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Opposing Jim Crow

Meredith L. Roman

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OPPOSING JIM CROW

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OPPOSING JIM CROW

African Americans and
the Soviet Indictment of
U.S. Racism, 1928–1937

MEREDITH L. ROMAN

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In loving memory of Michael J. Roman (1972-92)

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PREFACE

Throughout the many years I have been working on this project, diverse people have asked me how I became interested in comparative Soviet and African American history. I always appreciated their curiosity but I could never adequately address the question because the answer is complex. At the most basic level, my response would have to begin with the small town in central New Jersey where I grew up. As a result of my hometown's all-white working-class population, which was the result of a history of "sundown" laws (de facto or otherwise), I quickly became aware of its notorious reputation as a place unfriendly to persons of color and to African Americans in particular. Placed in the context of this study, the town in which I grew up in the 1980s and early 1990s had the exact opposite image and reputation that Soviet authorities cultivated for the cities and towns of the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s.

Since I grew up in a household where racist attitudes were abhorred, I became increasingly embarrassed by my hometown's racist reputation and frustrated with my schooling experience. From elementary school through high school, the curriculum (in both history and literature) erased Asians, Latinos, First Nations Peoples, and African Americans, who were the main targets of my classmates' racist diatribes in spite of their physical absence from the school (and town). As I entered middle school, I did extra reading and chose topics for assignments that dealt with the history of racism and, more specifically, the history of African Americans. I was trying to make

sense of why the working-class whites in my small town would harbor such racial animus toward blacks, with whom they had virtually no (meaningful) contact, and when African Americans were so obviously not the source of their economic oppression. At the same time, I was also trying to signal my unequivocal rejection of the dominant racial mores that many of my classmates espoused or tacitly accepted. I recall all this not to claim that I was a remarkable youth, but quite the contrary, to underscore how white privilege allowed me (and continues to allow me) to safely examine the history of racial injustice as an intellectual problem rather than as a real life, everyday experience, and to highlight the severe limitations that often accompany efforts to pursue an antiracist agenda. To be sure, the dilemmas I wrestled with as a teenager ultimately influenced—albeit indirectly—my decision to examine the first pursuit of state-sponsored antiracism in modern Europe and, by extension, African American and Soviet history.

My experiences in Freeport, Bahamas, though brief, expanded my intellectual interest in the history of racial injustice beyond the United States. I traveled with my family to this Caribbean island to pursue alternate treatment for my nineteen-year-old brother, who was soon to succumb to non-Hodgkins lymphoma, despite two years of radiation and chemotherapy. Since we were not tourists confined to the overwhelmingly white resort areas, I was exposed, as a sophomore in high school, to the extreme poverty that marked the lives of most Bahamians of African descent. My history classes and my own supplementary reading had left me ill-equipped to process the obscene racialized economic disparities that Western imperialism and globalization had created beyond the borders of the United States.

I was not introduced to the history of the Soviet Union and the direct challenges it posed to Western imperialism until I reached college. At the College of New Jersey (then Trenton State College) I first became acquainted with the promises of the Soviet experiment through the lectures that Tom Allsen eloquently delivered. In supervising my senior honors thesis, Tom encouraged me to investigate Soviet nationality policy, or what Terry Martin would term the policies of the “affirmative action empire.” My newfound interest in exploring

the Soviet experiment was now combined with a specific exploration of Soviet efforts to promote internationalism through the eradication of centuries of national inequality and injustice.

My investigation into Soviet internationalism evolved to include African Americans and became refined as an exploration of the Soviet Union's indictment of U.S. racism once I reached the Comparative Black History (CBH) Program at Michigan State University. The CBH Program is the final yet extremely critical component in adequately explaining how I arrived at a study of Soviet and African American history. Members of the then vibrant CBH Program (both professors and students alike) strongly encouraged the exploration of the history of the black diaspora and the black liberation struggle in its many incarnations. Combined with the indispensable support of Lewis Siegelbaum, my adviser in Soviet history, the atmosphere of dynamic intellectual inquiry and exchange of the CBH Program provided the necessary context for pursuing a subject that at the time had received minimal scholarly attention. Lewis's support was particularly valuable because some Western historians of the Soviet Union dismissed my project as having no significance to the history of the USSR. Excluded from this conservative group was, of course, Allison Blakely, whose monumental 1986 study *Russia and the Negro* was critical in inspiring my investigation into African Americans' role in Soviet antiracism.

