): 1–29, and the responses by Francine Hirsch, Amir Weiner, and Alaina Lemon.

26. Keshia Fikes and Alaina Lemon, “African Presence in Former Soviet Spaces,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 498.

27. As Allison Blakely has shown, there was nonetheless a history of contact. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was common for black servants to be employed at court and in aristocratic households. In the late imperial period, black immigrants often established successful careers as singers, circus performers, and athletes. George Thomas, an American expatriate, owned a large amusement complex in Moscow; Jimmy Winkfield amassed a small fortune as a jockey. Blacks also came to Russia as visitors. The Shakespearean actor Ira Aldrige, for example, toured Russia to great acclaim and was made an honorary member of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in 1858 (see Blakely, *Russia and the Negro*, 5–25, 39–49). On Soviet portrayals of African diasporas in the USSR, see also Fikes and Lemon, “African Presence in Former Soviet Spaces,” 497–524.

28. Francine Hirsch, “Race without the Practice of Racial Politics,” *Slavic Review* 61.1 (2002): 35.

economic inequality.<sup>29</sup> Such was the attraction of the “Red Mecca” that when a train carrying Langston Hughes and other black “pilgrims” stopped at the border from Finland into the USSR, several of the black passengers got out “to touch their hands to Soviet soil, lift the new earth in their palms, and kiss it.”<sup>30</sup> Most such tourists went for short visits, usually drawn by curiosity about the socialist experiment and inspired by Soviet claims to have eradicated racial prejudice. Some settled there permanently. Several couples in interracial marriages, for example, emigrated to Russia to escape persecution in America.<sup>31</sup> Like other visitors potentially sympathetic to socialism, most blacks, especially those who were famous or influential, were treated very well by the Soviets.<sup>32</sup>

A stream of prominent black intellectuals made the “pilgrimage” to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. The writer Claude McKay became the first such visitor in 1922. The Soviets fêted him as a literary celebrity, publishing his poems and articles on the front pages of newspapers, commissioning him to write a book on American blacks, and appointing him an honorary member of the Moscow Soviet.<sup>33</sup> The poet Langston Hughes, who like McKay was a socialist, came to the Soviet Union in 1932 along with twenty American blacks enlisted to participate in the making of *Black and White*, a Comintern-produced film on race relations in the United States. Although the film was never made, the group was deluged with banquets and publicity, and the great Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein gave a party in their honor.<sup>34</sup> Colonel Hugh Cooper, an American engineer overseeing

29. John Gardner argues that these travelers and their experiences in the USSR bolstered and helped radicalize the struggle for African American rights in the United States (Gardner, “African Americans in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s: The Development of Transcontinental Protest,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 23 [1999]: 190).

30. Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964; orig. ed. 1956), 73.

31. See, for example, the case of interracial couple Jane Emery Newton and Herbert Newton. They were evicted from their apartment because of their marriage. Because her marriage to a black man was considered evidence of mental illness, Jane Newton was brought to court and required to prove her sanity. The Newtons, both radicals, later emigrated to the Soviet Union. See “Daughter of White Banker Is Proved Sane in Chicago,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 29 December 1934, 1.

32. Harrison Salisbury’s introduction to Homer Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1964), x.

33. Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party*, 106–09.

34. The story of *Black and White* is an interesting tale in itself. Hughes recounts that the script, dealing with black workers in Mississippi, was out of touch with the reality of black American life in the South. The Soviets, for their part, were disappointed because the Americans were intellectuals rather than workers; moreover, the Americans, most of whom had no acting experience, could not sing and dance to the Soviets’ satisfaction. The Soviets also preferred uniformly dark-skinned blacks and were disturbed that the skin tones of the



the construction of the huge Dniepr dam, claimed to have used his influence with the Soviet government to have the film canceled; indeed, he was so incensed about Soviet propaganda among African Americans that in 1932 he talked to Vyacheslav Molotov, Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, and received the assurance that no more blacks would be allowed into the country and that the "Negro venture in Russia" was at an end.<sup>35</sup>

Black entertainers found receptive audiences in the USSR. Under the relatively liberal New Economic Policy in the 1920s, the Soviet Union, like Europe, experienced a jazz craze. Groups like the Chocolate Kiddies and Benny Peyton's Jazz Kings, both of which toured the Soviet Union in 1926, were hugely successful.<sup>36</sup> Paul Robeson, the world-famous actor and singer, visited the Soviet Union several times in the mid-1930s. Although he never joined the Communist Party, he revered the Soviet Union as an ideal society, seeing in it the embodiment of complete social and racial equality. In 1937 he enrolled his son in a Moscow public school to provide him with "an environment completely devoid of all prejudice or racial differences."<sup>37</sup> Robeson was enormously popular among Russians, both for his outstanding talents as a singer and for his status as a victim of American racial and ideological persecution.

Black Communists, like Otto Huiswood, Harry Haywood, Otto Hall, George Padmore, and William Patterson, spent years studying and working in Moscow. Haywood came to the Soviet Union in 1926 to study Marxism-Leninism at the

American group varied from light to dark. The film was ultimately dropped, in part because of these difficulties, but mostly because the Soviets decided to tone down their anti-American propaganda in connection with the impending recognition of the USSR by the U.S (see Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander; An Autobiographical Journey* [New York: Rinehart, 1956], 70–99; Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia*, 22–30; Faith Berry, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem* [Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1983], 154–71; " 'Black and White': Film of Negro Struggle," *Moscow Daily News*, 5 July 1932, 3; and the excellent account of the film's genesis and ultimate failure in Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* [New York: W.W. Norton, 2008], 133–48).

