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Black Diasporic Memories in the Soviet Union

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Black Diasporic Memories in the Soviet Union

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
Of Bard College

by
Davon Michael Blanks

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2016

O my body, always make me a man who questions!

Frantz Fanon

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Introduction

“To contribute to new knowledge and to add new significance, the narrator must both acknowledge and contradict the power embedded in previous understandings”

- Michel-Rolph Trouillot

In the spring semester of my freshmen year, randomly looking through the bookshelves in the Stevison Library at Bard College, I eventually came across a text titled *Russia and the Negro (1986)* by Allison Blakely. While students who come across African Diaspora Studies by studying various Black communities residing in Western Europe and the Americas, Blakely's book was the first text that initiated my curiosity of this discipline. It was an intriguing text because of the distinctive way it examined the Black experience in Imperial and Soviet Russia. The publication provided personal accounts from prominent Black figures such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson who all stated that Soviet Russia truly lacked a racist consciousness, for they treated them with humane respect. Allison Blakely informs that before the creation of the Soviet Union, Imperial Russia, in contrast to other European nations, lacked a racist ideology that would be used to justifying the enslavement of Black people and the colonization of African states. To read this was rather compelling because I expected that during the first half of the twentieth century, Black people across the Atlantic would have faced some form of racism. However, questions did also arise in my mind: Why haven't I heard about Black-Soviet relationships before?

During the twentieth century, the dominant depiction of the Black experience is that of disenfranchisement, exploitation, feelings of racial inferiority, and various forms of racial violence. In the words of W.E.B. Du Bois, the problem of the twentieth century was the color line. However, it is my belief that inside the color-line, the black body is a nexus of the white imagination and capitalism. In a racialized society in order to achieve an actual sense of upward

mobility one must paradoxically, from the words of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks*, become white. Fanon implies that in order to be recognized one must appeal to the conceptual characteristics of what is deemed white in order to be acknowledged as a human being. The problem with this choice is that no matter what, if the person has a black body, then the sense of racial alienation will never be eradicated unless the society that governs the racial norms is itself eradicated. This then leads to another question: Is there a third option, one perhaps that is beyond the color line?

From a historical standpoint, it seemed that the third option was the Soviet Union. Black Diasporic people, a term that is meant to describe Black people who traveled to various continents, believed that the Soviet Union provided a model to an alternative way of life. When they return to their native countries and were asked about their Soviet experience, a common response were feelings of being recognized as a human being. However, the relationship between Black Americans and Soviet citizens have been understudied. Why may that be the case? The emergence of the Cold War played an important role in blurring the distinctions between social justice and communism within Western and colonial countries, but most notably the United States. This political combination projected in a geopolitical space forced Black political figures to either fight for social justice within national bounds to be respected as an American ally, or for social justice within international bounds to be deemed as a Soviet ally. Those who advocated for the latter were more than likely to be ostracized in American society.

This moral and political predicament was why I garnered an interest in looking into the lives of Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois during the post-World War I and Cold War era. Chapter one, provides an analysis of Robeson's and Du Bois' political careers in the mid to late

twentieth century. My focus is to understand why the legacy of the older Du Bois is controversial, and why Robeson's legacy is little to unknown in the present.

Although I do find Black-Soviet relations very interesting, I am aware of the historic social and political problems in the Soviet Union that figures such as Du Bois and Robeson did not give attention to in public spaces. However, through Allison Blakely's book, I came across Robert Robinson who wrote *Black on Red: My 44 years in the Soviet Union (1988)*. It is one of the first texts I was introduced to that gave a negative portrayal of the Soviet Union. Robinson not only regretted his experience living in the Soviet Union, but he was not able to express his dissent until he was finally able to leave the state. Therefore, chapter two examines Robert Robinson's claims to Soviet Racism and the various reasons as to why he lived in the Soviet Union for nearly four decades.

When the Cold War is placed in the context of Black people's involvement, a different and slightly overlooked narrative emerges. This creates an objective that seeks to unravel the silence embedded in this narrative of the Cold War and Black-Soviet relations.

Chapter 1: Reconstructing a Black Radical Legacy

“My career did not end with Booker T. Washington, and if, therefore, you are still working on those comparative biographies I hope you will not either over-stress that earlier part of my career or forget that latter part. There seem to be a considerable number of persons who think that I died when Washington did, which is an exaggeration.”

W.E.B Du Bois

“Robeson’s story, well known to people over 50, vaguely familiar to people in their 40s and 30s, is all but unknown to most of those younger.”

Peter Applebome

Introduction

Four years after the death and burial of W.E.B Du Bois in Ghana, Walter Wilson, a real estate broker and former labor organizer, had an interest in buying the land where Du Bois grew up during his childhood and adolescent years. Wilson was able to finalize the purchase when he teamed up with Edmund W. Gordon, an African American scholar and civil rights activist who knew Du Bois in Brooklyn during the 1950s¹. Soon after they decided to create the W.E.B Du Bois Memorial Committee with the aim of developing the land into either a state or national memorial park.² During this process, Wilson and Gordon did not expect much difficulty. The memorial project received support from prominent Black national figures such as Harry Belafonte, Norman Rockwell, Julian Bond, Sidney Poiter, and the project was endorsed by the Berkshire County Historical Society.

To Wilson’s and Gordon’s puzzlement, the memorial project received strong opposition. Some Great Barrington residents, members of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), members from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and two local weekly newspaper were vocal on their disapproval to memorializing Du Bois. Although the opposition was never explicit about the debate’s concern of race, Wilson believed that their reasoning was a mask which covered their

¹ Amy Bass, *Those about Him Remained Silent: The Battle over W.E.B Du Bois* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 57

² Ibid, The majority of my citations on the W.E.B Du Bois memorial site will be from Amy Bass’s book.

racial bigotry.³ In fact, the New York Times believed that the root behind the controversy surrounding Du Bois' memorial project was racial prejudice: "Although no one talks about it openly, some residents are said to fear an influx of Negro visitors to the [proposed memorial] park".⁴ While that may seem to be a case, what the protesters were most concern about was their belief that was Du Bois a traitor to the United States. Residents had vivid memories of Du Bois registering himself as a member of the Communist Party, and for allegedly renouncing his U.S. citizenship to live in Ghana.

The Du Bois's memorial debate between the opposition and Wilson and his supporters continued until the opposition's was undermined due to an increase of anti-Vietnam war protests, and the American public withdrawing itself from hysterical anticommunist rhetoric.⁵ In 1979, Du Bois childhood home was finally recognized as a National Historical Landmark. However, many local residents in Great Barrington continued to debate about how to frame Du Bois' legacy as they struggled to reconcile and understand the relationship between Du Bois accomplishments during the early twentieth century civil rights era, and his later political leanings.⁶

One year before the Du Bois's memorial was finally given approval, the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre open up Phillip Dean's play "Paul Robeson," with James Earl Jones as the starring role in 1978. Dean stated that the play was meant to be a tribute to Robeson's legacy. Because Du Bois memorial site garnered opposition from people who believed that he was a communist sympathizer, Mr. Dean and his producers worried that they would receive the same response. The show did received backlash, however not because of Robeson's relationship with the Soviet Union. Instead, the show received, from Dean's surprised, sharp criticism by a group known as

³ *ibid*,75

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*, 109

⁶ *ibid*, 152

the National Ad-Hoc Committee to End the Crimes against Paul Robeson that was composed of well-known Black American figures.

Before the premiere of the Paul Robeson play, the group published a two page advertisement in *Variety* magazine criticizing the way Paul Robeson is characterized. Fifty-six well known Black figures signed the statement which included James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, Julian Bond, Gwendolyn Brooks, and civil rights leader Coretta Scott King. The ad argued that Robeson's lifelong commitment to fighting for racial equality and human rights through his art and activism was not truly reflected on the play. Despite the fact that it was later learned that most of the signers have not seen the production nor read the *final* script, they stated that they were protesting out of principle. Furthermore, the petition did not implicitly request the people to boycott the show, but eventually they were protesters outside the Lunt-Fontanne Theater.⁷

Dean responded by calling the signers of the petitions "the House Un-Black Activities Committee," a reference to the committee that Paul Robeson faced during the McCarthy era. Dean also received support from thirty- three writers, which included Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, and Ed Bullins who asserted that it was Dean's artistic right to depicted a national figure without cultural and political pressure.⁸ In the end, the play had a three-month run, and it was revived in 1988 and 1995. However, the negative response that Dean received is a contributing factor as to why he never produced or published another play.⁹

⁷ Matt Schudel, *Phillip Hayes Dean dies; playwright of 'Paul Robeson' was 83* [online], cited 30 April 2016 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/phillip-hayes-dean-playwright-of-paul-robeson-dies-at-83/2014/04/19/153a327a-c662-11e3-8b9a-8e0977a24aeb_story.html)

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Bruce Weber, *Phillip Hayes Dean, the Playwright of Divisive 'Paul Robeson,' Dies at 83* [online] cited 30 April 2016 (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/23/arts/phillip-hayes-dean-playwright-of-paul-robeson-dies-at-83.html?_r=1)

What both of these events have in common is the role that the polarizing response had in creating a tribute towards W.E.B. Du Bois' and Paul Robeson's legacy. When we look into the writings on Robeson and Du Bois throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, it is apparent that the recent public memories of them played a role in garnering controversy towards the memorial site and the play. However, when we fast forward to the present, there is more emphasis on neglecting and silencing certain aspects of Du Bois and Robeson's legacy than creating a discourse that unravels the controversy behind their recent pasts.

When we analyze the dominant narratives of W.E.B Du Bois's legacy, there is much emphasis in observing his contributions in the early twentieth century. Although it is important to consider his publication of *The Soul of the Black Folk* (1903), his position as the co-founder of the NAACP, and rivalry against Booker T. Washington, it is also important to consider why Du Bois stated that his legacy should not be confined in the early twentieth century. After all, he did not pass away the same day as Booker T. Washington.

Unlike Du Bois, Paul Robeson was the most well known Black American of his time. Robeson was not only recognized as a Black celebrity, but he was also known for mobilizing his popularity as a political tool to fight against racial discrimination and violence witnessed in the United States and internationally. When looking into Robeson's life, it is difficult to categorize him because he was a renaissance man: He was a writer, a stage actor, a scholar, a lawyer, a singer, an athlete, and an activist. However, few people today are able to name Paul Robeson's accomplishments in contrast to other Black historic figures like W.E.B Du Bois himself.

Robeson is little to unknown among people below the age of 50. His son, Paul Robeson Jr. argued that "[Robeson's] entire record of achievement has been eradicated in the attempt to

make Paul Robeson a non-person”¹⁰. Robeson’s music, plays, and his access to public media was at a severe decline during the 1950s Red Scare, leaving him in a state of deep disappointment. While the U.S. Cold War political climate gradually influence Robeson to remove himself from the public light, the same political climate also had a similar negative impact on Du Bois. The treatment that Du Bois received by the U.S. government, and the lack of support from his Black colleagues, left him in a state of disillusionment. It also motivated Du Bois to register as a member of the Communist Party.

What are the reasons behind forgetting Du Bois’s contributions after the 1920s, and detaching Robeson’s legacy from today’s national memory? In his book *Black and Red* (1985) Gerald Horne argued that what many historians seemed to neglect was that the 1950s political climate was able to combine anti-communism with anti-black racism¹¹. In other words, when a general understanding of Cold War History is given, what seems to be neglected is how anti-communist rhetoric, as witnessed throughout the second Red Scare era, was able to diverge attention from anti-black racism through an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist lens. During the Red Scare era, Du Bois and Robeson were activist intellectuals with unique talents for writing, speaking, and other political activities. However, this part of their legacy is distorted due to the lack of analysis on their sociopolitical positions during the McCarthy era.

Because of the way Du Bois and Robeson’s legacy are articulated within dominant Cold War narratives, what has also been historically overlooked are their travels to the Soviet Union. Du Bois and Paul Robeson understood the importance of traveling internationally to not only reveal the racial problems in America, but to also encountered the racial climate in other countries.

¹⁰ Paul Robeson Jr., “Cold War Constraints on African Americans’ Demands for Freedom,” in *The Price of Dissent: Testimonies to Political Repression in America*, ed. Dub Schultz and Ruth Schultz, 139. CA: University of California Press, 2001

¹¹ Gerald Horne, *Black on Red: W.E.B Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944- 1963*. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1986), 1-10

They were one of the many Black Americans to experience the Soviet life, and it had an major impact on their life. Their first encountered in the Soviet Union was so strong that they chose it as “the closet representation of their political idealism”¹². Although Du Bois and Paul Robeson traveled to the Soviet Union extensively between the 1920s and the 1960s, historians have not fully examined their experiences in the Soviet Union, and how it motivated them to create new projects center racial equality.

Building off from the works Gerald Horne, Kate Baldwin, and Von Eschen, I argued that Robeson’ and Du Bois’s first experience traveling to the Soviet Union radically shifted their understanding on the interdependency between race, class, colonialism, and imperialism within the geopolitical landscape. They adapted this political framework as they believed it would help them achieve racial equality and eradicate inequalities throughout all colonial nations. However, their new political framework proved to be incompatible with the Cold War political climate in the United States. Despite the political realities, Du Bois and Robeson resisted pressures to change their political frameworks, and as a result were left in a state of moral and political outrage after being ostracized by the McCarthy trials.