In addition to some of the individuals mentioned above, there are many other people who made a comparative study like this possible. My thanks to the directors and staffs of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), the U.S. National Archives, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Houghton Library at the Harvard College Library, the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives. I greatly appreciate the access to sources facilitated by the research librarians in the now defunct Baltic and Slavic Division of the New York Public Library and European Reading Room at the Library of Congress. J. Arch Getty and Elena Ser-

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A number of friends and colleagues associated with the once vibrant Comparative Black History Program at Michigan State University deserve mention. These include Kennetta Hammond Perry, Pero G. Dagbovie, John Wess Grant, Sowande' Mustakeem, Mona Jackson, Morey Lewis, Eric M. Washington, Dawne Y. Curry, Tracy K. Flemming, Marshanda Smith, Shannon Vance Harris, and Tamba M'bayo. I am extremely grateful to Matthew C. Whitaker for his interest in my work and for his empathetic responses to my inquiries about the publishing process. Eric D. Duke's friendship has been a tremendous gift to me, and I can never adequately express how much his sarcasm, encouragement, and thoughtfulness over the years has meant to me. I want to thank Jody Duke for her profound generosity, and Mya and Xavier Duke for always making me smile. Joseph M. Kassick and Monika Tom-

czuk helped me survive high school and the subsequent phases of our lives with their thoughtfulness, creativity, and laughter. Marcie Cowley has been an invaluable ally in Soviet history and I cannot imagine the historical profession or navigating Moscow without her.

I have been blessed with parents, Ronald and Cecilia Roman, who have selflessly supported—in countless ways—all my scholarly pursuits regardless of how much geographic distance it has placed between us, and made sure that I was well equipped to meet the many challenges I faced. They have visited me in every area of the United States in which I spent time. I can never repay them for their unconditional love and support. To members of the Quinn, Kuldoshes, Kaufmann, and Englehart families, thank you for always believing in me. Jenny (Kaufmann) Chalecki is owed a special thank you for her immense generosity.

My partner, best friend, and husband, Kenneth E. Marshall, is owed the greatest thanks. Over the years he has patiently endured endless discussions of diverse aspects and ideas in this book, read through and provided valuable feedback on several drafts of chapters, astutely recognized when coffee was needed, made me laugh when ideas and writing were not forthcoming, accompanied me to various conferences and listened to me practice numerous papers, and bravely made the trek to Moscow to remind me that my project was important. His love, intellect, and friendship have proven immeasurable. Last but certainly not least, I must acknowledge our newborn son, Julius Michael Marshall, who has brought such incredible joy to our lives, and whom we love so very much.

OPPOSING JIM CROW

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Introduction

The Birth of a Nation

On December 1, 1958, amidst the Berlin Crisis, U.S. senator Hubert H. Humphrey had an unprecedented eight-hour-long meeting with Nikita Khrushchev in the Kremlin. Humphrey explained afterward that at one point during their conversation the Soviet leader “tore off on a whole long lecture like I wish I could remember [because it would have been] the best speech I could ever make in my life on antiracialism. Boy, he really gave me a talk on that.”¹ Khrushchev’s verbosity in “speaking antiracism” in 1958, which greatly impressed the U.S. senator, was not a new skill that the Soviet leader had cultivated in the 1950s as a result of Cold War politics.² Rather, it was from the 1920s through the mid-1930s that Khrushchev and other young party officials—with the help of African Americans—learned to “speak antiracism.”³ Decades before most American senators even expressed interest in giving speeches on “antiracialism,” Soviet authorities used Jim Crow to claim the moral superiority of the USSR and contest America’s image as the world’s beacon of democracy and freedom.

Before the Nazis came to power in Germany, U.S. racism was identified in the Soviet Union as the most egregiously horrific aspect of capitalism, and the United States was represented as the most racist country in the world. This book investigates the Soviet indictment of American racial apartheid in the decades between the two world wars, and the role of African Americans in the first form of state-sponsored antiracism in modern Europe. Between 1928 and 1934, the pursuit of antiracism assumed the level of a priority or “hard-line” policy.⁴ Photo-

graphs, children's stories, film, newspaper articles, political education campaigns, and court proceedings exposed the hypocrisy of America's racial democracy, represented the USSR as a superior society where racism was absent, and identified African Americans as valued allies in resisting an imperialist war against the first workers' state.