35. "Report of Conversation with Colonel Hugh Cooper," George Messersmith, Berlin, to Washington, 30 August 1932, State Department Decimal Files, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland [hereafter SDDF], 861.5017 Living Conditions/519.
36. S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917–1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 54–55, 62.
37. Quoted in Blakely, *Russia and the Negro*, 150. Robeson's brother-in-law, Frank Goode, became a professional wrestler in Soviet carnivals and settled permanently in the Soviet Union; Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia*, ix.

University for the Toilers of the East and stayed until 1930.<sup>38</sup> George Padmore became a prominent figure in the Profintern, the Comintern's trade union component, as secretary of its International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers.<sup>39</sup> Lovett Fort-Whiteman, the Harlem organizer of the American Communist Party and founder of the American Negro Labor Congress, moved to Russia permanently, married a Russian, and became the ideological leader of the American "Negro" colony in Moscow, before falling victim to the purges in 1936.<sup>40</sup>

Although the reactions of these black Americans to the Soviet experiment varied, many were impressed by the lack of institutionalized racism. The freedom to go anywhere and be treated with courtesy was, even for Northern blacks, an overwhelmingly liberating experience. Some visitors noted a tendency to give blacks preferential treatment; in queues, for example, blacks were often led to the head of the line.<sup>41</sup> One black American who spent several years in the Soviet Union recalled only one incident of blatant racism, and it was instigated by white Americans who tried to expel him forcibly from a hotel barbershop in Moscow. The incident ended when the Soviet barbers threw the whites out of the shop with lather still on their faces.<sup>42</sup>

The lack of official racism did not mean that all Russians were free of racial prejudice. African Americans studying at Comintern schools in the late 1920s and early 1930s, despite being given preferential treatment (free room and board, tutors, clothing and travel allowances, and paid vacations), complained about material conditions, such as cafeteria meals that included chicken with feathers still attached. They also complained about Soviet racism, including entries in Soviet dictionaries that translated *negr* (Negro) as "nigger" and "darkey" and stereotypical portrayals of black Americans in Soviet plays. One African student said he had been spat upon in the street and called a "monkey."<sup>43</sup> Such complaints must be juxtaposed against other accounts, such as Harry Haywood's assertion

38. See his autobiography: Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978), especially 148–341.

39. Fort-Whiteman edited its official journal, *The Negro Worker*, lectured at the University for the Toilers of the East, had an office in the Kremlin, and was made a member of the Moscow Soviet (see Blakely, *Russia and the Negro*, 92; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 32–36).

40. Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia*, 77–83; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 153–54.

41. Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia*, 56.

42. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 79.

43. See the account of a 1932 investigation in Woodford McClellan, "Africans and Black Americans in the Comintern Schools, 1925–1934," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26.2 (1993): 371–85.

that in his years in a Comintern school he encountered only one racist incident, when a drunk on a streetcar referred to Haywood and his friends as “black devils.” Russian bystanders promptly seized the man and apologized to their “guests.” Historian Maxim Matusevich concludes that for the most part, the anti-racist rhetoric of the government “did, in fact, penetrate the fabric of Soviet society.”<sup>44</sup> It was foreign whites, especially Americans, Canadians, and Britons, who committed the most serious incidents of racism, leveling verbal insults and physical attacks on their darker-skinned compatriots.<sup>45</sup>

### ROBERT ROBINSON: SOVIET HERO

Robert Robinson was not the only black American industrial worker who came to the Soviet Union during the First Five-Year Plan. Richard Williams, an electrical engineer from New York who came to Magnitogorsk in 1934, and Margaret Glasgow, a textile worker in Moscow, were among the handful of others.<sup>46</sup> Homer Smith took a job as a consultant to the Moscow postal service in 1932 and stayed until 1946.<sup>47</sup> A large group of black agricultural workers was briefly stationed in Uzbekistan, where John Oliver Golden, a black American Communist, established in 1931 an experimental agricultural station for cotton and other crops.<sup>48</sup> Robinson was, however, the only black among the several hundred Americans at the Stalingrad Tractor Factory.<sup>49</sup> He later recalled that his arrival in Stalingrad

44. Maxim Matusevich, “An Exotic Subversive: Africa, Africans and the Soviet Everyday,” *Race and Class* 49 (2008): 64.

45. McClellan, “Africans and Black Americans,” 371–85.

46. Richard Williams is mentioned in Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia*, 208–09. A letter from Margaret Glasgow, entitled “Negro Mother, Now a Shock Worker,” is included in *Sixty Letters: Foreign Workers Write of Their Life and Work in the U.S.S.R.* (Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R., 1936).

47. See his memoirs: Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia*.

48. Most of the black agricultural experts he recruited left at the end of their two-year contracts, but a handful stayed. Golden himself became an instructor at the agricultural institute in Tashkent and was made a member of Tashkent Soviet in recognition of his contributions to the modernization of agricultural production. Yelena Khanga with Susan Jacoby, *Soul to Soul: A Black Russian American Family, 1865–1992* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 71–80, 84–86, 94. Khanga, who worked as a Soviet journalist in the 1980s, is Golden’s granddaughter. See also Andrew Fogelman, “The Unknown Exodus: U.S. Blacks in USSR,” *Chicago Tribune*, 22 June 1990, V, 1f.