This chapter will explore these specific components of Robeson’s and Du Bois’s life: (1) their experience traveling in the Soviet Union and how it helped them reevaluate their political agendas (2) the political repression that Du Bois and Robeson confronted during the McCarthy era (3) their response to the oppression that took place in the Soviet Union and, finally, (4) how their later actions affected how their legacies are interpreted within dominant narratives. Through this analysis, it is my hope that it will be easier to identify the reasons behind the silences and negligence of Du Bois and Robeson radical past.

¹² Murali Balaji, *The Professor and the Pupil: The Politics of W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson*, (New York: Nation Books, 2007), xvii

W.E.B Du Bois' first experience in the Soviet Union

Before Du Bois traveled to the Soviet state, he was making history and setting accomplishments in a thirty year span. He was the first Black American to get a PhD from Harvard University. Soon after Du Bois became known for publishing classics such as *The Philadelphia Negro (1899)* *The Souls of Black Folk (1903)*, and being the co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Du Bois rivalry with Booker T. Washington also lead to the development of his Talented Tenth philosophy. It advocated that in order to become a leader and uplift the Black masses, that Blacks obtain a liberal education that would provide them the conceptual tools needed to help change the socioeconomic conditions of Black Americans. Du Bois would eventually reevaluate the talented tenth philosophy when he expressed his curiosity about a new nation in the eastern hemisphere known as the Soviet Union.

After the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War, Du Bois heard news about the Soviet experiment and Bolshevism. Du Bois admired and was interested on the news surrounding the Soviet nation. However, he was skeptical that Bolshevik politics would gradually transform into communism, and he expressed that many news outlets detailing the impact and significance of the Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War was nothing more than "wartime propaganda." It was difficult for Du Bois to find credible news sources. These contributed factors caused Du Bois to withhold his judgment on Soviet Russia.

What contributed to Du Bois deciding to travel to the Soviet Union was the people he either interacted with or admired. One example is interaction with Claude McKay, a Jamaican American writer and poet. At the time Claude McKay became famous for writing a poem titled "If We Must Die," which urged Black people to resistant to the racial violence inflicted up on

them. Later in his career he becomes known for publishing books such as *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1928). But before McKay's imagination allowed the creation of these magnificent literary works, another accomplishment of his was being one of the first Black Americans to travel to the U.S.S.R. After landing on Soviet soil in 1923, McKay was met with positive reception among the Soviet citizens. Considering the racial climate of that time in many western countries and their colonial territories, where many Black citizens experience overt racism, McKay was surprised that the Soviet people gave him humane affection. McKay's experience in the U.S.S.R. radically altered his view on race relations when he return back to the United States in fall of 1923.

Du Bois was aware that McKay had traveled to the Soviet Union, and invited him to write about his experience in *The Crisis* in 1923.¹³ One of the articles that McKay wrote on his Soviet experience was an article titled *Soviet Russia and the Negro*. In the article he articulates his experience as one where he lost his sense of "self-consciousness," and it being replace with an awareness that he, to the Soviet people, is a symbol and representation "of the great American Negro group" that have suffered due to imperialism and racism. This positive aspect of his Soviet experience made him realize that there is an ideal space where racial alienation is non-existent, and what is substituted is an "international brotherhood" that is united to fight for oppressed people throughout the world. He states that what he saw was Soviet propaganda, then he proud to say that he is a propagandist. While Du Bois was impressed with McKay's articles, he still remained skeptical because of other newspaper stories circulating about Soviet Russia.¹⁴

¹³ Claude McKay, "Soviet Russia and the Negro," *African American Poetry*, 1923, http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/mckay/russia.htm

¹⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Russia and America: An Interpretation*, in the *W.E.B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312)*(Massachusetts, MA: Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries), 15

At the 1921 and 1923 Pan African Conferences, which were both held in London, Du Bois encountered several African delegates that mentioned many of the new developments taking place in the Soviet Union¹⁵. What seem to finally pushed Du Bois to decide on traveling to Soviet Russia was, according to Joy Gleason Carew¹⁶, a letter that he received from James C. Jackson in 1924, as it is stated:

The letter comes from a village deep in the heart of Russia. I am an American Negro, a native of the South, here in Russia. I am an American Negro, a native of the South, here in Russia making a study of social conditions. The above named village is the seat of the summer colony of the University of the Toilers of the East [KUTVA], located at Moscow. I have been invited from Moscow to this colony as a guest. One must visit Russia to understand and appreciate the many beautiful social developments... There is a perfect spirit of internationalism here... Here in Russia the desire for information concerning the Negro is fervent. There is no race of which knowledge is sought with such eagerness as of the Negro. I am kept busy writing articles for newspapers and magazines both in Russia and Ukrainia [the Ukraine] and giving lectures... I have been much pleased to know that your little book, "The Negro," and Rene Maran's novel, "Batoula" have been much read in student circles here.¹⁷

In 1926, Du Bois was able to obtain the funds needed from a couple who wanted Du Bois "to make up his mind" on the Soviet experiment, and even accepted Du Bois suggestion of being "free to examine conditions [in the Soviet Union] and come to [his] own conclusions."¹⁸

When he arrived to the Soviet Union in 1926, the first thing he noticed was the negative impact that World War I and the Russian Civil War had on the Russian economy. He encountered homeless people asking for money, children who weren't well kept, and observed long lines of people waiting to buy a loaf of bread. Although Du Bois saw poverty at many areas of his travels, he also noticed that there was enthusiasm in the air among the Soviet people. Du

¹⁵ Joy Gleason Crew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 50

¹⁶ *ibid*, 50

¹⁷ W.E.B Du Bois, *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois, Volume 1*, edited by Hubert Aptheker (Amherst, MA; University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 289

¹⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Russia and America: An Interpretation*, 16-17

Bois was oblivious to Soviet internal politics, but it didn't stop him from observing that the economy was centered "on what the common man *needed*"¹⁹.

For Du Bois to see that economic progress was taking place in Soviet Russia, and not have any sense of racial alienation was an eye opening experience for him. His experience motivated him to write this: "I stand in astonishment and wonder at the revelation of Russia that has come to me. I may be partially deceived and half- informed, but if what I have seen with my eyes and heard with my ears in Russia is Bolshevism, I am a Bolshevik"²⁰. Although Du Bois implicitly admits that he is not aware of how life is in the Soviet Union, his statement is only a reflection of what he was able to witness in the Soviet state.

Du Bois stayed in Soviet Russia for about two months, visiting Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, and other sites in the Soviet Union. When he return to the United States, Du Bois wrote a couple of articles detailing his experience. In one of the articles, Du Bois praised the Soviet citizens for their economic production, and how their role in developing the Soviet nation will eventually prove to be "of fateful importance to the future civilization."²¹

What makes Du Bois experience even more significant is that, for the first time, he truly felt "comfortable and inconspicuous." In the Soviet Union, he felt visible as he was welcomed by the Soviet people as a human being. From his experience, he learn that a double consciousness' lens is incompatible with Soviet reality in contrast to his other experiences at other western countries:

I know countries where race and color prejudice show slight manifestations, but no country where race and color prejudice seems so absolutely absent. In Paris, I attract some attention; in London I meet elaborate blankness; anywhere in America I would get anything from curiosity to insult. In Moscow, I pass

¹⁹ Balaji, Professor and the Pupil, 33

²⁰ Du Bois, Russia and America, 19

²¹ W.E.B Du Bois, *Judging Russia in The Crisis*. 33, no. 4 (FEB 1927), 189

unheeded. Russians quite naturally ask me for information; women sit beside me quite confidentially and consciously.²²

Encountering this experience and realizing what it is like to be treated as a human being, Du Bois began to reevaluate his understanding on how to combat racism back in the United States.

Paul Robeson's experience in the Soviet Union

While Du Bois can be labeled as an intellectual who was also an activist and journalist, it is very difficult to put a label on Paul Robeson. He was an athlete, a singer, an actor, an activist, an intellectual, and one of the most well-known Black figures in the United States of his time. However, what pushed Robeson into new celebrity heights was his time spent in the Soviet Union. Paul Robeson traveled to the Soviet Union seven times, between the years of 1934 and 1961, but it was Robeson's first experience in the Soviet Union that motivated him to further advocate for racial and socioeconomic equality.

Paul Robeson had heard news surrounding the new Soviet nation. It is very likely that he read of Du Bois' and McKay's Soviet experiences from the *Crisis* magazine in the 1920s. Soon Robeson found himself invited to the Soviet Union by famous Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. Although Paul Robeson didn't know Eisenstein at first, through English journalist Marie Seton (a close friend of Paul and Essie Robeson) acting as the messenger, Robeson received a letter from Eisenstein:

I never had an opportunity: "I never had an opportunity to meet you and I was allways [sic] sorry of it because you are one of the personalities I allways [sic] liked without knowing them personally... [I am] extremely pleased to hear from Mary [sic] that you get really interested in our country."²³

²² W.E.B Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B DuBois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1991) , 39-40

²³ Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1988), 182

Robeson was hesitant at first, but his curiosity of the Soviet state was strong. On December 20, 1934, Paul and Essie Robeson, who were also accompanied with Marie Seton, decided to travel to Soviet Russia from London.²⁴

Marie Seton, Paul, and Essie Robeson had to first go through Nazi Germany to arrive in the Soviet state. Their brief experience in Germany proved to be hazardous. While at the train station, Paul Robeson and Marie Seton faced the Nazi storm troops who thought that Seton was white.²⁵ Paul Robeson noticed the anger and hatred coming from the troop's eyes. It reminded him of a lynching mob. Robeson told a reporter, years after the encounter, that after "[he] took a step forward, they backed off. They made it to the train safely, but this brief experience was traumatizing for Paul Robeson as it made him realize the long-term and devastating impact of Fascism. Marie Seton, recalling that incident, wrote her observation of Paul Robeson soon afterwards: "For a long time after the train moved out of Berlin... Paul set hunched in the corner of the compartment staring out into darkness."²⁶

When he finally arrived in the Soviet Union, it turned out that his experience starkly contrasted to what he experienced in Nazi Germany. Robeson also took some time to himself to witness the daily Soviet life. He was shocked to see that the Soviet people did not fear him and were enthusiastic with his ability to speak Russian. "Here, for the first time in my life I walk in full human dignity," he said to Sergei. "You cannot imagine what that means to me as a Negro."²⁷ He was not given hateful stares as he encountered in the Nazi Germany, but instead encountered people who treated him with open arms. This contrasting experience had a profound impact on Robeson, and it also gave Robeson a significant impression of the Soviet nation and its citizens.

²⁴ Ibid, 185

²⁵ *Paul Robeson Here I Stand*, DVD, directed by St. Clair Bourne (1999; Colorado Springs, CO, Winstar Studios, 1999)

²⁶

²⁷ Paul Robeson Jr., *Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898-1939*, (New York, NY: Wiley, 2001), 221

What made Robeson's first trip to the Soviet Union significant was that it was the polar opposite to Nazi Germany. The two political systems, communism and fascism, were firmly embedded in Paul Robeson's psyche as they symbolically represented good vs. evil. What made Robeson hugely popular among Soviet citizens was his ability to transcend cultural boundaries through his performances. This encounter influenced him to finally engage with politics by explicitly connecting his art with political aspirations. To realize this objective, Robeson decided to save enough money from his performances to place himself in financial stability and invest his time in political activity throughout the world. Also, what Paul Robeson and Eslanda Robeson experienced in the Soviet Union motivated them to enroll their son to the Soviet Model School. In a 1957 newspaper Paul Robeson reflects on his first encounter and observe the Soviet life: "In the Soviet Union I felt like a person for the first time... I visited many schools, watched the pupils and saw in their eyes that the children... are taught a very important thing: that it is necessary to treat people equally, regardless of their skin color."²⁸

Unlike W.E.B Du Bois, who was oblivious to the political climate in the USSR during the 1920s and 1930s, because of their son, Paul Robeson Jr., who was enrolled in a Soviet school, Paul Robeson and Eslanda Robeson had insider information to what was happening in Soviet Russia. Although Paul Robeson Jr. stated that though he was ten years old when the purges took place, he was able to receive a great deal of information. Many of Robeson Jr's friends lost family members as they simply vanished, and were eventually denounced as "enemy of the people." When Paul Robeson Jr. asked his father if the executions were justified, he responded that they, as foreigners, are not in a position to judge and only the Russians are able to.²⁹ Furthermore, when Paul Robeson Jr. asked his father why he doesn't speak out on Soviet crimes,

²⁸ Duberman, 185

²⁹ Paul Robeson Jr., *Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898-1939*, 290

Paul Robeson responded with this statement: “(S)ometimes... great injustices may be inflicted on the minority when the majority is in a pursuit of a great and just cause”.³⁰ Although the purges killed many innocent Soviet officials, members of the military, and Soviet citizens, in the United States Black Americans experience racial violence by white mobs- for example, during the “Red Summer” of 1919.³¹ In a documentary detailing Paul Robeson’s life, his son stated that his father lived in a world of relative evils, and had to choose which one had to be prioritized.³²

This conversation between Robeson and his son is a powerful highlight not just on Robeson’s politics, but also his morals. Despite the increasing evidence that reveal horrifying crimes by Stalin and his colleagues, Paul Robeson illustrates his full commitment to not question nor express his concerns for the Soviet state publicly. Although the Robeson family continued to support the Soviet Union publicly, it did not stop them from taking a precaution on what was happening in the Soviet state. They decided to transfer Paul Robeson Jr. to a school in London known for having children from Soviet diplomats. Robeson Jr. stated that his uncle John left the Soviet Union as he sensed the purges were expanding throughout the state.³³ They also helped Eslanda Robeson’s brother Frank escape from the country as the purges were becoming more apparent. Paul Robeson never spoke about the purges in public due to his belief that his statements would benefit right wing politicians and groups back in the United States.³⁴

After his first exposure to the Soviet state, in 1934 Robeson soon went to Spain during its civil war in order to perform in solidarity for those who were fighting fascism. Paul Robeson’s experience there firmly consolidated his political aspirations. When Paul Robeson returned back to the United States after staying nearly ten years in England, as he took part in various of left-

³⁰ Ibid, 305-306

³¹ Ibid, 289

³² *Paul Robeson Here I Stand*

³³ Paul Robeson Jr., 281

³⁴ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 220-221

led organizations and movements, and continuing on his theatrical performances, he quickly became the most popular Black American citizen.³⁵

Du Bois vs the U.S. Government during the Red Scare Era

The voice of Du Bois and Robeson' in Black and U.S. political spaces gradually declined as the emergence of the Cold War shifted the focus on combating racism as an international issue to a domestic/American issue. Du Bois and Robeson resistance to changing their political objectives caused them to be categorized as communist dupes. When examining their life during the 1950s, we must consider the role the F.B.I and other government agencies had during the Red Scare.