Notwithstanding the considerable propagandistic value that Soviet leaders stood to gain at home and abroad from drawing attention to U.S. racism, Soviet antiracism challenged the prevailing white supremacist notion—dominant throughout Europe and the globe—that blacks were biologically inferior and unworthy of equality with whites. At the same time it raised critical awareness of the routine violation of African Americans' human rights. To be sure, interwar America was a place of extreme racial apartheid; this was no exaggeration of Soviet propaganda. The 1920s and 1930s punctuate the time period that some African American historians identify as the “nadir” of black American life, beginning in the 1890s. In addition to the race riots, or mass violence perpetrated against black communities in the wake of the First World War, everyday life for the average African American consisted of routine racial degradation, lower wages, exclusion from most skilled labor and trade unions, inferior living conditions and public accommodations, and disproportionate rates of unemployment which the Great Depression exacerbated.⁵ Moreover, despite their status as U.S. citizens, African Americans enjoyed little to no protection under the law. This was evidenced most clearly in the U.S. government's refusal to take any action to stop lynching or other extralegal acts of racial terrorism directed primarily against black men.⁶ Confronted with America as a place of “unfreedom,” U.S. blacks pursued a variety of strategies to protest and improve their less than equal status. It is within this context that African Americans of diverse political and socioeconomic backgrounds became instrumental contributors to the Soviet indictment of U.S. racism and architects of the USSR's image as a refuge from American “freedom.”

Concerned with African Americans' involvement in Soviet antiracism, this book does not delve into the “hidden transcript” to capture black Americans' lived experiences in the first workers' state or

Soviet citizens' genuine feelings toward them.⁷ A few recent studies address these important issues directly. These include Joy Gleason Carew's *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, Kate Baldwin's *Beyond the Color Line*, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore's *Defying Dixie*, the scholarship of Maxim Matusевич, and Allison Blakely's foundational 1986 study, *Russia and the Negro*.⁸ Alternatively, an investigation of Soviet antiracism is the focal point of *Opposing Jim Crow*. To this end, my purpose is not simply to document Soviet antiracism but to present it as a discursive field in which its themes, images, and manifestations were glorified, redefined, and contested by various individuals and organizations—for an array of reasons—but with the same objective: representing the Soviet Union as a society where racism was absent. African Americans—not just those of prominence or with Communist Party membership cards—were indispensable creators of and participants in this discourse and, by implication, in shaping the USSR's identity as an emerging world power. They helped bring awareness of Jim Crow to the USSR, making African American oppression central to Soviet representations of U.S. democracy, and concurrently, central to representations of Soviet exceptionalism regarding race. In recognizing African Americans' substantive contributions to Soviet antiracism, this book furthers the scholarship of Kate Baldwin, Mark Naison, Robin D. G. Kelley, Mark Solomon, and William Maxwell, who demonstrate to varying degrees the integral role black Americans played in influencing Comintern policy and Soviet society.⁹

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, contemporary Soviet and African American newspapers constructed, reformulated, and exhibited the Soviet Union as a society intolerant of racism. (Such efforts were particularly consistent in the Soviet press from 1930 through 1932 and from 1934 through 1937 in the African American [non-Communist] press.) Besides newspapers, this book employs the memoirs of several black Americans and the collections of Comintern, trade union, and propaganda organizations located in GARF, the State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii), and RGASPI, the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'noi i politicheskoi istorii). The

information found in these archival records, memoirs, and newspapers is read critically, with an appreciation for what they represent rather than as descriptors of Soviet reality.¹⁰ Thus, the *Chicago Defender*, the records of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTSSPS), and the pages of its organ, *Trud* (Labor), do not necessarily provide evidence that the USSR had eliminated racism. Instead, they demonstrate that in the 1930s trade union officials in the Soviet Union and editors of the non-Communist African American press in the United States were speaking their own brands of Soviet antiracism, that is, engaging in rhetoric that authenticated the USSR as a society where racism was absent. The discursive field of Soviet antiracism, in other words, traversed the Atlantic to include blacks who never set foot on Soviet soil.