49. As Robinson recounts it, his trip to Stalingrad was not a pleasant experience. He traveled to the Soviet Union with a group of about 45 white Americans who had also been hired by the Soviet government. They generally ignored him, trying not to speak to him or sit at the same table with him at meals. When three Americans were assigned to a hotel room with him in Leningrad, they spent all day trying to get another room. The hotel management ignored

on 4 July 1930 caused considerable consternation within the American colony. At meals Robinson was greeted with hostile stares, muttered insults, and curses. On several occasions white Americans told him to leave and threatened to kill him if he did not.<sup>50</sup>

The attack on Robinson came on July 24, three weeks after his arrival. It was described, serendipitously, in a contemporary account by another American worker at Stalingrad, who wrote a letter that was published in the *Detroit News* before the incident had received any publicity in the USSR. The American wrote:

There is a colored fellow in our crowd who just came in. Whoever had the nerve to hire him and send him here had very little brains for you can imagine what a life he will live over here being the only one. Some fellow drunk and all worked up took him on [*sic*]. The fellow grabbed a pail and started to work on him. I did not see much of it but he was doing a good job of it too.<sup>51</sup>

The attacker's name was Lemuel Lewis; another man named Brown was also involved. Describing the incident half a century later in memoirs written with the assistance of a professional writer, Robinson recounted that the two attackers had punched him, and that he had defended himself by biting the neck of one of the white men.<sup>52</sup>

Reporter William Chamberlin, who attended the later trial and spoke to Americans at the plant, heard a different story. Lewis, an Alabaman who was not "markedly anti-Negro," had been teased by white friends that the Soviets were going to make him live with a black man "and make him like it." While walking along the Volga one day, Lewis and Brown encountered Robinson. Feeling defensive about the teasing, Lewis said he would throw Robinson in the river if he did not leave. Robinson refused, and a fight ensued, in which Robinson smashed a pail against Lewis's head and bit his neck. Brown tried to separate them, and

their protests and the Americans finally slept in the room, but they studiously avoided acknowledging Robinson's presence. On the boat that took the group down the Volga to Stalingrad, when Robinson was invited to dance by Russian women, the other Americans sat down, refusing to share the dance floor with him. At Stalingrad the Soviets, by now anticipating difficulties, placed him in a room with a Russian, rather than with other Americans as was customary (Robinson, *Black on Red*, 35–43, 57–58).

50. *Ibid.*, 60–65.

51. "Detroit Worker in Russia Tells of a Life of Woes," *Detroit News*, 13 August 1930, 17.

52. Robinson, *Black on Red*, 68–69.

Lewis was “somewhat severely hurt.”<sup>53</sup> The pre-trial account of the Detroit worker supports Robinson’s version that he was the victim of an unprovoked attack.

Although the Stalingrad police made a perfunctory investigation, the incident might have been allowed to fade into obscurity, with the American attackers left unpunished, if the national daily *Trud* (Labor) had not taken up the story two weeks later and made it a *cause célèbre*. Incidents of racism at the Comintern schools, where white foreign students sometimes attacked black students, were rarely made public, because Soviet authorities were eager to maintain the appearance of harmony.<sup>54</sup> What was unique about the attack on Robinson was that it became a matter of significant public attention.

Only after the national spotlight was turned on Stalingrad did the local police take action to prosecute Lewis and Brown. Throughout August the attack and the trial received almost daily coverage on *Trud*’s front page. Following *Trud*’s lead, other newspapers began to carry the story, though none gave it the prominence it achieved in *Trud*. *Trud*, the official trade-union organ, focused on labor and industrial issues, and probably saw the attack on Robinson as a useful way to foster labor discipline and to provide propaganda for the upcoming Profintern Congress. The incident furnished an excellent pretext to criticize the management of the Stalingrad Tractor Factory, and *Trud* also used the opportunity to throw in a few jabs at other newspapers, which were accused of misunderstanding the significance of the incident.<sup>55</sup>

Coverage of the events in *Trud* and other newspapers reflected Stalinist journalistic conventions of the early 1930s. As Matthew Lenoe describes, Soviet newspapers adopted a shrill tone of exhortation and castigation. As Lenoe writes, “The Soviet press of the 1930s instilled in party members an identity as warrior heroes battling for socialism, presenting them with images of the coming millennium, and promising them that industrialization would make the Soviet state even more great and powerful than the wealthy capitalist democracies.” Newspapers had little deep coverage of news; instead, they were oriented toward the fulfillment of tasks, including raising production. Prose style emphasized the use of

53. Enclosure No. 1 to Despatch no. 7250, Confidential, Riga Legation to Washington, 11 September 1930, SDDF, 361.11/4046.