The idea of a 'communist dupe' was developed by F.B.I's first director, John Edgar Hoover. Hoover's objective throughout his tenure with the F.B.I was to eradicate Communism at all cost. However, why does it seem that Hoover was obsessed with abolishing communism in America? Reilly stated that Hoover " [linked] a consensus opinion, which is that communists posed a serious threat to American institutions, with a more problematic one, which is that civil rights advocates posed an equally serious threat to those same institutions and values." Since Hoover linked the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* with communist infiltration, it became apparent that any type of issue centered in racial justice would be deemed communist. In other words, the term 'communist dupe' is an synonym for anticommunism, meaning that "all manner of liberal and leftist critiques of capitalism without regard for whether the institutions or people targeted had a formal relationship to the USSR that involves criminal

³⁵ Murali Balaji, 115

acts of espionage, sabotage, or terrorism.”³⁶ The problem with this definition is that it gave the FBI, and other federal and state departments the conceptual means to perceive any civil rights issue as a communist threat. This is a pattern that the Hoover enacted throughout his career, thus the generalizations that he asserted must be translated in a way that recognizes the paradoxes, contradictions, and ironies of his decisions to infiltrate and surveil civil rights groups.³⁷

The anticommunist concept that Hoover helped developed eventually became a political weapon that the U.S. government used to undermine various civil right groups and activists. This is especially evident with the F.B.I surveiling Paul Robeson and W.E.B Du Bois. What makes the FBI actions and other federal and state agencies’ actions important is the way they used this political weapon to primarily diminish Du Bois and Robeson’s legacy.

The FBI and federal organizations have tried any possible way of framing Du Bois as a communist. In one of the earliest reports on Du Bois’ life, the FBI analyzed passages from Du Bois’ book *Dusk to Dawn*. The beginning of the report stated that though Du Bois is not a communist, it adds that it is his "aim to improve the status of the negro group." It quoted a passage from his book, "I tried to say to the American negro... you must put behind your demands, not simply American negroes, but West Indians and Africans and all the colored races in the world."³⁸ The common agreement displayed from many of the reports on Du Bois is that he is a socialist, and not a communist. However, this is not news considering that Du Bois stated publicly and through many of his works that he is not a communist, but a socialist. If this is not new knowledge, then what keeps the FBI continually surveilling him? The FBI awareness of Du

³⁶ James Zeigler, *Red Scare Racism and Cold War Black Radicalism* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 199

³⁷ David Gallen and Kenneth O’ Reilly, *Black Americans The FBI Files* (New York: Carroll & Grad Publishers, 1994), 15

³⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *William E.B. DuBois File #: 100-99729 Part 1 of 5*, <https://vault.fbi.gov/E.%20B.%20%28William%29%20Dubois/E.%20B.%20%28William%29%20Dubois%20Part%201%20of%205> (accessed May 4, 2016), 13

Bois actual politics demonstrates their long term plan to ostracized Du Bois as a communist by constructing a timeline in the long run where they link him to groups that seem to be sympathetic towards communism. This is illustrated by the FBI later reports linking Du Bois to groups like the Southern Negro Youth Congress. While the FBI.'s early reports frames Du Bois as a person whose interest is seeing Black people in a better socioeconomic position, it is certain that the FBI's long term objective is to frame him as a communist.

In the first phase of the Red Scare, Du Bois wrote in the *Crisis* that the reason for anti-communist hysteria was the belief that communism would likely dismantle American racism: "The shrill cry of a few communists is not even listened to, because and solely because it seeks to break down barriers between black and white"³⁹. In May 10th, 1933, David de Sola Pool, a rabbi and a friend of Du Bois, highlighted that passage in a letter and asked Du Bois if this was an error in terms of saying that racism was the sole reason for anti-communism hysteria, and if so, would he agree. Du Bois gave him a reply in May 19, 1933: "As I review my statement concerning the Communist. I think it is true, as you remark, that there are plenty of other American reasons for their unpopularity. Still, I am certain that the race equality business ranks very high."⁴⁰ While Du Bois agreed that racism is not the sole reason for the spread of anti-communist rhetoric in the United States, he is rather certain that the main concern is that Black Americans would be treated as an equal in a communist society. Nearly two decades later where the Second Red Scare began to emerge, Du Bois' passport was taken because his Pan-Africanism was perceived as a path way towards communism. Considering Du Bois experience with the first

³⁹W.E.B Du Bois, "The thought and writings of W.E.B Du Bois- The Seventh Son Vol II," edited by Julius Lester, (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 296

⁴⁰ *ibid*

Red Scare, it is very likely that he knew right away that the U.S. government was blurring the lines between advocating for racial justice and communism.

What led to Du Bois's passport being taken away from him was his association with the Peace Information Center (PIC), where he was the chairman. The objective of the organization was requesting that all nuclear weapons be banned for use. They circulated a petition throughout the U.S. nation, and it was highly received as it reached almost two million signatures in six weeks. However, Dean Acheson, newly appointed as the secretary of state, attempted to discredit it. He argued that the petition was a political act meant to benefit the Soviet Union. Soon after the U.S. Justice Department requested the PIC organization to register themselves "as an agent of a foreign principal within the United States. Du Bois refused such argument by stating that their agendas are not political tools "of any foreign or domestic power," but instead to undermine Big Businesses who demand war over peace. Furthermore, what makes this request more interesting is that request was predicated by a policy known as The Foreign Agents Registration Act. Basically, the U.S. government's actions have more to do with the Cold War politics than following the law. Despite the fact that the organization disbanded, the U.S. government insisted in requesting that the non-existent organization apply as an agent that represents a foreign nation.

The problem with the U.S. government's demand is that there is not much legal weight to concede to such demand. However, considering the political tension emerging from the McCarthy and Red Scare climate, the demand was something that Du Bois, as he stated, should have taken "seriously." Du Bois and other members of the PIC board were indicted in February 8th, 1951. If Du Bois was to be found guilty, then he would receive a five year prison sentence. Vito Marcantonio, who was one of the most progressive politicians and lawyers of that time,

defended Du Bois and his colleagues as a favor of Du Bois assisting him in a 1948 election.

Since the case was too simple for the defendant, and considering that the defendant stated that Albert Einstein will make an appearance as a witness, the judge dismissed the case.

What confused Du Bois about the emerging trial was that, in his own words, he had to defend himself for advocating for what he believed international communities wanted, peace:

I hammered at the proposition that the Soviet Union did not want war, while our masters did; that we in demanding peace were opposing Big Business which wanted war, and that we did this as free Americans and not as the tools of any foreign or domestic power.⁴¹

Du Bois's confusion about the reasons he was in court for peace advocacy shows why this case was simple. The U.S. government lacked legal credibility on their accusations against Du Bois and his colleagues. This begs the question: What was the actual objective of the case if the U.S. government was inevitably going to lose the case? Although this trial was one of the very few cases where the government did not achieve a victory during the Red Scare, it can be argued that the trial was meant to publicize and implicitly label Du Bois as a communist sympathizer, and to undermine his reputation and legacy. This trial could possibly also meant to frighten those who have a similar social and political stance like Du Bois. This is especially clear when Du Bois' passport was taken during the trial as he refused to identify himself whatever or not he is a communist.

On June 4, 1957, in an interview with Al Morgan, Du Bois stated that he refused to state his political affiliation(s) on his passport application because it "was a matter of principle," as he continued: "I am not a member of the Communist Party but I think that the government has no right to ask a person to say anything about his religious views or his political views, that that is

⁴¹W.E.B Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace: The Story of My 83rd Birthday* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 57

an invasion of his private life.”⁴² However, Du Bois added that the initial reason for his passport being taken had little to do with his political affiliation. Instead it had to do with Du Bois interest in attending a Peace Conference, as he states:

...the passport division refused me a passport before they had this [Communist] question on the application at all. I wanted to go to the Peace Conference at Montevideo and they refused it because they said they didn't think that my trip there would be to the best interests of the United States⁴³.

The next passport application was where they asked Du Bois his political affiliation(s), thus explaining why he refused to politically identify himself. In a letter to the United States Passport Division, Du Bois wrote that removing his inability to travel was unconstitutional and that he demands “for a passport, in accord with the Constitution of the United States, the laws of the land and the decision of the courts.”⁴⁴ Because traveling has been historically important among Black Diasporic people in terms of voicing their grievances, it is likely that Du Bois would agree that the right to travel is essential to the freedom of Black Americans, the ability to voice their American experience aboard in hopes of getting international support for racial justice.

Paul Robeson and the U.S. government during the McCarthy Era

The F.B.I also attempted to prove that Paul Robeson was a member of the Communist Party in the early 1940s. The FBI director wanted to show that Paul Robeson was “engaged in espionage for the Soviet Union and was a member of the U.S. Communist Party.” However, the FBI director also gave up in proving that Robeson is a communist as he concluded that there was

⁴² Du Bois, “The thought and writings of W.E.B Du Bois- The Seventh Son Vol II,” 701

⁴³ibid

⁴⁴ Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to United States Passport Division, July 13, 1955. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

“[no] open documentary evidence” to prove Paul Robeson’s affiliation with the Community part.⁴⁵

Robeson’s reason for not joining the communist party is illustrated in his conversation with his son:

When I [the son] asked his advice about the party, he suggested I talk with Ben Davis. I asked him why he had never joined the party. After thinking a moment, he replied that he wasn’t willing to submit himself to party discipline. “I come and go. I do what I want to, say what I want to, sing what I want. I listen to what others say, but I make my own decisions.” I wanted to know what was the most important to him, his politics or being Negro. He replied that he puts the interests of the Negro people ahead of any political ideology. “I’m a human being first,” he said, “a Negro second, and a Marxist third. But all three of those levels are inseparable connected.”⁴⁶

These components of Robeson’s philosophy demonstrate the complexity of his politics and personality, and how it can never be fully grasp by the F.B.I who are unable to fully articulate nor grasp Paul Robeson’s political stance.

Robeson’s passport was also taken for eight years, and his voice was undermined from public media. However, the difference between Du Bois and Robeson is that Robeson’s career in the United States went downhill due to his controversial speech at the World Congress of the Partisans of Peace at Paris in 1949. At the conference he stated that it was unthinkable for Black Americans to fight against the Soviet Union. He placed emphasis on the racial violence witnessed in the United States in contrast to the humane peaceful treatment experience in the Soviet Union. Robeson’s comments garner attention by U.S. government, eventually leading them to request that he testified in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ The Price of Dissent: Testimonies to Political Repression in America By Bud Schultz, Ruth Schultz, p.141

⁴⁶ Paul Robeson Jr, *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom, 1939-1976* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2010), 44

⁴⁷ “You Are the Un-Americans, and You Ought to be Ashamed of Yourselves”: Paul Robeson Appears Before HUAC.” Accessed May 4 2016. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6440/>

Paul Robeson refused to state that whether or not he was a member of the Communist Party by arguing that they were invading his right to a secret ballot. There was another point where Robeson was asked why, since Robeson felt like a human being when he travels to the Soviet Union, haven't he decided to live there. Robeson responded by articulating that his father was a slave, his people died building the United States, and these reasons alone are why he has every right to live in this country as the person who asked him the question.⁴⁸ Robeson was also asked of his opinion on Stalin, since Khrushchev's secret speech received media attention. Robeson's replied, saying that the problems in the Soviet Union are reserved for the Soviet Union to resolve themselves. Furthermore, he added that the problems within the United States, in terms of how the country was built, has not yet resolved the problem of being responsible for "hundred million black people dying in the slave ship and on the plantations."⁴⁹

Every time HUAC asked him a question that was frame as a communist issue, Robeson answers the question but shifted the discourse from communism to the disenfranchisement of Black Americans and anti-black racism. Although the committee unanimously voted to have Robeson be cited for contempt, Congress refused the vote for he answered all the committee's questions. Although Robeson had strong international support, this trial prevented his American career from ever recovering. Because he refused to admit that he was or wasn't a communist, like Du Bois trial, Robeson's passport was revoked and he wasn't able to travel for nearly a decade.