Though this book focuses on the Soviet indictment of U.S. racism from 1928 through 1937, it does not suggest that hitherto, authorities in Moscow had ignored American racial oppression. Leaders of the Third International had demonstrated interest in the plight of black workers since the organization's First World Congress in 1919.¹¹ This interest received its first concrete expression in 1922, when the Fourth Comintern Congress organized a "Negro Bureau" and formulated a "Thesis on the Negro Question," which acknowledged the Comintern's support of all black liberation movements that helped undermine imperialism (conceptualized by V. I. Lenin as the highest stage of capitalism).¹² Otto Huiswood, a U.S. black Communist originally of Dutch Guiana, was appointed head of the bureau. Claude McKay, the Jamaican-born U.S. poet who traveled to Moscow independent of the Workers Party of America delegation (the predecessor of the U.S. Communist Party), was designated the face or "poster child" of the alliance that the Comintern officially forged with black workers at the congress.¹³

As several scholars and biographers of McKay have discussed, Comintern authorities' preference for McKay over Huiswood was based entirely on his darker skin color, which conformed to Russians' stereotypical notions of blackness. Huiswood's light complexion made

him more tolerable to the white American Communists (who resented the Comintern's order that they include a black representative), yet less desirable to officials in Moscow. They were ignorant of the complexities of U.S. racism and wanted McKay's dark skin to authenticate Soviet enlightenment. As Joy Carew writes, "McKay's darker skin stood in greater contrast to the white faces of the Russians around him, and, therefore, his propaganda value as a symbol in photos and publications was also greater."¹⁴ Huiswood, as Kate Baldwin likewise explains, "was too light-skinned to afford the crucial racial distinctions between black and white that could herald the Soviet Union as the true model for global internationalism."¹⁵ "Color-struck" Comintern leaders invited McKay to sit on the platform and address the congress on the plight of U.S. blacks.¹⁶ McKay's speech was subsequently published in *Pravda*, with strategic changes. Most notably, McKay's extended discussion of racism among American Communists was removed to confine racism to bourgeois society.¹⁷ The Comintern's alliance with black workers, which the exhibition of McKay symbolized, extended beyond the halls of the Fourth Congress. Photographs of McKay posing with various Soviet officials and at key Russian historic sites appeared in central newspapers, and he spoke at factories and meetings of Soviet intellectuals. Huiswood was not excluded from these publicity engagements but became "black" by association with McKay; both men were consequently named to the Moscow City Soviet.¹⁸

In addition to publishing his Fourth Congress speech in *Pravda* in altered form, Comintern authorities commissioned McKay to write *Negroes in America* (1923), a one-hundred-page nonfictional work that presents U.S. black history and life from a Marxist perspective, and a collection of three short stories, titled *A Trial by Lynching: Stories about the Life of Negroes in North America* (1925).¹⁹ *Negroes in America* was allegedly required reading for high-ranking Soviet officials, but a limited number of copies were printed; in 1932 Langston Hughes looked for a copy of this "African-American primer for Soviet beginners" that was already out of print.²⁰

Despite this initial flurry of attention devoted to black workers, it did not extend in any substantive way beyond McKay's visit. Rather,

Soviet interest in exposing the contradictions in U.S. democracy's treatment of African Americans before 1928 is best conceived as a latent or soft-line policy.²¹ Certainly, a few Soviet writers and officials who visited the United States in the early to mid-1920s commented on American racism in published accounts of their travels, but so had some of their prerevolutionary Russian predecessors.²² The best-known example from the 1920s is the revolutionary poet Vladimir Maiakovskii, who indicted U.S. racial oppression (including white men's use of rape to terrorize black "girls") in verse and in a travelogue titled *My Discovery of America*.²³ Yet apart from the work of Claude McKay, Maiakovskii, and a few others among the Soviet elite, literary works by and about U.S. blacks were not printed consistently in the Soviet Union until the 1930s when, as chapter 2 outlines, the publication of these materials reached its peak.