54. McClellan, “Africans and Black Americans,” 377.

55. See in particular *Trud*, 12 August 1930, 1, which summarized and critiqued other papers’ coverage, with particularly sharp words for the lack of interest shown by the local factory newspaper.

exclamation points, commands, military metaphors, value-laden language, superlatives, and epithets.<sup>56</sup>

The attack on Robinson first came to national attention in *Trud's* August 9 edition. The banner headline was exhortative rather than informative: "We will not tolerate the practices of bourgeois America in the USSR." The article described the attack on Robinson by "a reactionary group of Americans" as a "barbarous, anti-proletarian act."<sup>57</sup> Newspapers consistently described Robinson as a "worker-Negro" (*rabochii negr*) and his attackers as "workers" or "Americans," there being no corresponding label "white" in Russian.<sup>58</sup> The attack itself was described in very brief terms in *Trud's* first article, which merely said that Robinson was "beaten and thrown out of the cafeteria" by a "group" of American workers.<sup>59</sup> In subsequent articles the story became more elaborate: Robinson walked into the cafeteria to have lunch, one article described, but an American from "the South"—a region associated with racial injustice for many Soviet readers—warned him to leave. Robinson refused but was beaten up when he tried to leave. Robinson was portrayed in favorable terms: as a careful worker and a good comrade; the main attacker—now given a name and identifying characteristics—was accused of being a drunkard and a hooligan. The articles emphasized that it was the mere presence of a Negro that white Americans found intolerable.<sup>60</sup> As Robinson later characterized it, the affair became a matter of "good conquering evil."<sup>61</sup>

Contrasting the reactionary mores of capitalism, which pitted race against race and led workers to beat each other up, with the Soviet ethos of egalitarianism, newspaper coverage depicted the racism of the United States as entirely alien to the Soviet Union and to most of the foreign workers who labored in Soviet factories. Noting that the Stalingrad Tractor Factory employed workers of 26 nationalities, including over 300 Americans, *Trud* characterized relations among these workers as "brotherly." Only a handful of "backward" workers, it claimed, failed to understand that the Soviet Union is "the fatherland of all workers,"

56. Matthew Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution, and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 7–19. The quotation appears on 7–8.

57. *Trud*, 9 August 1930, 1.

58. There was, however, one reference to "white chauvinism"; see *Trud*, 29 August 1930, 1.

59. *Trud*, 9 August 1930, 1.

60. *Trud*, 12 August 1930, 1.

61. Robinson, *Black on Red*, 71.

regardless of nationality or race. The article explained that the Soviet Union, in destroying capitalist exploitation, had simultaneously destroyed national and racial inequalities. Emphasizing the attractiveness of the Soviet model, newspapers claimed that some Americans were so impressed that they had already decided not to return to the United States when their contracts expired.<sup>62</sup>

The contrast between the “brotherly” relations that allegedly prevailed in the Soviet Union and the racist pathologies of the United States was visually reinforced by the photographs of black Americans in the Soviet Union that accompanied many of the articles. Jenny Reed, a black American textile worker from Philadelphia and a delegate to the Profintern Congress, was pictured in the column next to *Trud's* first article about the attack. The next day's paper contained a photograph of another black American delegate, James Ford, standing among a group of Moscow factory workers. A photograph on August 23 showed a black American and a Russian, both delegates to the Profintern Congress, shaking hands in “brotherly” fashion. Tapping into a frequent target of Soviet press coverage, *Trud's* summary of the verdict in the trial of Lewis and Brown was juxtaposed with a photograph of two black victims of a lynching in the United States. The clear message was that racists in one country were brought to justice; in the other, racist murder masqueraded as justice.<sup>63</sup>

Thanks to *Trud's* initial coverage, the attack became a staple reference in contemporary speeches. Several delegates to the Fifth Profintern Congress, which was about to open in Moscow, condemned the Stalingrad incident. John Ballam, an American delegate, declared that the attack “clearly illustrated the vile racial prejudices cultivated in the minds of workers by capitalists.” Robinson's attackers, Ballam continued, had committed a terrible crime against the proletariat and had violated the policy of the Soviet Union, where “all racial and national antagonisms have been eliminated” and “dozens of races live and work peacefully together.”<sup>64</sup>

According to *Trud*, the attack at Stalingrad aroused “tremendous indignation” among Soviet workers. Dutifully taking their cue from the agenda being set from above, workers at factory conferences in Moscow passed resolutions deploring the attack and pledging that “the brotherly unity of workers of all nationalities” would not be broken. The workers at one factory adopted a resolution advocating

62. *Trud*, 12 August 1930, 1.

63. *Trud*, 9 August 1930, 1; *Trud*, 10 August 1930; *Trud*, 23 August 1930; *Trud*, 28 August 1930, 1.

64. *Trud*, 10 August 1930, 1.

that the American attackers be expelled from the Soviet Union. As “a sign of solidarity with the Negro revolutionary movement,” they invited Robinson to work at their factory.<sup>65</sup>

The predominant theme in the press coverage was the supposed lack of national and racial differences among workers in the Soviet Union, contrasted with the racism and injustice of American society. “This is not bourgeois America,” declared the headline in *Rabochaia Gazeta*.<sup>66</sup> *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* proclaimed that “all workers are brothers, regardless of the color of their skin.”<sup>67</sup> *Trud* likewise declared that “the U.S.S.R. is the fatherland of black, yellow, and white races,” and went so far as to claim that the incident at Stalingrad was “the only example” of a racially motivated attack “throughout the entire existence of the U.S.S.R.”—and that “it must be the last.”<sup>68</sup>