It was two U.S. Supreme Court decisions that allowed Du Bois' and Robeson the ability to travel without fear in how the U.S. government deems their political projects. In the *Trop v. Dulles* case, the court decided that U.S. citizenship can be relinquished only by the soon to be

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ *ibid*

citizen voluntarily, and that the U.S. government went beyond the boundaries in revoking passport rights from the American people.⁵⁰In the *Kent v. Dulles* case, The Supreme Court had a 5-4 landmark split decision on the *Kent v. Dulles* case.⁵¹ Their decision was significant because not only does the U.S. government have a right to deny a citizen ability to travel because of his or her political beliefs, but also that they don't have a right to request that a U.S. citizen sign an affidavit indicating whether or not they are Communist before traveling abroad.

Although W.E.B Du Bois and Paul Robeson won a very hard political fight, it did come with consequences. After receiving back their passports, Du Bois and Robeson made the decision to travel more often than spending time in their native country. Their actions is a reflection of them not interested in modifying their political positions and primary focus primary on domestic racism. At the same time, the trials as well as the McCarthy and Red Scare climate resulted in Robeson and Du Bois losing public and political access to media outlets, thus undermine their influence. These contributed factors is why Paul Robeson's music and films lacked public circulation, and why W.E.B. Du Bois was left feeling bitter due to lack of support from prominent Black American leadership.

Du Bois' response to Soviet Crimes

While the McCarthy climate still raged on in America, back in the USSR new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech denouncing Joseph Stalin. This had a radical impact among leftist political circles throughout the world, leaving many people in a state of shock and eventually abandoning the Soviet cause. Although the silences throughout progressive and leftist

⁵⁰ Balaji, 379

⁵¹ *ibid*

circles is reasonable considering that they were undergoing a process of shock and disillusionment, the United States- interesting enough- did not capitalized the impact of the secret speech. As for the responds that Paul Robeson and Du Bois provided is most significant.

In July 1956, Du Bois responded to the news of Stalin's crimes by writing a letter to Anna Melissa Graves, a teacher, traveler, and a friend. Despite the fact that the USSR officially denounced Stalin crimes, it didn't put Du Bois in a state of disillusionment. Instead, he remained firm on his position that the Soviet lifestyle is a model that should be replicated throughout the world. Du Bois wasn't able to confront the moral problems of the USSR because he considered it an issue that only the Soviet people must confront. Moreover, the oppression that have taken place in Soviet Russia, Du Bois argued, is not a reason to be diverted from a discussion on the racial oppression in America. However, what is perhaps most shocking is that Du Bois believed that the Moscow Show trials were actually justified after reading the testimony. He wasn't aware that the testimony was part of the performance of the trial. Nevertheless, Du Bois admit that if Stalin was a tyrant, he is not the first and he would not be the last.⁵² Furthermore, Du Bois expressed his appreciation for Stalin by stating that he played an important role in fighting against Hitler during World War II.⁵³

While Du Bois justification of Stalin's legacy is highly problematic it is also understandable. It was Du Bois' decision to become a member of the Communist Party which caused his later legacy to be deemed contradictory and clouded with controversy. Some scholars have argued that his action was a response to the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the *Communist Party of the United States v. Subversive Activities Control Board* case to uphold the 1950

⁵² The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois, Volume 3, p.402

⁵³ *ibid*

McCarran Act, which required “Communist” organizations to register under the U.S. Attorney General.

Many people have argued that Du Bois decision to become a member of the Communist Party was a tragedy. However, Manning Marable would argue that due to the Cold War climate in the United States, where anti-communist hysteria made it extremely difficult to make political decisions outside the Cold War binary, only left Du Bois the choice to become a Communist member.⁵⁴ The other side of the binary was untenable for Du Bois because he would have to shift his Pan-African politics to Cold War Black liberal politics. In other words, Du Bois would have to compromise his politics, and that is something which he was very resistant to.

What prevents people from understanding Du Bois’ decision is neglecting the fact that all of his decisions are firmly rooted in what he believes is in the interest of disenfranchised non-European people.⁵⁵ This is why this misunderstanding caused various of Cold War liberals and anti-Communist Negro integrationists tend to interpret Du Bois career as contradictory, and as Marable puts it, “constantly shifting from one racial formulation to another, eclectically in search of the Golden Fleece of Black liberation”.⁵⁶ Marable follows the advice of Aptheker who asserts that to understand Du Bois from an ideological stand point, one must see him as an “Black radical democrat” whose “political affiliations or affinities varied as times change[d],” while simultaneously maintaining his profound cultural and philosophically anchor to the overarching project of Black freedom and dismantling of structural racism transnationally”.⁵⁷ In other words, Marable mentioned that he looks into studies Du Bois’s career in terms of it being paradoxical instead of it being contradictory.

⁵⁴ Manning Marable. "Reconstructing the Radical Du Bois," *Souls* 7, no. 3-4 (August 2005): 12

⁵⁵ *ibid*

⁵⁶ Marable, 11

⁵⁷ *ibid*

During the 1950s, the second Red Scare began to label any civil rights issue as “communist.” Black liberals made an implicit compromise with political officials that they would distance themselves from African diasporic politics, and in exchange they would focus on racial and socioeconomic issues in the United States. Du Bois not only had an issue in limiting himself to domestic racial politics, but he also had an issue with racism being newly defined as a psychological issue rooted in prejudice.⁵⁸ David Levering Lewis, a biographer of Du Bois life, agrees with Du Bois’ point as it shows the flaw behind Cold War racial politics in America: “...it may be suggested that Du Bois was right to insist that to leave the solution of systemic social problems exclusively to the market is an agenda guaranteeing obscene economic inequality in the short run and irresolvable political calamity in the long run”.⁵⁹ This explains Du Bois seeming to refusal to acknowledge the distributing facts behind the harsh realities in the Soviet state. His persistence in not criticizing the Soviet nation is rooted in the racial legacies embedded in American History, and which during the McCarthy era was not given the consideration Du Bois would hoped for.

Even if we considered that Du Bois’ main concern is pushing the path towards racial and social justice, it is a problem to use this as a reason to justify Du Bois negligence in acknowledging the problems of the Soviet state. In the past scholars have argued that though Du Bois placed important emphasis in revealing the contradictory relationship between democracy and racial discrimination in the United States, he does not invest the same energy towards the Soviet state. Although analyzing Du Bois’ engagement with Black radical thought and his Soviet travels provide great evidence in understanding Du Bois life after World War I, it does not give a

⁵⁸ Balaji, 226-227

⁵⁹ Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality, 570

fuller picture in how Du Bois acted in the Cold War climate. In other words, the debate on the older Du Bois life will continue to be controversial and puzzling.

There is a problem in specifically focusing on Du Bois later life. The debate surrounding the older Du Bois takes place by detaching and isolating the older Du Bois from earlier segments of his life and career, thus not only leaving the older Du Bois to be analyzed as a static figure, but it also prevents us from observing any past incidents where Du Bois was in a controversial and puzzling situation. If we instead look at the various social and political spaces that Du Bois occupied that produced moral dilemmas that he himself had to confront, it then becomes evident that Du Bois at times held an accommodationist position. Accommodationism can be defined as a belief that a middle ground or a compromise can be found with a person who has an opposing point of view. William Jordan argued that Du Bois would engage with accommodationism because of the highly tense racial climate required him to make compromising decisions that would most benefit the black community in the long run.

Unlike his peers, by the mid-1940s Du Bois has long eradicated his accommodationist position with the U.S. where its socioeconomic and political landscape operated through a racial climate. However, Du Bois shifted his accommodationist position towards nations that seem to be interested in fighting against colonialism, imperialism, and/or white supremacy. His first encounter in the Soviet nation, his experience under the Red Scare and McCarthy era, and his work as a journalist helped Du Bois to fully understand the magnitude of media propaganda, thus leaving him suspicious of any report that is anti-Soviet. Du Bois' refusal to criticize the Soviet Union is predicated on his experience in the Soviet Union, and taking an accommodationist position towards anti-colonial and/or anti-racist nations. While it is true that we cannot deny the harsh realities that took place in the USSR, we should not reserve a space for controversial and

paradoxical position to the older Du Bois. Instead we must consider on analyzing the patterns where Du Bois engage with accommodationism to comprehend how he was able to navigate the controversial and paradoxical landscapes of his time.

Robeson response to Soviet Crimes

Unlike W.E.B Du Bois, Paul Robeson did not provide many public statements that expressed his explicit approval or disapproval of Khrushchev's speech. What makes Robeson distinct from Du Bois is his awareness of what took place in the socioeconomic and political Soviet landscape.

This awareness came about in the 1930s where Robeson began to notice that most of his Soviet friends were disappearing. In August 1937 he eventually understood the magnitude of the purges when Ignaty Kazakov, a physician and close friend, disappeared. Against the advice of Sergei Eisenstein, who told him that Kazakov was arrested and that "the subject of the purges" should be left alone, Robeson insisted in seeing him and made a formal request through official channels. Surprisingly, Robeson's request was met as Kazakov invited him to the Metropol Hotel for lunch. However, when Robeson arrived, he noticed that Kazakov was accompanied with two escorts. It was at that instant that Robeson sense something was very wrong, but he didn't convey that through his body language. He ignored the escorts' presence and conversed with Kazakov for about two hours. Although they both spoke casually, their body expressions conveyed an understanding of the situation. At the end of lunch Kazakov gets up, hugs Robeson, and whispers to Robeson's ear: "Spasibo" thank you. Sadly, not only was Robeson unable to save this person, but this was not the last situation where Robeson was placed in such predicament.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Paul Robeson Jr., *Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898-1939*, 294

Robeson faced an almost similar moral challenge in Soviet Russia in June 1949. Returning to the Soviet Union for the 150th anniversary of Alexander Pushkin life, he was scheduled to perform in front of a Moscow Audience. Although he was treated very well by the Soviet government, his main focus was to reach out to Itzik Feffer. Robeson's persistent inquiries to reconnect with Feffer finally lead Feffer to being brought, unaccompanied, to Robeson's hotel room. When they met, Feffer quickly told Robeson through hand gestures that the room was bugged. With Paul Robeson able to communicate through written notes, Feffer provided many essential facts to what was taking place in the Soviet Union. He told Robeson that major intellectuals and artists from the Jewish community were being arrested and purged from Soviet society. Feffer also communicate by crossing his neck that he was schedule to be executed. Shortly after meeting Feffer, Robeson proclaimed his friendship with Itzik Feffer at his last Moscow concert, then began singing in Yiddish, "Zog Nit Kaynmal," a Warsaw Ghetto resistance song.⁶¹ Robeson captivated the audience with his passionate lyrics and voice. He also gave a similar performance nearly a decade later at the First State Ball Bearing Plant through Robert Robinson's request. Robinson noticed the powerful impact that Robeson had on the audience by singing a Jewish song, as well staring for singing such song, he writes:

Robeson began another one that startled me. It was a song [from] the Jewish tradition that decried their persecution through the centuries. I knew this song would alienate party officials in the audience. I wondered whether Robeson... was even aware of Soviet anti-Semitism. I decided that he must be, and that perhaps he knew what he was doing. As he sand, there was a cry in his voice, a plea to end the beating, berating, and killing of Jews.⁶²

Singing these songs in front of the Soviet population was Robeson's way of protesting the plight of the Soviet Jewish people. The performance was influential as it left the audience, which was composed of soviet officials, deeply moved and brought to tears. Although his

⁶¹ Duberman, 353

⁶² Robert Robinson, *Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union*, (Washington, DC: Acropolis Books, 1988), 311

actions saved Feffer from being executed that same year, he was eventually shot in 1952. With the amount of inside information Paul Robeson received on the problems surrounding the Soviet state, would it have been possible that Feffer and others life would be saved if Robeson gave a critical opinion on the Soviet Union?

Paul Robeson never publicly criticized the Soviet Union because he strongly believed that the greatest threat to mankind was U.S. racism and imperialism. Despite Khrushchev denouncing Joseph Stalin in February 25, 1956, Robeson's judgments toward the U.S.S.R was given in closed doors to very close friends. Robeson withheld any public comments criticizing the Soviet Union throughout his life. To bring awareness would be a political disservice to his main objective, which is to revolutionize the material conditions of oppressed peoples. He believed that his main objective corresponded with Soviet interests:

I have heard some honest and sincere people say to me, "Yes, Paul, we agree with you on everything you say about Jim Crow and persecution. We're with you one hundred percent on these things. But what has Russia ever done for us Negroes?" And in answering this question I feel that I go beyond my own personal feelings and put my finger on the very crux of what the Soviet Union means to me – a Negro and an American. For the answer is very simple and very clear: "Russia," I say, "the Soviet Union's very existence, its example before the world of abolishing all discrimination based on color or nationality, its fight in every arena of world conflict for genuine democracy and for peace, this has given us Negroes the chance of achieving our complete liberation within our own time, within this generation."⁶³

Robeson's political beliefs was rooted by his experience in the Soviet Union, where he experienced a freedom that he never encountered in any country, in contrast to the United States, which had problems in developing programs that would help eradicate racial discrimination and disenfranchisement.