Similar to literary works, information about U.S. race relations appeared sporadically in Soviet newspapers of the 1920s, therefore corresponding with what Jeffrey Brooks argues was the ambiguous but generally positive image of America found in the press during the first decade of Bolshevik rule.²⁴ Of equal significance, central authorities neither organized a political education campaign to condemn U.S. racism in the 1920s nor made a concerted effort to portray Soviet citizens as outraged by American racial injustice. Additionally, the number of black Americans who visited the USSR prior to 1928 paled in comparison to those who traveled to the country thereafter. W. E. B. Du Bois, the preeminent African American leader and intellectual, first toured the Soviet Union for two months during the late summer of 1926 (which included the celebration of International Youth Day in Moscow). But Du Bois generated absolutely no fanfare, something that would become unfeasible a few years later, not to mention in the decades after the Second World War (in spite of his light-skinned complexion).²⁵

What helped elevate the Soviet indictment of U.S. racism to a hard-line or priority policy after 1928? What inspired propagandists to identify African Americans as allies of Soviet citizens (not just of the Comintern), and what encouraged a greater number of these African

American allies to traverse Soviet territory? Two major corresponding shifts in domestic and Comintern policy informed these developments. By 1929 central authorities abandoned the New Economic Policy (1921–27), which sought to attain socialism through capitalist practices, and launched a campaign to build socialism through rapid industrialization as outlined in the First (1928–32) and Second (1933–37) Five-Year Plans. They simultaneously pursued various means to represent the USSR as a superior, unmistakably “noncapitalist society.”²⁶ The designation of U.S. industry as the model of development and the recruitment of a substantial number of workers from the United States (and other capitalist countries) to help eradicate the Soviet Union’s industrial inferiority made this objective particularly imperative. The indictment of U.S. racism helped assuage anxieties among officials in Moscow that they were simply reinstituting capitalism.²⁷ Having launched a campaign to build a new society and people, the incentive emerged to represent Soviet citizens as committed to racial equality and as appalled by the stark racial inequalities in the United States.²⁸

Moscow’s heightened interest in condemning U.S. racism was also motivated by the ascendancy of the Comintern’s militant Third Period (1928–35). In 1928 authorities of the Third International posited that the “gradual and partial stabilization” of capitalism characteristic of the “second period” (1924–28) was being replaced by an impending crisis in capitalism that would bring with it a proliferation of revolutionary opportunities. To capitalize on these opportunities, Comintern leaders ordered Communist parties around the world to abandon their coalition policies with working-class parties while they assessed the revolutionary potential of black Americans. As a result of this assessment, Comintern officials at the Sixth World Comintern Congress in 1928 declared African Americans as an oppressed nation with the right to national self-determination and anointed them the vanguard among colonized nations.²⁹

The “birth of the African American nation” at the Sixth Congress, in conjunction with the project of building socialism, encouraged the elevation of antiracism to a priority policy in the years that fol-

lowed. The decree effectively made American blacks “indispensable allies” to the USSR at a time when the country was building socialism in what Soviet leaders depicted as an extremely antagonistic capitalist world.³⁰ Paradoxically, America’s status as the most advanced capitalist country not only rendered it the model of Soviet industrial development but also (by the logic of the militant Third Period) made the United States the USSR’s most formidable enemy. Officially recognized as valued allies, a veritable fifth column that would resist the U.S. bourgeoisie’s efforts to wage an imperialist war against the Soviet Union, African Americans henceforth received more sustained attention in the first workers’ state. The increased persecution they suffered in the Depression-ridden United States was depicted as the first steps in the U.S. capitalists’ plot to destroy the country of Soviets. Whereas Comintern officials spoke of U.S. racism as an impediment to the international revolutionary movement, in the Soviet Union it was represented as a threat, albeit indirect, to the country’s national security.³¹

Due largely to the increased attention to African American oppression that these two monumental policy shifts precipitated, the number of U.S. blacks who visited the USSR in the interwar decades reached its height between 1928 and 1937. The Comintern’s emphasis on militant agitation and elevation of black Americans’ status in the revolutionary family meant that a larger number of black Americans were admitted to КУТУ—the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (Kommunisticheskii universitet trudiashchikhsia Vostoka)—and the International Lenin School (Mezhdunarodnaia leninskaia shkola) and attended the organization’s international congresses (and those of its affiliates). At the same time, the demands of the First and Second Five-Year Plans created opportunities in Soviet industry and agriculture, which the Great Depression in the United States made attractive to black workers who, as mentioned earlier, were hit hardest by unemployment. Additional black Americans traveled to the USSR during this era of capitalism in crisis to examine in person the country’s image as a superior, raceless society.³²