The incident, according to the press interpretation, demonstrated the need to improve propaganda efforts among foreign workers, some of whom were bringing capitalist modes of thinking to the USSR. Noting that the number of foreign workers in the Soviet Union was growing every year, *Pravda* declared, “[t]hese workers bring with them the traditions of their native countries, but they must be absorbed into the ranks of Soviet workers and all efforts must be made to ensure that they assimilate Communist attitudes towards labor and fellow workers.”<sup>69</sup> *Rabochaia Gazeta* similarly stressed the importance of educational efforts among foreign workers. The newspaper warned that the attack was viewed sympathetically by a handful of “backward foreign workers . . . who have yet to break with the shameful habits of capitalist America.”<sup>70</sup>

The authorities at Stalingrad came in for a great deal of criticism for their lack of zeal. Immediately after the attack, the police arrested both attacker (Lewis) and victim (Robinson), then released them and for over two weeks took no further action, apparently content to let the matter rest until *Trud* began its publicity campaign. *Trud* described the inaction of the police and the procurator's office as

65. *Trud*, 10 August 1930, 1, and 12 August 1930, 1.

66. *Rabochaia Gazeta*, 11 August 1930, 1.

67. *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 19 August 1930, 1.

68. *Trud*, 14 August 1930, 1.

69. *Pravda*, 11 August 1930, 2. *Za industrializatsiuiu* (22 August 1930), in contrast, complained that Soviet workers were unwilling to learn from American experts; Riga Legation to Washington, 11 September 1930, SDDE, 361.11/4046, p. 6.

70. *Rabochaia Gazeta*, 11 August 1930, 1.



“scandalous.”<sup>71</sup> The newspaper sharply criticized the factory committee at Stalingrad for having completely ignored propaganda work among foreign workers. *Trud* noted that American workers had not been invited to participate in factory meetings and that there was a complete lack of educational literature for the Americans.<sup>72</sup> *Trud* found it particularly disturbing that “none of the party or trade union workers at the factory has yet found time even to talk to Comrade Robinson, despite the fact that workers of all countries have taken an interest in his beating.” The Stalingrad city and factory newspapers were likewise sharply criticized for virtually ignoring the incident.<sup>73</sup>

The authorities at Stalingrad took the hint and soon organized their own protests and demonstrations.<sup>74</sup> The standard resolutions condemning the attack and asking for Lewis and Brown to be expelled were passed by various groups and committees. Thousands of workers attended a huge rally at which a dozen speakers denounced the evils of racism. At work Soviet citizens continually interrupted Robinson to express their sympathy. As Robinson recalled many years later, “at the factory everyone—from floor sweepers to the administrative staff—was talking about the incident. They all deplored the attack on me. Many viewed me as a hero . . . I was dazzled by the adulation and attention showered on me.”<sup>75</sup>

The attackers were given what amounted to a show trial, one staged entirely for its didactic purpose. One of the members of the investigatory commission was George Padmore, the Trinidadian head of the Negro Bureau of the Profintern in Moscow.<sup>76</sup> The proceedings, which began in Stalingrad on August 20, were structured to highlight the differences between justice in America and in the Soviet

71. *Trud*, 14 August 1930, 1.

72. *Ibid.*, 13 August 1930, 1.

73. *Ibid.*, 12 August 1930, 1.

74. Although the Soviet press portrayed the plethora of protest meetings and resolutions in Moscow, Stalingrad, and other industrial centers as the spontaneous results of popular indignation among Soviet workers, it is clear that all such actions were carefully organized and directed by the party. This is not to say, though, that the attack did not generate a real sense of outrage among some Soviet people. Many of the letters of support and sympathy that Robinson received from around the country were undoubtedly genuine.

75. Robinson, *Black on Red*, 68–71.

76. James R. Hooker, *Black Revolutionary: George Padmore's Path from Communism to Pan-Africanism* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1967), 35–6.

Union.<sup>77</sup> *Trud* declared that “the entire capitalist system” was on trial. The arbitrary beatings and lynching of blacks in America were contrasted with the swift punishment meted out to racists in the USSR. In his testimony at the trial, Robinson was asked to describe racial violence in America. He said that he had seen many attacks on blacks, including lynchings, and that the American authorities had never attempted to bring the white perpetrators to justice. Another American worker was called on to provide further testimony that attacks on blacks went unpunished in the United States and that “the ruling classes of America encourage murders, beatings, and offenses against black workers.”<sup>78</sup> Lewis, quoted as saying in his defense that “I had no idea that Soviet Russia was the country of the proletariat,” followed by the notation “(!)”, became an object of ridicule.<sup>79</sup> Highlighting the didactic purposes of the trial, the proceedings were broadcast by radio to the living quarters of the tractor factory.<sup>80</sup>

Lewis and Brown were convicted of national chauvinism, a more serious offense than assault and battery, under a statute designed to protect Jewish and other national minorities in the Soviet Union. They were sentenced to two years’ imprisonment, but in consideration of their “background in a capitalist system that promotes racial prejudice,” the sentence was commuted to ten years’ banishment from the “workers’ paradise”—underscoring that banishment from the Soviet Union was itself a punishment. In consideration of Brown’s lesser role in the affair, his sentence was later commuted entirely, and he was allowed to continue working at Stalingrad. (Not surprisingly, this second grant of leniency received minimal coverage in the Soviet press.)<sup>81</sup>

As Robinson recounted later, he found the attention discomfiting and unwelcome. Although he was glad that the attackers had been prosecuted, he realized that he was being used for propaganda purposes by the Soviets, and he was afraid that the publicity would make it harder for him to find work when he returned to

77. Before the trial began, Lewis issued a public apology in which he renounced racial chauvinism and asked the workers of the Soviet Union to forgive his “blatant mistake.” At the trial, however, he tried to defend himself by arguing that the incident had been a simple fight, instigated equally by both parties, and not a racially motivated attack (*Trud*, 20 August 1930, 1; 21 August 1930, 1; 23 August 1930, 1).