When Paul Robeson passport was restored in part of the June 1958 Supreme Court decision in *Kent v. Dulles*, he began a world tour across Europe to perform several theater

⁶³ Paul Robeson, *The Negro People and the Soviet Union* (New York: New Century Publishers, 1950), 12

shows. It seemed that Paul Robeson was once again on the path towards being the most known Black American in the world. Unfortunately, his turned upside down after arriving to the Soviet state in March 26th 1961. In the evening of that same day, Robeson locked himself in a hotel room and attempted to commit suicide by cutting his wrists in order to slash his arteries.

Although Robeson survived his suicide attempt and was quickly under the care of Soviet medical doctors, this was the beginning of many mental episodes that Robeson would experience for the remainder of his life.

Why did Robeson's mental health suddenly decrease- all of a sudden- and never able to return back to normal for the rest of his life? Several of explanations have been produced to understand the cause of Robeson's mental collapse and eventual decline. Anna Louise Strong, an activist journalist and friend of Robeson, was surprised to learned that he his mental health broke down .She believed that Robeson's mental collapse was due to the Sino-Soviet split of 1957 after Khrushchev's speech denouncing Stalin. "...Paul had a very deep love and devotion both for the USSR and for China's revolution and... consequently the split must have been through passionate allegiance rather than through theory."⁶⁴. Martin Duberman provided a different account to what may have cause Robeson mental to decline. Duberman claimed that due to the pressures he confronted by the government (preferably the United States), the bitterness of being bypassed by the civil rights movement, and the state of feeling like an outsider in other nations, may have contributed to Robeson's mental decline. On the other hand, Paul Robeson Jr. offers a more complex theory for what has happen to his father.

Paul Robeson Jr. stated that his father was drugged by the C.I.A. psychological warfare program that the organization used for a number of years. The C.I.A's highly classified program is called Project MKUltra. What contributed to the development of this program was the western

⁶⁴ Duberman, 540-541

intelligence interest in mind-controlling drugs due to hearing that the Nazi's engaged in mind-controlling projects through the use of drugs. In the mist of the Cold War, the objective of the program was to engage in psychological warfare with what the C.I.A believed towards their foreign and domestic enemies. The drugs were meant to cause its patient to be in an extreme mental panic that would lead them to commit suicide. Two decades after Paul Robeson death, Paul Robeson Jr. later believed that his father was given LSD, at that time an unknown drug by the public, "because the physical psychological symptoms [his father] experienced matched those of an LSD trip."⁶⁵

Paul Robeson Jr. indicated that what garner the attention of western intelligence operations was Paul Robeson plan to accept a passport violation in order to travel "to visit Havana at Fidel Castro's personal invitation and return home to join the civil rights movement."⁶⁶ Paul Robeson Jr. confirmed that the trip was meant to take place because Cuban officials contracted him about the invitation, and Paul Robeson Jr. was also part of the arrangements. At the time Paul Robeson arrived to Moscow in March 23rd where his next trip to Cuba, the Bag of Pigs, was scheduled for April 17th. Paul Robeson Jr. believed that the C.I.A and the F.B.I had an interest in neutralizing his father in order to make sure that the invasion of Cuba would be effectively successful. Moreover, Paul Robeson Jr. believed that they were concerned about Robeson returning back to the United States because Martin Luther King Jr. was becoming a more prominent figure and Malcolm X, who was distancing himself from the Nation of Islam to formulate a new political organization that would likely work, would possibly function alongside MLK Jr. To witness

⁶⁵ Paul Robeson Jr. "*The Paul Robeson Files*"[online] cited 30 April 2016 (<http://www.frankolsonproject.org/Articles/Robeson,%20Nation.htm>)

⁶⁶ *ibid*

them working together and possibly become the next “the three musketeers,” Paul Robeson Jr stated, was not in the F.B.I’s interest.⁶⁷

While Paul Robeson Jr. began to investigate whether or not Paul Robeson was drugged, meeting with Soviet officials who embarrassingly admitted that there was a lack of security at Robeson’s premises, three days later found himself in a similar situation as his father. At a hotel event with his mother he request and drank one-third of a cup of tea. Soon after he returned to his room he began to experience at psychiatric episode:

“Once there, I settled down to write a letter home and felt fine. I finished the letter and turned on the radio for the late news. As I listened to the commentator’s voice, it turned into Lenin’s speaking at the 1918 Congress of the Bolshevik Party. I switched to a music station, but the program appeared to change into a U.S.. military broadcast describing a nuclear test in the Pacific islands. As I settled back to watch a French movie with Russian subtitles, the faces of the actors changed into those of people I knew. Switching to a news program, I experienced the same kind of changing identities. I realized I had been drugged and was hallucinating. I recalled that the waiter who had served me the tea had looked oddly out of place”.⁶⁸

Paul Robeson Jr. found himself in a hallucinating state, and eventually volunteered himself to a KGB psychiatric hospital where he stayed for a week. He recovered after staying in the hospital for nearly a month.

In an interview with Dr. Julianne Malveaux, he stated that it was his first time ever having a psychiatric disturbance, and he never had one since.⁶⁹ While he does not have a “smoking gun,” he believed that there was a file on Paul Robeson from the KGB that has not yet been release, but because of other C.I.A cases of people being induced with the a LSD drug that caused them to be

⁶⁷ Democracy Now, “*Did the U.S Government Drug Paul Robeson*” [online] cited 2016 30 April (http://www.democracy.now.org/1999/7/6/did_the_u_s_government_drug)

⁶⁸ Paul Robeson Jr., *Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist’s Journey, 1898-1939*, 318

⁶⁹ Youtube, “*Paul Robeson Jr interviewed by Dr Julianne Malveaux*” [online] cited 2016 30 April (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iX2xb6KQpdo>)

a permanent state of mental panic or commit suicide, Paul Robeson Jr. believed that he had a lot of circumstantial evidence to come to the conclusion that he and his father were drugged.⁷⁰

Paul Robeson Jr. have spent nearly 40 years researching what contributed to his father's illness. In the same interview he was hopeful that he would have access to KGB files on Paul Robeson. It was Paul Robeson Jr.'s plan to have evidence to eventually build a case against the C.I.A. However, he passed away in April 26, 2014 before he was able to see his case realized.

What is interesting is that the essential difference between Martin Duberman's and Paul Robeson Jr.'s biographical narratives on Paul Robeson is that, surprisingly, the latter never mentioned Robert Robinson, a Black American who at the time was a Soviet citizen (and who will be discussed in the next chapter). In contrast to Duberman who was able to interview Robert Robinson, Paul Robeson Jr. was writing his biographical narrative of his father after Robert Robinson passed away. However, Paul Robeson Jr. does not mention his father's interactions with Robert Robinson in Soviet Russia. This is interesting considering that Paul Robeson Jr. was likely aware of Robinson's autobiographical account of his life, as well Duberman's, the person who Robeson Jr. chose personally to write a biographical account of his father, interviewing Robinson. When we analyze Robinson's perspective on what potentially cause Robeson's mental breakdown, it then opens up a new world of possibilities.

Robert Robinson provides a small but significant report that opens a dialogue on how Robeson's concern for the conditions of the Soviet Jewish people could have possibly strained his relationship with Soviet prime minister Nikita Khrushchev. In his book *Black on Red*, Robinson, about a week or more after Robeson's concert performance at Robinson's factory work place, heard a rumor that he had an "unpleasant confrontation with Khrushchev."⁷¹

⁷⁰ *ibid*

⁷¹ Robert Robinson, *Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union*, 319

According to the rumor, which Robinson obtained from three different party members who did not know each other, Robeson was invited to Khrushchev's villa since they were both in the same region. It was there where Robeson asked him "whether stories he had in the western press about Soviet anti-Semitism were true."⁷² Known for being an unpredictable person, Khrushchev angrily responded with vehemence "and accused Robeson of meddling in our country's internal affairs." As stated by Robinson, "Robeson was so shocked by Khrushchev's fury that he left the next for East Germany where, according to East German radio, he was placed under medical care."⁷³ Robinson later explains that after this alleged incident he noticed that Paul Robeson's music, which used to play regularly on the radio, ceased. Paul Robeson erasure from collective was, to Robinson's mind, a reflection of what happens when a person "[questions] Soviet domestic policies."⁷⁴

Robinson's recollection of the Robeson alleged dispute with Khrushchev is significant. It provides a different narrative as to what would likely caused Robeson eventual psychological collapse, one which he was never able to fully recover from. However, according to Duberman, who interviewed Robinson, there are inconsistencies with Robinson's account. For instance, Duberman pressed Robinson about the dates of his photographs that showed Robeson at the State Ball Bearing Plant. Duberman knew that Robinson's date July 1961 was inaccurate because that was the time where Paul Robeson "was confined in poor health at Barveekha Sanitarium." He believed that the actual dates of the photographs were likely January 1960, and obtained proof of that date when he found a photo from the Sovfoto Archives (New York) of Robeson singing at the same place. Robinson insisted that his dates are correct because he wrote the dates the moment he took them. However, as Duberman persisted, Robinson accepted that the month

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ ibid

⁷⁴ ibid

might be wrong and changed it to March, the same month which Robeson attempted to commit suicide, but he continued on maintaining that the year was right.

While Robert Robinson may have the date of the rumor wrong, Duberman sees the value of the content of Robeson's testimony as it might "shed light to Robeson's attempted suicide." If the rumor that Robinson heard was true, it can then be safe to argue that Robeson's mentality hit its limit by exposing himself to highly intense and traumatizing situations. Ultimately, if the year that Robeson collapse is the same year that Robeson collided with Khrushchev, then it is likely that the latter was the turning point of Robeson's life because it was here that his admiration of Soviet Russia and its harsh realities clashed in his mind. For Khrushchev's to implicitly confirm Robeson's suspicions of Soviet anti-Semitism could have been the motivating factor for Robeson's eventual attempted suicide.

When it comes to the political and cultural landscape of the Cold War, Robeson was motivated to take a conditionalist approach. While Robeson supported the Soviet state in terms of advocacy of his anti-racist and classless society, Robeson also decided to indirectly denounce the anti-Semitic purges by performing the song of the Warsaw Ghetto Resistance in recognition of his friend Itzik Feffer and other Jewish victims. At the time the Paul Robeson only told his son the story of Itzik. However, he asked his son to never reveal the truth about Itzik's actual situation until he passed away. Paul Jr. kept his promise and revealed the meeting between Robeson and Itzik three years after his father's death through a journal article publication. Paul Robeson's willingness to take the truth to his grave indicates how much importance he placed on his lived experience in the Soviet Union than the disturbing realities in the Soviet state that was increasingly becoming publicized. His experience of being treated as a human being in the Soviet Russia in contrast to being seen as a second class citizen in the U.S. override the moral

dilemma he encountered. If Paul Robeson's Jr case is creditable, then it demonstrates that that the U.S. anti-communist climate had an invested interest in silencing dissent voices by any means necessary. However, if Robinson's myth is true then it leaves us with this question, at what cost?

Conclusion

Despite the wealth of information of Du Bois and Robeson radical pasts, their radical legacies remain little to unknown to this day. When observing Black American history within mainstream history text, the lack of visibility shows how Paul Robeson was the most ostracized black person in American history. It is painful to recognize Robeson that, despite his reputation and status in Europe and the Soviet Union, and being in the public spotlight majority of his life, he won't be fully recognized for his accomplishments by American society.

Near the end of his life, Robeson was living in Philadelphia with his son's family. However, he was publicly isolated as he couldn't participate or help out the new generation of activists during the Civil Rights Movement because removed from public light. Although the dominant narrative would supposedly him being an artist and performer and undermined his more politically radical contributions, there is a lack of awareness of his legacy throughout American society. However, to unravel the complexity of Robeson's past, we must confront the moral consequences of Robeson's support towards the Black Diasporic and disenfranchised communities, as well his support towards the Soviet Union.

There are various of interpretations as to why Du Bois register as a member of the Communist Party. However, considering that the membership of the Communist Party was extremely low, and that the party's political power was little to nonexistent, it seems that Du Bois's action was a representation of his deep disappointment of U.S. politics. The stigma of Du

Bois registering in the Communist Party played a huge role in why Du Bois is narrowly defined to what he frown at the time that he was alive: a co-founder of the NAACP, the writer of the *Soul of the Black Folk*, and his rivalry against Booker T. Washington. There is an old saying that the winners are the ones who decide how history is written. Although it may seem that Du Bois and Robeson took their leftist politics to their graves, it is possible that we unearth it to give them a better recognition of what they have done in the struggle for racial and socioeconomic equality.

Chapter 2: Is Robert Robinson a Black Subaltern?

“The Soviets won’t like my book. I am writing as an outsider, who lived and worked inside Soviet society for forty-four years. Mine is not a story of labor camps and exile, but of living nose-to-nose with Soviet workers. There has never been anybody else like me—never in the history of the Soviet Union. This is not a boast. It is nothing so grand, and certainly not what I meant to do with my life. I state this simply, as a fact.