The movement of black Americans between the United States and

USSR, like Soviet interest in indicting American racism, dissipated by 1937. War seemed imminent on the continent, and suspicion of all foreigners intensified in the Soviet Union. Few if any newcomers joined the ranks of the small yet significant Soviet African American community after 1937 on either a temporary or long-term basis. By 1939 Paul Robeson had removed his son, Pauli, from the Moscow school where he was enrolled in 1936.³³ The majority of U.S. blacks who remained in the USSR by late 1937 stayed there at least through the duration of the Second World War. These African Americans, many of whom appear throughout this study, included Robert Robinson, Frank Goode (Robeson's brother-in-law), Homer Smith, Williana Burroughs and her sons Neal and Charles, Lloyd Patterson, Robert Ross, Oliver Golden, George Tynes, and Wayland Rudd. Like all inhabitants of the USSR, these African Americans were divested of their civil rights. Overwhelmingly, however, their blackness allowed them to escape persecution during the Stalinist "Great Terror" (1936–38) despite their foreign origins.³⁴

The lone exception was Lovett Fort-Whiteman (James Jackson), a member of the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) and resident of Moscow since 1928. He was sentenced to internal exile in Kazakhstan in 1937 for "anti-Soviet agitation" and died in a Siberian labor camp in 1939.³⁵ Tragically, Fort-Whiteman's fate was the result of political infighting within the CPUSA, which stemmed from his persistent opposition to the Comintern's support of black self-determination and his eccentric personality. Fort-Whiteman's death could have been averted had U.S. Party leaders approved his request in October 1933 to return to the United States to work as an instructor in the New York Party School. Denied return, Fort-Whiteman's attacks on the Party escalated. By 1936 he had been expelled from the Party as a "Trotskyist," and William Patterson, a leading black American Communist, charged him with having a pernicious influence on Moscow's black American expatriate community. Despite running completely afoul of the Communist Party, Fort-Whiteman could have still escaped imprisonment and death had the U.S. consulate in Moscow approved his application for a passport in early 1936.³⁶

While the threat of imperialist war against the USSR persisted in

the second half of the 1930s, Soviet officials perceived its primary architects to be Nazi Germans instead of U.S. capitalists. As a consequence, African Americans ceased to be identified as valued allies of the first workers' state. It became advantageous for authorities in Moscow, intent on forging an antifascist alliance with the governments of the United States, France, and Britain, to "go soft" on U.S. racism, that is, pursue significantly less militant, Popular Front tactics, the effects of which informed Soviet propaganda prior to the Comintern's adoption of it as official policy in 1935.³⁷ The Nazis' rise to power in early 1933, along with the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States that November, played a key role in subordinating the indictment of U.S. racism to antifascism. Though Germany had become the main enemy, Soviet leaders continued to reject as unenlightened and inferior a society defined by racism.

Soviet leaders' equation of modernity with the transcendence of racism seems all the more unique when placed within the context of a world that was witnessing the consolidation of racial theory and defining modern civilization in hierarchical racial terms.³⁸ Anxieties on the Left and the Right about racial decline, degeneration, and reinvigoration fueled the ascendancy of biological racism in Europe. The boundaries of national communities throughout the continent, including the new nation states of Poland, Hungary, and Romania, were redrawn to include members of one putatively homogenous ethno-racial biological group at the exclusion and discrimination of others.³⁹ Antiracist movements—many of which were affiliated with the Comintern—emerged in response to the burgeoning of scientific racism, especially in interwar England, as Susan Pennybacker has shown.⁴⁰