78. *Ibid.*, 25 August 1930, 1; see also Chamberlain’s account in Enclosure No. 1 to Despatch no. 7250.

79. *Ibid.*, 31 August 1930, 1.

80. *Ibid.*, 31 August 1930, 1.

81. *Ibid.*, 31 August 1930, 1. I have been unable to find confirmation that Lewis did, in fact, leave the country.

the United States. Nevertheless, at the end of his first year he decided to renew his contract and in subsequent years continued to sign on for additional one-year terms, in part because of the continuing Depression at home. In part, too, as he wrote later, "I felt comfortable here, less pressured than in the United States, more accepted for what I was, a human being whose skin happened to be dark." He also found his work in the Soviet Union challenging and rewarding, and he knew that it would be difficult to find a position in the United States with the same level of responsibility.<sup>82</sup> His value to the Soviets is indicated by the fact that by the mid-1930s, when foreign specialists were no longer in high demand and the few that remained were mostly on ruble contracts, Robinson was able to negotiate contracts that paid partly hard currency.<sup>83</sup>

Although Robinson sensed that the Soviets hoped to groom him as a potential Communist recruit, he refused to be drawn into politics. He liked his work in the Soviet Union, but Communism as a political system held no appeal for him.<sup>84</sup> To his chagrin, however, the Soviets did not give up on their efforts to use him as a propaganda tool. In December 1934, the party nominated him as a candidate for a high-profile honor as a member of the Moscow Soviet (city council), and the workers at the First State Ball Bearing Plant in Moscow, to which he had recently transferred, duly "elected" him. Robinson later recalled that he was "furious" at the unexpected honor. He feared that he would lose his contract if he rejected the position, but to accept it would make him appear to be a Communist sympathizer. In the end, he decided to accept the position, but it was a decision that would come back to haunt him.<sup>85</sup>

Once again Robinson's picture appeared on the front pages of Soviet newspapers. The articles recounting his experiences in the Soviet Union placed special emphasis on the Stalingrad affair. He was praised as a diligent and valuable worker who had found a place to use his talents only in the Soviet Union. Although Robinson was described as "non-party," the articles claimed he was studying the works of Lenin and Stalin.<sup>86</sup>

82. Robinson, *Red on Black*, 62–8.

83. "Report on Robert Nathaniel Robinson," Moscow to Washington, 14 March 1935, SDDF, 800.00B/Robinson, Robert Nathaniel/2, pp. 3–4.

84. A search of the Communist International (Comintern) Archives Project (INCOMKA) at the Library of Congress yielded no results for Robert Robinson (10 October 2008, cited at <http://www.loc.gov/rr/european/comintern/comintern-project.html>).

85. *Ibid.*, 78–9, 95–105.

86. *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 14 December 1934, 2; *Rabochaia Moskva*, 11 December 1934; *Ogonek*, 30 November 1935, 18–19.

### THE VIEW FROM THE UNITED STATES

When Robinson was attacked, the U.S. legation in Riga (the United States had not yet formally recognized the Soviet Union) filed a report on the events—and asked J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI for information on Robinson as a potential subversive.<sup>87</sup> In the mainstream U.S. press, Robinson’s experiences were viewed through the prism of fears of Communism. The attack coincided with hearings before the House of Representatives “Fish Committee” on Communist propaganda. Testifying at the committee hearings, Walter White, a black anti-Communist, declared: “How can Communism fail to make progress among colored people . . . when Negro newspapers broadcast the recent expulsion from Russia of two Americans, not for lynching, but for beating a Negro worker?”<sup>88</sup> Expressing fear of Communist propaganda about racism, the committee’s report concluded, “[a]t every opportunity [the communists attempt] to stir up trouble between the white and negro races. The negroes are made to believe that the communists practice complete racial and social equality . . . [and] it is openly advocated that there must be complete social and racial equality between whites and negroes even to the extent of intermarriage.” The committee disapprovingly cited American Communist Party leader William Foster’s statement that he made “no distinction” between races and believed freedom of choice in marriage to be a fundamental right. The report implied that “agitat[ion] for the abolition of all racial antagonism and discrimination of every kind and character” was in itself deeply threatening to American society.<sup>89</sup>

The Stalingrad attack and trial received varying coverage in the European and American press. The *Baltimore Afro-American* correspondent reported from Paris that the trial was widely discussed in France. He concluded that “capitalist circles see in it a direct bid for the favor of the Negro while Communist and labor circles generally feel that Russia has set an example in good government for the United States since the attackers of the Negro workers at Stalingrad were taught a lesson, while the far more serious crime of lynch murder in the United States always goes

87. Riga Legation to Washington, 11 September 1930, SDDE, 361.11/4046; E. L. Packer to J. Edgar Hoover, 19 August 1930, SDDE, 800.00B Robinson, Robert N./1. The code 800.00B was used for communist subversion.