The Soviets would prefer that my experiences die with me. They may seek to discredit me and my account. I would prefer to deal with this as an American citizen, reattached in some sense to my roots. Facing a campaign of lies, distortion, and hatred will be no fun. I have not been ready for that, until now.”

Robert Robinson

Robert Robinson wrote these words the same day he was in the process of becoming an American citizen-again in December 9th, 1986. It took Robinson nearly thirteen years to receive his American citizenship after leaving the Soviet Union. While his experience in the Soviet Union helped him realize his dream of becoming a mechanical engineer, Robinson remembered the time when he had no choice but to give up his U.S. citizenship in the 1930s. He also recalled losing many friends to the purges, and the occasions he applied for a visa every year in the Soviet Union, only to be denied for the next four decades. Nevertheless, the moment he received his citizenship, surrounded by hundreds of people who were also waiting to become U.S. citizens, he surely felt that he didn't have to be silent any more. Robinson believed that it was now safe to publicize his Soviet experience as a Black person.

He was interviewed in various news publications, and spoke at colleges and universities to publicize his book, *Black on Red: My 44 years inside the Soviet Union (1988)*. In the context of the Cold War, Robinson's book should have garnered a lot of media coverage. However, there was not that much discourse surrounding his book in the public, or in academia. Allison Blakely, the scholar who was instrumental in the creation of Black Diaspora studies in Russia and the Soviet Union, was one of the two people who wrote a review on Robinson's book. It is possible that the downfall of the Soviet Union, which took place in 1991, most likely played an important role in undermining Robinson's publication in the public sphere. Three years later, Robert Robinson passed away due to cancer, and his book remained on the library shelf. It took nearly two decades for his narrative to be recognized within the confines of academia.

Although there are various autobiographical accounts of Black people writing their experiences in Soviet Russia (most notably W.E.B Du Bois and Paul Robeson, discussed earlier) Robert Robinson stands out. In contrast to other Black diasporic sojourners, Robinson lacked ideological sympathy toward the Soviet experiment, and he was oblivious to the impact that the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Russian Civil War had on the construction of the Soviet state. His first exposure to Russian culture was

through a newspaper, where he saw caricatures of Russians having long beards, and their pants inside of the boots instead of outside.⁷⁵

Because of the business partnership between the Ford Motor Company and the Soviet State, Robert Robinson was one of the many westerners to accept a Soviet contract to help build the country's industry. However, after staying a couple of days in the Soviet Union, Robert Robinson quickly obtained international fame. Due to a racial confrontation with two white Americans, where a fight broke out and Robinson retaliated, his public recognition skyrocketed to celebrity status. The news of the racial assault became known as the Stalingrad Incident and it made Robinson an international symbol of racial disenfranchisement in the United States. Since Robert Robinson understood that he would never have received the same treatment in the United States, he appreciated the Soviet Union for recognizing that he was racially insulted, and for acting accordingly. However, Robinson was suspicious that he was being used for propaganda. In Robinson's autobiographical account he explores confirmed suspicions by not only analyzing the Soviet's claim to being a raceless society, but by additionally challenging the country's claim in being a representation of what socioeconomic equality can look like.

The scholarship on Black diasporic sojourners in Soviet Russia has been understudied. However, in the context of Black diaspora studies in the Soviet Union, Robert Robinson's story has been marginalized in contrast to internationally known Black figures such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and W.E.B. Du Bois. As for the historians and scholars who have looked into Robinson's life, it has mostly been limited to surveying his life, and giving an analysis of Robinson's involvement with the Stalingrad Incident. Although I am willing to continue this tradition, it will be done within the context of historiographical depictions of Robert Robinson.

The main concern lies in a historical analysis on the essential themes of Robert Robinson's project. For instance, Robinson's claim that racism existed in the Soviet Union, and his frustration as to why it took him four decades to leave a country. Keeping in mind that many Black people have explicitly

⁷⁵ "Reluctant Comrade." Timewatch, British Broadcasting Corporation (London, UK: BBC, February 27, 1991).

stated that traveling to the Soviet Union was their first time being treated as a human being, for Robinson to challenge this dominant narrative is to position himself outside of normative sphere.

Memories of living in the Soviet Union for approximately forty-four years, explicit personal of the personal impact of the Purges and violence of World War II, and the refusal of the Soviet government to provide him with a visa to leave the state makes for an intriguing important and unique life history. Robinson gives us one of the first dissenting perspectives of the Black experience in the U.S.S.R, where his anti-Soviet rhetoric presents a bitter and negative portrayal of Soviet people and its institutions. Furthermore, unlike many of his political colleagues, Christianity played an important role in his ability to navigate and survive Soviet society. In order to unravel the complexities of Robinson's experience, an analysis of various affairs in Robinson's life within the context of the dynamic Soviet political climate, from the emergence of the purges to the intensity of the Cold War, will be considered.

In this chapter I will first provide a brief summary of Robinson's life, followed by an historiographical analysis on Robert Robinson, closing with observations of how his life corresponded in tandem with the shifting political climates of Soviet Russia. This study will construct an alternative narrative of Robinson's legacy by highlighting overlooked events in his life.

Brief Biography of Robert Robinson

Robert Robinson was born in Jamaica, raised in Cuba where he obtained his toolmaking skills, and moved to the U.S. at the age of twenty. Like many Blacks individuals who traveled to the United States from the Caribbean, he was astounded by the amount of racial hostility white Americans expressed towards Black Americans. Before Robinson arrived to the United States he stated that he "never experienced racial prejudice and did not know what it was until [he] arrived in New York"⁷⁶. He eventually moved to Detroit in hopes of working at the Ford Motor Company. Robinson wanted to obtain financial security, hone his skills as a toolmaker, and realize his dream of designing and inventing new

⁷⁶ Robert Robinson, *Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union*, (Washington, DC: Acropolis Books, 1988), 24

machines⁷⁷. Although he was qualified to be a toolmaker at Ford, he was repeatedly denied a position due to racial discrimination. When a church friend told him that he must apply to the lowest position, i.e., floor sweeper, to then become a toolmaker, Robinson took his advice, applied at Ford once more, and finally got a job. After sweeping the floors eight hours a day for four months, and taking a couple of classes from the Ford's technical program, he eventually worked his way up to becoming the only Black toolmaker among 700 whites. His friend's advice suggests that there was a racial hierarchy operating within the company. This is not surprising considering the racial climate at that time.

During the late 1920s, the Soviet Union was going through a major change. Joseph Stalin implemented the Five Year Plan with the objective to rapidly industrialize the nation. One of the many strategies of the Five Year Plan was to recruit workers from western countries, specifically those who were attracted to communism. One of the companies that the Soviet Union partnered with was the Ford Motor Company. The Soviets not only wanted to hire Ford workers, but the Soviets highly admired the techniques that derived from the Ford Company, and wanted to replicated its manufacturing process within their own country.

Robert Robinson met a group of Russian recruiters at the motor plant. They watched Robinson work for a couple of minutes before asking him if he would like to work for them by teaching toolmaking to Soviet apprentices in Russia. He agreed, largely in an effort to get rid of them, and to put all of his main attention towards his work⁷⁸. A couple of days later Robinson showed up at their headquarters and met with the recruiter. At the time he was making \$140 yet the Soviet recruiter "offered him \$250 a month, rent free quarters, a maid, thirty days paid vacation a year, a car, free passage to and from Russia, and they would deposit \$150 out of each month's paycheck in an American bank"⁷⁹. Considering the racial climate in the United States of that time, and the increasing unemployment because of the Great Depression, it was an offer that he couldn't refuse: "America is in the rip of a serious depression and I could be laid off any day at Ford. Judging by all the applicants in the outer room, white Americans are

⁷⁷ Ibid, 23

⁷⁸ ibid, 27

⁷⁹ ibid, 29

lining up for this chance. Why not me too?"⁸⁰. Robert Robinson was aware of the negative depictions the media portrayed of the Soviet Union. But he didn't hesitate in reading over the contract and signing it.

The Stalingrad Incident

Robert Robinson was assigned to work at Stalingrad Tractor Factory, where he was the only Black among many White Americans hired by the Soviet government. The first couple of weeks he was confronted with racial hostility among white American workers. At meals he was met with insulting remarks and angry glances, and several times during the day they requested that he leave and threaten to kill if he resisted ⁸¹. Eventually on Thursday, July 24th, 1930, around six in the evening, Robert Robinson was racially assaulted by Lemuel Lewis and William Brown, two white Americans. They attempted to beat Robert Robinson up in order to frighten him to return to the U.S. However, Robinson retaliated and discovered strength that he didn't exercise living within the United States:

[After my tenth day of work] ... [on] my way of home..., strapping American...said, "Robinson, be careful when you go to the Volga. On the night you arrived all the Americans got together and decided to drown you."... Louis leapt in front of me and began beating me with his fists. Brown was able to pin down my arms to prevent me from hitting back, but I broke loose and struck back at Louis...Then something inside me exploded-the rage that had been building for years... My teeth caught his neck. I dug deeper.⁸²

Robinson's anger provoked him to bite hard on Louis's neck, and that bite symbolically represented all the terror and embarrassment he faced from White Americans. Right after the incident he promised himself that he would never allow White Americans to terrorize or embarrassed him, as he writes: "I... felt like someone who had just achieved some marvelous physical feat... Never again, I vowed, would I run away from racist attackers... I fell on my bed exhausted, but overcome by the sweet sensation of liberation, which I was feeling for the first time in my life ⁸³.

⁸⁰ *ibid*

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 63-65

⁸²*ibid*, 66-67

⁸³ *ibid*, 67

The Stalingrad police eventually investigated this incident, but it was very brief. The case could have faded into history, and the white American attackers would have possibly gone unpunished. The police's actions reflected a larger pattern of the way Soviet authorities handle racial incidents. The majority of the time, the Soviet Union would quiet down racial incidents in order to keep the impression that they were an anti-racist society where everyone got along. However, in a journal article Barbara Keys argued that the national daily *Trud* (Labor) publicized the incident two weeks after it took place. The publication of this story garnered the attention of other Soviet media outlets, and most importantly from the authorities. *Trud* eventually "provided the most extensive coverage, printing on the front page an average of four articles," from different worker factories expressing solidarity towards Robert Robinson⁸⁴. The increasing awareness of the Stalingrad Incident resulted in the arrest of those two White Americans, and they were placed on trial for white chauvinism⁸⁵.

The newspaper understood the story's political significance because it contrasted from previous racial incidents in the USSR: the two white Americans were not communist. The news coverage negatively impacted the United States because the two White Americans lacked political allegiance with the Soviet Union, placing the Soviet Union in a positive light when it garnered international attention.

Barbara Keys added that Soviet newspapers use of exhortative and castigated language reflected Stalinist journalistic conventions. The Soviet newspapers' objective was not to provide deep coverage of news, but rather to encourage the Soviet public to accept their words as a reflection of Soviet ideals. This is apparent when reading the *Trud's* banner headline of the Robert Robinson incident: "We will not tolerate the practices of bourgeois America in the USSR"⁸⁶. Although many Soviet newspaper articles were providing more elaborate information about the Stalingrad incident, they did not express interest in Robinson himself. Rather they were more invested in constructing a public image of him. The information that they provided to the Soviet public center concerned "his blackness, innocence, and

⁸⁴ Meredith L. Roman. *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 26

⁸⁵ Robinson, 71-73

⁸⁶ Barbara Keys, "An African-American Worker in Stalin's Soviet Union: Race and the Soviet Experiment in International Perspective," *The Historian* 71, no. 1 (2009): 44

diligence as a laborer⁸⁷. Robert Robinson was presented as a symbol for the racial discrimination and violence that Black workers experienced in western societies, and an ideal worker and comrade in Soviet society.

Many of the articles described Robert Robinson in favorable terms, while the white Americans were described as drunkards and hooligans⁸⁸. Moreover, Keys stated that the articles “emphasized that it was the mere presence of a Negro that white Americans found intolerable”⁸⁹. It is evident that in the United States, the newspapers would have given a more sympathetic depictions towards the two White Americans, and take a more ambivalent stance toward their portrayal of Robert Robinson. However, in contrast to American newspapers, The *Trud* and other Soviet newspapers reconfigured this racial confrontation as a representation of American racial norms sabotaging Soviet society.

This case was the first race trial during the pre-Cold War era. The Soviets invested in this case to publicly condemn American racism and demonstrate their moral superiority in regard to race relations. Moreover, the trial was meant to show the symbolic differences between the Soviet Union and the United States. The two white Americans representing racial violence, and the trial as a whole reflect the Soviet Union as a nation that refused to tolerate any manifestation of racial discrimination. Taking into account the foreign presence in the Soviet industry, specifically foreigners who are not sympathetic to the communist cause, the case was also intended to communicate to foreigners that their habits and customs would not be tolerated if it conflicted with the Soviet’s views on racial and economic equality.

The actions that the Soviet Union implemented caused Robert Robinson to then be perceived “as a symbol of racial oppression under capitalism and of communism’s promise of racial equality” among Soviet citizens.⁹⁰ This consequently made him a celebrity nationwide. His picture was of the front page on many Moscow newspapers, and featured in many Soviet posters.

⁸⁷ *ibid*

⁸⁸ Roman, p.44

⁸⁹ *ibid*

⁹⁰ Keys, 1

Robert Robinson was happy to receive solidarity among his co-workers and the Soviet nation at large. However, he preferred to put his talents to work at his factory, and to not take part of any kind of political affairs because communism did not appeal to him, and he was apolitical. This is why Robinson was reluctant to accept celebrity status: he was skeptical of the Soviet's actual intentions with the Stalingrad case. Robinson's skepticism was realized years later when he was given an unexpected honor in December 10, 1934, an endorsement by his co-workers to become their Moscow Soviet representative. He was again on the newspapers where he was presented as a hard worker and loved by his co-workers. But Keys pointed that what was rather troubling is that (1) the newspapers "placed special emphasis on the Stalingrad Incident, and (2) though "Robinson was described as "non-party," they asserted that "he was studying the works of Lenin and Stalin."⁹¹ Robinson was not happy because he understood that he was being used for propaganda purposes, and that his election would grab the attention of American authorities.

The consequences of becoming a Moscow Soviet Representative

Scholars like Barbara Keys and Meredith Roman have placed emphasis on analyzing the Stalingrad incident. This is understandable considering that the incident placed Robert Robinson as a central figure in many news stories internationally. However, Robinson mentioned that while he was in the process of traveling to and from the United States, he didn't encounter any U.S. or Moscow authority that expressed interest in that incident.⁹² Instead, Robinson mentioned that what put him in a difficult position was in December 10, 1934 when he was elected as a Moscow Soviet Representative (City Council). When he heard his name called, and his co-workers applauding and congratulating him, Robinson was in a state of shock, disbelief, and anger:

What have they done to me?" I thought. "What have I gotten myself into? I'm not a political person. And besides, I'm an American citizen, and not even a Communist party member. My very fundamental beliefs are in complete opposition to the party and the

⁹¹ Keys, 49

⁹² Ibid, 82-84

Soviet regime. I'm not an atheist, not even an agnostic. I believe in God, I pray to Him, and my first allegiance is to Him.⁹³



(With thoughts of disillusionment, Robinson is congratulated by his co-workers at the Moscow Soviet election)

What made this election significant are five reasons: (1) Robert Robinson is a Christian and not a communist, and both positions are irreconcilable politically (2) he is not a Soviet citizen (3) he was not notified nor was asked for approval for the nomination (4) he is apolitical (5) although he is not the first black American to be honored with this position, he was the first to be elected by his own co-workers and not as a honorary member by Soviet officials.⁹⁴ With these factors in mind, what were the reasons behind Robinson's election? It is best believed that the Soviet Union wanted to show other countries the possibility for Black people to be placed in positions of power, thus juxtaposing themselves to the United States. Robinson's election was what actually garnered the attention of politically powerful people in the U.S.S.R, and captured the attention of U.S political authorities.

In the United States, newspapers and government officials were quick to label Robinson with anything that political categorized him as a Red, a Communist sympathizer, and at worse a communist himself. The U.S. government publicly asserted that he was a communist subversive.⁹⁵ Moreover, Harold Knuton, a Minnesota congressman, introduced a bill in February 1935 where U.S citizens are prohibited

⁹³ Robinson,96

⁹⁴ Ibid, 95-103

⁹⁵ Keys- 33

from accepting any type of award from a foreign government.⁹⁶ Although the bill never came to a vote, the timing of the bill implies that there was a connection with Robinson's election. Despite the U.S. belief that the Soviets were integrating Robert Robinson in their hopes that his position will influence Black Americans to align themselves with the U.S.S.R, Robert Robinson himself refused to associate himself with the Soviets by his own will. Furthermore, he tried the best he could to extend his U.S. visa.

During the time Robert Robinson was at risk of losing his U.S citizenship, he asked Homer Smith, a Moscow correspondent for the African American press, to assist him in acquiring a passport extension from former U.S ambassador William Bullitt. Robinson never spoke with a U.S ambassador, but he knew that the ambassador was a former journalist thus making Smith a useful ally. However, it turned out that he was wrong. Robinson stated that what angered the ambassador was being called 'comrade' by Homer Smith.⁹⁷ It must be taken into account that Smith was not in a similar predicament as Robinson. Considering that Smith was in a better socioeconomic position than Robinson, that he had access to various of commodities in the Soviet Union, and memories of racism in the United States, it can be considered that Smith had little interest in acting appropriately towards the former ambassador.

The Soviet authorities attempted to bribe Robert Robinson, but it was to no avail. Robinson couldn't be brought because he has no interest in being entangled with the Soviet system.⁹⁸ One example of this was when he was scheduled to meet Nikolai Bulganin, chairman of the Moscow Soviet, one week after the election at 10am. At the meeting Nikolai offered him a better apartment to live in, and a dacha in the country outside of Moscow. Robinson refused the offer because though such luxuries were not available to the average Soviet citizen, he understood that accepting those offers had strings attached to them. Nevertheless, such actions cost him getting special favors from the Soviet government. Robinson was left to be regarded solely for his symbolic capital when the Soviets attempted to garner Black support in the United States.

⁹⁶ *ibid*

⁹⁷ Robinson, 109-110

⁹⁸ *ibid*, 102

In 1937 Stalin announced that foreigners either become a Soviet citizen or leave the country. However, Robert Robinson did not become a Soviet citizen because of Stalin's 1937 order. He became a Soviet citizen because the United States requested that he return to the country or forfeit his U.S. citizenship. Since the U.S was still experiencing the Great Depression, and because Robinson was blacklisted in many industrial companies because of their perception of him as a communist, he believed that being a Soviet citizen was the better option.

Although Robinson's decision to apply for Soviet citizenship is understandable, it is rather odd that he would ask the Soviet Union if it would be possible to allow him to return back to the United States when he wished to. The Soviet authorities did in fact inform him that it was possible, as he wrote: "They assured me that this was possible, citing examples of two Americans- and an Englishman who, together with his Russian wife and two children- had done just that."⁹⁹ He knew the other Americans, such as Rosa, a woman who have lived in the Soviet Union, and asked her to confirm what the Soviets told him.¹⁰⁰ She responded with a yes. However, the Soviets and Rosa's assurances were not truly safeguards because of the simple fact that they were white, and that he was black. It is surprising that even though he was living in a "raceless society," his Blackness was a key factor for his stay until 1974. When Robinson was setting up a case to the U.S embassy to obtain an extension on his passports, he obtained evidence "of Americans working in Russia whose passports had been extended."¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, when he brought this evidence to the embassy, his appeal was still denied and ordered to return back to the U.S. Confronting this decision is where Robinson came to this conclusion: "The only difference between me and the people who received a passport extension was that they were white and I was black."¹⁰²

Another important reason why Robinson decided to accept Soviet citizenship was his commitment toward his education. He was recommended by his shop party secretary to apply to the Evening Institute of Mechanical Engineering in order to become a Mechanical engineer. Furthermore, the

⁹⁹ *ibid*, 109

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*

¹⁰¹ Robinson, 108

¹⁰² Robinson, 109

Soviet government would paid for his education.¹⁰³ He was not willing to sacrifice his dream of “becoming an engineer,”¹⁰⁴ and stated that it would be too painful for him to give it up. This is understandable considering comments from Prof. Michael Winston on a show that covered Robinson’s life titled ‘Reluctant Comrade.’ He stated that in the 1920s engineering was a field almost completely closed to black Americans. Although he added that Howard University began an engineering program in 1910 and graduated its first civil engineer in 1914, it took nearly three decades “for any blacks who were properly trained to be engineers to get any as engineers.”¹⁰⁵ With the racial realities that Black engineers faced in the first half of the twentieth century in America, it is became another reason for Robert Robinson to stay in the Soviet Union.

Robinson’s Identity and Soviet citizenship

Robert Robinson’s best days in the Soviet Union was during the time he held his U.S citizenship. His foreign status allowed him access to restaurants and clothing stores that had a wide range of commodities. This is a stark contrast to what the Soviet citizens had access to. In Soviet’s clothing shops there were mostly shabby clothes that were either oversized or undersized, and in grocery stores what was mostly sold was black bread and mustard. Robert Robinson’s foreign status allowed him to understand what it meant to not only have one’s humanity to be recognized, but what it meant to have that humanity be advocated and protested for internationally. This alternative experience was in further contrast to the U.S when it came to issues concerning “white supremacy, discrimination, and racial segregation.”¹⁰⁶ But when he gave up his U.S citizenship for Soviet citizenship, Robinson’s adjustment to his new Soviet life allowed him to confront harsh realities that other Black Americans were shielded from.

¹⁰³ Robert Robinson, 111

¹⁰⁴ Robinson, 118

¹⁰⁵ "Reluctant Comrade." Timewatch, British Broadcasting Corporation (London, UK: BBC, February 27, 1991).

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, 49

When he accepted Soviet Citizenship, Robert Robinson stated that he was the same person who was a “toolmaker, an inventor, and aspires to become an mechanical engineer.”¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, he lost access to elite shops that held western goods, and was forced to go to places catering to the Soviet population as a compromise.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the perception of Robinson as a foreigner, i.e., Black, first made him realize the negative treatment of Soviet citizens.

There were a wide variety of events that highlighted the consequences of Robert Robinson being a Soviet citizen. For instance, when he lost his watch while working as an actor and assistant for a Soviet film, the police provided a thorough investigation by questioning all the crew members, and giving Robert Robinson their undivided attention. However, when they later learned that he was a Soviet citizen, they didn't bother continuing the investigation. Another similar incident involved Robert Robinson going for a check-up. He was sent to the wrong hospital where it was for foreigners only, he asked a friendly assistant for help. However, when the assistant learned that he was a Soviet citizen, Robinson described that the doctor's expression “changed to a scowl.”¹⁰⁹

The contrasting treatment that Robinson receives leads us to ask these two questions: Did Robert Robinson receive bad treatment from Soviet officials because he was a Black American, or because Robinson was a Soviet Citizen? Or is it because Robinson was a Soviet citizen who is also a Black American? Robinson's status as a Black American was a double edge sword. Because of his physical appearance, though he is considered Black by Soviet standards of ethnicity, in regard to nationality he is deemed foreign. Soviet citizenship allowed him to experience a reality exclusive to Soviet citizens, yet his essential characteristic, i.e., his Blackness, seem to define his experience. What is perhaps most interesting about Robert Robinson's Soviet experience was that his blackness placed him in dangerous situations. For instance, there was a time where he was proclaimed a "foreign spy" at a factory. Thankfully, his co-workers alleviated the tension before it raised any curiosity among the secret police.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, 112

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, 382

¹¹⁰ *ibid*, 170

However, his national status as a foreign and his blackness at times saved his life. There was one instant where the secret police knocked on his door late at night, saw him, and apologized to him as they assumed that they knocked on the wrong door.¹¹¹ While there is the case of Lovett Fort-Whiteman, a Black communist and an American citizen, who became a victim of the purges, the essential difference between Fort-Whiteman and Robinson is that the latter's position was apolitical. Although Robinson's status as a black foreigner could have saved him from the purges, his apolitical position most likely contributed to the secret police's lack of interest in arresting him.

Robert Robinson had several identities because of the Soviet political climate. He was a Soviet citizen, a foreigner, and an apolitical Black American. Because of the various identities Robinson claimed, it played an important role in his ability to survive in the Soviet Union. However, it is clear that throughout Robinson's book, his experience in the Soviet Union was traumatizing. The obstacles that Robinson confronted left him questioning the creditability of the Soviet Union as an equal and raceless nation. In fact, one of the major themes in Robinson's book is arguing that racism did exist in the Soviet state.

Soviet Racism

Robert Robinson's essential argument is that although racism is illegal according to the Soviet constitution, it is apparent that racism lingered in Soviet society. Robinson's main point is rather puzzling because it is in stark contrast to the opinions of many Black Americans who, after traveling and interacting with the Soviet people, believed that racial equality was possible. However, Robert Robinson pointed out that those Black visitors were treated "like dignitaries," thus shielded from the harsh realities of Soviet society. As Robinson himself expressed: "These visitors obviously gained no understanding at all of what life was like for the average non-Russian in Soviet society."¹¹² They were presented in association with a positive representation of the Soviet Union. This image prevented them from giving a thorough critique of the Soviet state. This is especially evident when Robert Robinson asked Langston

¹¹¹ *ibid*, 122-123

¹¹² *ibid*, 305

Hughes's input on Soviet society. Hughes replied that although "he [hasn't] seen enough [of the Soviet Union], he added "that there are some things that the U.S could copy [from the USSR], to its benefit."¹¹³ Hughes' answer are of the many responses that were genuinely ambivalent towards the realities of Soviet life, something which Robinson is strongly aware of.

It is interesting that Robert Robinson makes a bolder and broader claim by stating that during and after the 1960s, "all blacks were treated as second-class human beings."¹¹⁴ He clarifies this statement by adding that the moment Black Americans "let their defenses down" after moving to the USSR, they will get rejected by the Soviet people, resulting in an experience of embarrassment and disillusionment.¹¹⁵ This is a daring statement because Robinson never elaborated nor provided examples of racial violence inflicted towards Black Americans by Soviet citizens. However, there is a possibility that Robinson's claims of Soviet racism were alluding to the second wave of the Black diasporic migration.