88. *Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 October 1930, 3.

89. United States Congress, House of Representatives, *Investigation of Communist Propaganda: Hearings before a Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities in the United States of the House of Representatives, Seventy-first Congress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1930–1931), 32–33, excerpt in Clarence T. Starr Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Palo Alto, California.

unpunished.”<sup>90</sup> The Italian fascist newspaper *Popolo d'Italia* commented that “the trial of Lewis represents colossal propaganda in the defense of Negroes of the entire world and especially Negroes in the United States. The trial shows the clear desire of the U.S.S.R. to destroy all racial differences among workers.”<sup>91</sup>

Walter Duranty, Moscow correspondent for the *New York Times*, wrote several articles on the affair. Duranty, an apologist for the brutalities of Stalin's regime, presented Soviet efforts to punish the attackers in sympathetic terms.<sup>92</sup> The *Daily Worker* also covered the story, but without particular enthusiasm. “Race prejudice and discrimination are tactics of the rotten capitalist system” and will be abolished once the workers take power, one article declared.<sup>93</sup> The Stalingrad events, not surprisingly, generated the greatest resonance in the black press. The *Baltimore Afro-American* saw the trial as evidence “that white Soviet Russia is in earnest in her policy of complete economic, social and political equality for workers of all races alike,” and praised the Soviet government for acting “with determination to halt any show of racial prejudice.”<sup>94</sup> The *New York Amsterdam News*, in an editorial titled “Score One for Moscow,” similarly praised the Soviets for their efforts to fight racism.<sup>95</sup> The *Pittsburgh Courier* noted that Russians were “very partial to Negroes” and quoted Robinson as saying that the Soviets are “firmly opposed to color prejudice and to any other injustice against Negroes.”<sup>96</sup>

William Henry Chamberlin, the *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent in the USSR, went to Stalingrad to cover the trial, but the paper ran only one brief article about it.<sup>97</sup> In his 1935 account of life in the Soviet Union, *Russia's Iron Age*, Chamberlin mentioned the trial with a touch of sarcasm. He recalled that

90. “White Americans in Russia Escape Prison Term; Apologize for Jim Crow,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 20 September 1930, 3. I was unable to find more than a brief mention of the trial in *l'Humanité*, the French Communist paper.

91. Quoted in *Trud*, 30 August 1930, 1.

92. “Americans Essay Color Bar in Soviet,” *New York Times*, 9 August 1930; “Soviet Sees 2 Sides in Attack on Negro,” *New York Times*, 13 August 1930; “Soviet Holds 2 Americans,” *New York Times*, 19 August 1930; “Paper Lashes Red Who Scored Negroes,” *New York Times*, 20 August 1930, 6; “Apologizes to Russians,” *New York Times*, 22 August 1930, 4.

93. “Attack on Negro Rouses Soviets,” *Daily Worker*, 16 August 1930, 1.

94. “Russ Workers Won't Stand U.S. Prejudice,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 16 August 1930, 4; “Russia Acts to Halt Racial Prejudice,” *ibid.*, 23 August 1930, 1.

95. *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 August 1930, 4.

96. “Mechanic Who Was Attacked by U.S. Soviets, Tells Story,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 5 September 1931, A3. This story ran when Robinson was on vacation in Paris.

97. *Christian Science Monitor*, 30 August 1930, 3.

“no less than ten amateur prosecutors, of different races and in different languages, held forth on the evil of racial chauvinism as a weapon in the armory of the capitalists against the workers.” Based on his conversations with American workers at the plant, Chamberlin concluded that the trial had strengthened rather than diminished their racism. The comments of a middle-aged Methodist who had been active in a committee formed to aid Lewis underscored the defensiveness Soviet criticism on race produced in many Americans: “It’s been most humiliating for us, as Americans, to hear a lot of furriners [sic] get up and jabber about how our government was no good and how we couldn’t make laws to suit ourselves.”<sup>98</sup>

Robinson’s 1934 election to the Moscow Soviet elicited more unfavorable attention. Shortly after the election, Robinson appeared at the newly opened American Embassy in Moscow on a routine matter. As the Embassy reported, officials used the opportunity to “interrogate” him about the election. Officials concluded that “there seems to be little doubt that he is being groomed to spread Soviet propaganda among the negroes in the United States upon his return.” The Embassy told him that within four months, the “presumption of expatriation” would arise and he would lose his U.S. citizenship.<sup>99</sup> The “presumption of expatriation” was a contentious element of a 1907 law pertaining to naturalized citizens who resided abroad with no bona-fide intention of returning to the United States.<sup>100</sup> Because Robinson at the time had a contract expiring in 1936 and expressed his intention to return to the United States permanently at its end, it appears that the State Department chose a strict-constructionist approach to his case because of his status as a potential “subversive.”

The American press also took note of Robinson’s election. Although some reactions were neutral, others were sharply critical.<sup>101</sup> With the Depression now more deeply entrenched and the Soviet Union’s industrialization campaign showing signs of success, many white Americans were inclined to be even more nervous about Communist propaganda. Despite the fact that black Americans

98. William Henry Chamberlin, *Russia’s Iron Age* (London: Duckworth, 1935), 362–64.

99. “Report on Robert Nathaniel Robinson.”