It must be taken into account that the first wave of Black travelers consisted mostly of Black Americans and Afro Caribbeans from the 1920s to the 1930s. Some of them, like W.E.B Du Bois and Paul Robeson, traveled to critically observe the Soviet experiment, and to observe whether or not the young nation's claim of being an anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonialist country were true. Moreover, they came to the Soviet Union in hopes of leaving their western and colonial experiences of racial alienation, and like Robert Robinson to be exposed to various economic opportunities in the Soviet Union. Although most of the Black travelers were not ideologically fluent in Soviet politics, the overwhelming humane experience left them sympathetic to Soviet ideals.

In contrast, the second wave consisted of African students (mostly male) from independent nations in postcolonial Africa. When they arrived the Soviet Union was a shell of its former self. The purges devastated the revolutionary spirit of the Soviet state, and heavily decreased the nation's political and social capital. Joseph Stalin revived Russian nationalism in World War II to appeal to the Soviet people's morale, and motivated them to fight against Nazi Germany. Furthermore, the emergence of the

¹¹³ *ibid*, 324

¹¹⁴ *ibid*, 301

¹¹⁵ *ibid*, 302

Cold War caused the Soviet Union to become more politically assertive with their ideology. However, after Stalin's death, the Soviet Union was able to once again become an inclusive and international space, willing to demonstrate their commitment to the fight against colonialism and imperialism. Eventually, the Soviet government began to offer generous scholarships to students from African independent nations. In 1959 there were no more than seven students enrolled, but by 1961 the African student enrollment increased to 500. By the end of the 1960s, the African student population was more than 5,000.

Unlike the Black travelers before them, the African students went to the Soviet Union to have access to affordable education. They weren't interested in Soviet ideology, and therefore become hostile when noticing that educational programs also consisted of courses like Marxism/Lennism or Communist Party History. While it has been stated earlier that Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois held an accommodist position towards the Soviet Union, the African students were less forgiving. During the 1960s, African students were protesting against everything about their Soviet college life, from restrictions on dating Russians girls, forming national and ethnic student associations, to traveling. They also reported racist incidents and fights with Soviet youngsters. One of the most tragic events was the death of a Ghanaian student in Moscow, and this provoked one of the first unauthorized demonstration in the Soviet Union since 1927.

Robert Robinson must have been aware of these events in part because of his connections with various of African delegates. However, most of what has been stated is speculated because he stated that the racism he experienced corresponded to the rising tensions between African students and Soviet citizens, where the seeds of racial bigotry and xenophobia manifested itself in post-Soviet Russia. In other words, if the reader is not invested in doing the research to validate Robinson's claims, then what remains is for the reader to accept his word on faith. In Robinson's defense, he mentioned that the government successfully cultivated "Russian biases" that only a trained eye would be able to see through.¹¹⁶

Robert Robinson does not have incontrovertible incriminating evidence of Soviet racism. However, he does go into detail about his personal experience of racism in the Soviet state. Throughout

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, 301

his life in the country, Robinson stated that he has never been promoted, yet has noticed that Russian/white workers with less experience than him occupied higher paid positions. With this realization he came to this conclusion:

“With my professional record, if I had been white, I would have received career promotions... I was never allowed to go on foreign or domestic technical missions, where other designers- Russians, of course- with much less experience than I were sent. Often they would return with new ideas that they could not implement on the drawing board, so they would turn to me to figure out how to make their borrowed concepts work.”¹¹⁷

He stated that Russians refuse to acknowledge their prejudice towards black people and other ethnic and national groups of people. If they acknowledge their flaws then they also have to violate and reconstruct their notion “of equality and brotherly love.”¹¹⁸ Eventually, this experience contributed to his belief that the Soviet Union is not an anti-racist society.

Black Political Dilemmas

When Robert Robinson came to his own understanding that racism existed in Soviet Russia, he was simultaneously trying to get out of the country. He asked Paul Robeson if he could convince the Soviet authorities to allow him to travel to Ethiopia, where he could teach his technical knowledge.¹¹⁹ Robinson understood that Paul Robeson had the connections to help him get a visa to Ethiopia, and return to the United States. Nevertheless, Robeson didn't provide such assistance.

Why was Paul Robeson hesitant in helping Robert Robinson leave the Soviet Union? Eslanda Robeson, wife of Paul Robeson, who came to the Soviet Union in the early 1950s gave Robinson a response, she stated:

“Robinson, you asked Paul to help you go to Ethiopia. We have thought about your request, and he has decided that he cannot help you. You see, we do not really know you well enough, to know what is in your mind. Suppose he were to help you leave, and then

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, 302

¹¹⁸ *ibid*

¹¹⁹ *ibid*, 313

when you arrived in Ethiopia, you decided to turn anti- Soviet. We would find ourselves in trouble with the authorities here.”¹²⁰

When we untangle the complexity behind the Robeson’s ambivalence and hesitance at providing sympathy towards Robinson’s circumstances, it is evident that there are political stakes involved. While it is true that Paul and Eslanda Robeson helped arrange their family members escape from the Soviet Union, the decision to not assist Robinson escape from the Soviet Union was a reflection of their accommodationist position with the Soviet Union. Cold war politics is one of the major factors that prevented the Robesons from using their Soviet connections to help Robinson leave the Soviet state. However, their hesitance to help Robinson is rooted in their experience of racism in the United States, and the humane solidarity they received from the Soviet people and their officials. It is important to consider that the immediate experiences that Black Americans had in the Soviet Union were in turn shaped by the racial encounters witnessed in the United States. While this may be true, Eslanda Robeson’s statement is a reflection of their understanding that to explicitly associate themselves with Robert Robinson’s escape would potentially affect their relationship with the Soviet Union.

Leaving the Soviet State

Even though some Black American figures like Paul and Eslanda Robeson did not invest their time in helping Robert Robinson leave Soviet Russia, there were other Black figures who had a genuine interest in assisting Robinson in returning back to the United States. Because of the emergence of the Cold War, and the wave of independent movements in many African nations, the Soviet’s anti-colonial stance led them to invest in partnerships with postcolonial African nations. Through the Soviet-African relationship, Robinson was able to captivate relationships with African officials that would help him leave the Soviet state.

The Soviet bureaucracy had made various attempts to make it difficult for Robinson to leave Soviet Russia. Since the end of World War II, the U.S.S.R denied his visa application consistently. Considering

¹²⁰ *ibid*, 317

the amount of investment and exploitation that the U.S.S.R asserted towards Robinson's ideological position initially, and Robinson's daunting experience during the Great Purges and World War II, the risk of having him leave the USSR and potentially spreading anti-Soviet rhetoric would go against the nation's interest. It is very likely that with Robinson's insider knowledge of the Soviet state, he would vocalized it that would consequently lead the Soviet Union losing the support from Black Diasporic communities. However, Robinson was able to finally leave the Soviet nation after receiving the approval to visit Uganda in 1974. Four years later, thanks to his connections with former Black American Foreign Service officer William Davis, Robinson finally returned to the United States. When Robinson return, one of the first thing he did was to write his experience living in the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

Robert Robinson's book is unique because it was the first book where a Black American expressed harsh disdain for the Soviet Citizen. However, such harsh criticism raises some concerns. It is evident that from reading the book and learning the experiences that Robinson have went through for forty-four years left him traumatized. But if a person has undergone a unique yet traumatizing experience, can it be possible for that same person, who can vividly detail that traumatic experience, to be taken advantage of for ideological and political purposes? It can be argued that the interpretive void created by Robinson's trauma can be used to reinforce anti-Red rhetoric that could undermine political programs among Leftist organizations.

Black on Red: My 44 years in the Soviet Union (1988) was published in the final years of the Reagan administration by a publishing house, Acropolis Books, "with connections to the C.I.A."¹²¹ Scholars who have read Robinson might have questioned its accuracy since the C.I.A has a history of funding writing projects involving disillusioned people who previously took part in socialist and communist activities. However, the anti-Soviet sentiments within the memoir actually appears to be "a genuine reflection of Robinson's opinions."¹²²

¹²¹ Keys, 34

¹²² Keys, 34

These suspicions are understandable because Robert Robinson's text can also be described as a literary experience detailing trauma. Robinson's experience as he articulates it in the book raises an idea that Robinson couldn't live a normal life- even after returning back to the United States. He was watched over by the secret police in public, and his colleagues at his workplace watched over him as well. It was difficult for him to reach out to family in the U.S. because communication lines were cut during the peak of the purges and the war. Furthermore, the Soviet denied Robert Robinson a visa after the war, preventing him from seeing his mother before she passed away.

What is most important about Robert Robinson's experience in the Soviet Union was that he survived. Many of Robinson's friends and acquaintances were not able to survive the purges. During this time, Robinson stated the Soviet Union's objective was to create a new Soviet citizen who only thinks socialist thoughts, and strives to advance the socialist cause.¹²³ But what Robinson neglected to mention was that the purge atmosphere contributed another component to the creation of the new Soviet citizen: they don't express their true thoughts in public spaces in fear of their neighbor. Therefore, the Soviet citizen's isolation forces them to only trust and eventually depend on the government. Robert Robinson had to quickly learn how to behave in a way that would be perceived as normal among the Soviet population. If a person was to go outside that norm then it would raise suspicion among Soviet authorities.¹²⁴

What proved to be most significant in helping Robert Robinson survive the fierce political climate in the Soviet Union was having enough social capital to navigate spaces of high surveillance, and cautiously keep his distance from Soviet politics. It can be assumed that it took Robinson a much longer time to eventually become accustomed to life in America. Moreover, it is true that nearly all Black diasporic people who have either traveled, resided, or lived in the Soviet Union survived the purges. But it is also true that nearly all of the same people were foreigners who held citizenship in other countries.

¹²³ Robinson, 115

¹²⁴ *ibid*, 126-127

Four years after publishing his book, Robinson passed away due to cancer. While Robert Robinson's main goal was to reveal that Soviet Racism did exist, it seems that the existence of racism is limited to his experience as a citizen. Considering that he lived in the Soviet Union for over four decades without ever being promoted to a higher paying position, it is evident that Robinson faced racial discrimination. In the end, when reading about Robert Robinson's book, it is crucial to question and analyze Soviet's claims of being an anti-racist nation.

Conclusion

What has been overlooked in the historiography of the Cold War was the role that Black Americans had in shaping Soviet and American foreign policies. In addition, while Black-Soviet studies garnered attention in academia, it remains an understudied subject. The U.S.S.R. offered an alternative experience for Black people who had an interest in removing their sense of racial

alienation, to replace it with an experience of humane warmth (frame this is the context of citizenship, connect both sentences for smoother transition)

When W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson traveled to Soviet Russia, their experience was a contributing factor toward adopting Black radicalism. However, their politics conflicted with popular Black and American discourses on race and racism, which was shifting from an understanding of racism as an institutional and colonial problem to a psychological issue rooted in individual prejudices. This gradual shift towards incorporating a Cold War liberal anti-Communist lens to articulate and fight against domestic anti-black racism consequently undermined political groups who incorporated a framework that intersected a Pan-African, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist critique of world systems. Consequently, left-leaning activists such as Du Bois and Robeson who remained resistant to the shaping of the Cold War landscape were left repressed by the Red Scare, discredited by Black mainstream leaders, and saw their influence in Black American politics marginalized.

Robeson's and Du Bois' moral and political disappointment is justified. Still, some would argue that their disappointment limited their ability to analyze and articulate the indiscriminatory and Jewish oppression which took place in the Soviet Union. How can an activist who advocates for human freedom and racial equality support Joseph Stalin and his colleagues, leaders who committed one of the most heinous crimes in human history? Furthermore, how can a person remain committed to not acknowledging Stalin's crimes after Nikita Khrushchev's denounced Stalin in his "Secret Speech?" We must consider that, despite the crimes witnessed in the U.S.S.R, Du Bois and Robeson were more invested in pushing awareness on the racial violence that Black Americans witnessed in the United States, and the global inequalities predicted from colonialism and imperialism. Their political frameworks are rooted in the Black Radical

Tradition, where its focus articulates the experiences of colonial peoples throughout the world and issues surrounding white supremacy. For them to publicly criticize the Soviet Union would provide ammunition for people who Du Bois and Robeson believed are resistant to change, politicians and other influential figures who uphold an Eurocentric and/or white supremacist view.

However, Du Bois' and Robeson's concern for Cold War politics and the greater cause of Black liberation allowed them to neglect problems that were taking place in Soviet Russia. In fact, it is the essential reason as to why Paul and Eslanda Robeson made the decision to not assist Robert Robinson in returning to the United States. Robert Robinson, an apolitical individual who desired access to economic opportunities, found himself exposed to the Soviet purges, and unable to travel because of the Cold War political landscape. While Robinson was able to leave the Soviet state and write his autobiographical account, he is a Black subaltern. Despite his experience as a Soviet citizen and a Black foreigner, his voice was largely silenced by the Soviets. Consequently, Robert Robinson's articulation of his experience throughout his book is deeply political. Despite his assertions of being apolitical throughout his life, he embodied the Black and Red experience by being perceived as a Black communist throughout most of the Cold War. In other words, Robinson's narrative was silenced, and when his voice was finally liberated it spontaneously became politicized for the same exact reasons.

In the end, while W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and Robert Robinson have displayed their ability to have control over their destiny, these Black figures in the long run were victimized by the pressures of the Cold War that deeply inform the way their legacies are interpreted, spoken about, and taught in the present.

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