100. United States Congress, *Naturalization of Individuals by Special Acts of Congress: Hearings Before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, House of Representatives, Sixty-seventh Congress, First Session on H.J. Res. 79* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1921), 211.

101. For neutral-to-favorable reports, see “U.S. Youth is Soviet Leader,” *Chicago Defender*, 15 December 1934, 1; “U.S. Negro Elected with Stalin to the City Council of Moscow,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, 12 December 1934, in SDDF 861.00/11582; “Detroit Negro Named Deputy to Moscow Soviet,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12 December 1934, 1.

remained aloof from Communism, Soviet efforts “to complicate the social problem in America”—as one concerned white American delicately put it—fed into the anxieties of many white Americans who feared a “red-black” alliance.<sup>102</sup> A sarcastic piece in *Time* magazine vividly illustrates the combination of anxiety and hostility Communist propaganda about race relations evoked in some Americans. “Negroes, so every Soviet child is taught, are the Black Hopes of Communism in the U.S.,” the piece began. “Sooner or later, if properly primed by Moscow, they will ‘arise and slash [their] thralldom’s chains’, as the Soviet anthem puts it.” Scoffing at the lack of overt racism in the Soviet Union, the article sneered that “nowhere else in the world is a Negro so pampered as in Russia.” The article noted that Robinson—“that coal-black protégé of Joseph Stalin”—was “famed because of the Communist propaganda trial put on in his honor in 1930 at Stalingrad.” It implicitly condoned the original Stalingrad attack on Robinson, describing it in the following terms: “Two white U.S. machinists objected violently to being lumped with a ‘nigger’ at meals.” His election to the Moscow Soviet, the article suggested, was another piece of “elegant propaganda” designed to incite American blacks to rebellion. Mocking his election, the caption under a photograph of Robinson read: “He will sit with a dead man and a jailbird,” referring to the concurrent election of a jailed German communist and a deceased Soviet hero.<sup>103</sup>

Robinson’s standing in the eyes of many white Americans slipped further in 1935 when he received an award from the Soviet government for technical achievement. According to Robinson’s account, the new round of publicity in the Soviet Union and the United States prompted Republican Congressman Harold Knutson from Minnesota to introduce a bill making it unlawful for American citizens to accept awards or titles from foreign governments; anyone convicted of accepting such an award would have his or her citizenship suspended for two years. Knutson did indeed introduce such a bill in February 1935. The timing does suggest a connection to Robinson’s award, but the bill never came to a vote.<sup>104</sup>

102. Comments of Eugene Szepesi, 13 May 1931, SDDE, Russia/The Soviet Union 861.5017–Living Conditions/255.

103. Robinson, *Black on Red*, 107; *Time*, 24 December 1934, 19. See also “Negro Named Moscow Deputy,” *New York Times*, 12 December 1934, 18.

104. Harold Knutson’s papers contain a copy of the bill, but no supplementary information. Harold Knutson Congressional Files, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, Minnesota, Bill Files, HR 6024. Knutson gave no speech in Congress in support of the bill; *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the First Session of the 74th Congress of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1935), vol. 69, pt. 2, 2358.

The State Department refused to renew his passport unless he returned to the United States, but Robinson was unwilling to leave, fearing that he would be blackballed because of his unfavorable reputation in the United States, and ultimately decided to accept Soviet citizenship, unwisely reassured by Soviet promises that he could still return to the United States at a later time. In fact, Robinson was forced to stay in the Soviet Union until 1973, when he was finally able to escape by getting permission to take a vacation in Uganda. He eventually regained his U.S. citizenship and settled in Virginia.<sup>105</sup>

Robert Robinson's experience in Stalinist Russia illustrates many of the complexities of the relationship between Communism and black Americans in general. Robinson's difficulties in the United States—his fear of losing his job at the beginning of the Depression and the discriminatory treatment he was subjected to—contrasted with the cordial and respectful welcome he received in the Soviet Union, where he was promoted, given the opportunity to pursue higher education, and rewarded for his technical achievements. His status as an oppressed worker who had come to the Soviet Union to escape economic troubles and racial discrimination in America made him a powerful propaganda symbol. The Stalin-grad beating and the honors later bestowed on him provided excellent opportunities for the Soviet regime to propagandize among its own citizens and among black Americans about the benefits of Communism.

The propaganda, however, was not very effective in achieving its main goal: converting African Americans to Communism. Many blacks admired the Soviet Union's commitment to racial equality and took great interest in the Soviet experiment, and some found it expedient on occasion to use the "red menace" as a means of extracting political and social gains—what one historian describes as "you better give the Negro his rights or he will go Bolshevik." Yet their admiration and interest rarely extended to concrete support. Most blacks felt that Communism had little relevance to the political and social problems they faced in America.<sup>106</sup> They wanted what Robert Robinson wanted: a decent job and freedom from discrimination. Robinson appeared to have found these in the Soviet Union, but eventually he became profoundly disillusioned with Soviet communism. By then, though, it was too late to leave.

105. Robinson began to try to leave in earnest after World War II, but Soviet authorities did not give him permission to travel until 1973 (Robinson, *Black on Red*, 107–12, 251, 365–427).

106. Mark I. Solomon, "Red and Black: Negroes and Communism, 1929–1932" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1972), 525–60.