Yet among European states, Soviet leaders alone promoted antiracism and posited that a superior, modern society did not use race to categorize or identify its populace. Francine Hirsch, Amir Weiner, and Terry Martin emphasize that Soviet authorities believed they were distinct from, and superior to, their Western capitalist contemporaries because they used the sociohistorical categories of nationality

and class in managing the populace at the explicit rejection of the biological category of race. Eric Weitz contends that although officials in Moscow disdained use of the category of “race,” Soviet population politics were essentially “racial politics without the concept of race.”⁴¹ Even if one agrees with Weitz’s argument, Soviet authorities nonetheless insisted on the backwardness of racial hierarchies during an era in which government leaders in Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa celebrated the superiority of “white men’s countries.”⁴² Only following the Second World War and the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust did a “new international antiracist consensus” emerge among state leaders, making Soviet officials ahead of their contemporaries in playing the “race card.”⁴³

Juxtaposed with Soviet leaders’ desire to represent the USSR as the champion of racial equality, the Nazi racial state took to the extreme the biological racism prominent in European social thought, and postulated as impossibility the equality of races.⁴⁴ As Mark Mazower argues, the Nazis modeled their racial politics after Western European colonial policies in Africa and Asia. This was epitomized in the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, which criminalized interracial sexual relations and codified Jews’ exclusion from the racially defined national community of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Viewed from this perspective, the Nazi quest for a racial empire, as Mazower avers, constituted the “culmination of the process of European imperial expansion that began in the 1870s” and merely turned inward onto the continent itself.⁴⁵

Mazower’s emphasis on the connections between Nazi and Western European imperial policy is consistent with the scholarship of Thomas Holt, Alice Conklin, and Sue Peabody, which demonstrates how discourses of liberal universalism contributed to British and French conceptualizations of superior and inferior races but prevented open promotion of racial hatred and legislation of racial exclusion on the level of the Nuremberg Laws.⁴⁶ The British and French governments increasingly introduced segregation and color bars in the colonies, made it extremely difficult for dark-skinned colonial subjects to receive full citizenship, and exhibited even greater concern in the early twentieth century with preventing miscegenation.⁴⁷ More specifically, the Brit-

ish condemned interracial marriage as a threat to the racial, class, and gender boundaries that sustained imperial rule, and deprecated the children that such unions produced as a disruption to England's purported homogeneity and harmony.⁴⁸ The French, moreover, quickly repatriated the North African and Indochinese laborers in France at the end of the Great War as a result of escalating violence and anxieties surrounding miscegenation. French officials replaced them with Polish and Italian immigrant workers to restore the semblance of European, that is, "white" order.⁴⁹ As reflected in British and French policies of the interwar era, the key to "racial survival" in the colonies and metropole was based on mutually reinforcing cultural and biological definitions of race, which required observing strict cultural and gender proscriptions and limiting interracial sexual contact.⁵⁰

Despite non-European laborers' experiences with discrimination in France during the First World War, the Soviet Union was second to France as the most popular European "promised land" for many African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s. Certainly, less personal risk and sacrifice were involved in exploring the myth of French colorblindness. The USSR was logistically more difficult to reach, and travel there necessitated tolerance of atheism and Communist ideology and a willingness to deal with a foreign language that used the Cyrillic alphabet. More important, individuals who relocated to France risked neither ostracism from family nor additional stigmatization from a U.S. government that already treated blacks as second-class citizens. Stigmatization was especially severe prior to the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in November 1933.⁵¹ As a consequence, regardless of individuals' specific intentions, travel to the USSR constituted a symbolic boycott of the U.S. racial regime.

Apart from the varied factors that made migration to the Soviet Union a precarious venture, the attractiveness of France was enhanced by the testimony of African American soldiers. Many U.S. blacks who had served in France during the First World War claimed that the French had treated them with more respect and warmth than any white people previously. Tyler Stovall attributes the favor accorded black Americans to Parisians' obsession with blackness, which was

rooted in a crisis of European rationality and progress that the Great War inspired. Stovall therefore stresses that the French in no way purported that blacks were whites' equals, but considered their primitivism (i.e., "lush naive sensuality") and simplicity virtues rather than vices.⁵²

Leaders of the Communist International, in contrast, recognized black equality at least in theory. They expressed a bias for African Americans, who they conceived as the least primitive and most poised for leading revolution within the African diaspora. According to Kate Baldwin, prior to 1928 Comintern authorities conceived of African Americans' "use value for the liberation of Africa, not their individual political existence as a nation."⁵³ The Sixth Comintern Congress (July 17–September 1) elevated their importance in the revolutionary family by declaring them an oppressed nation with the right to self-determination in the so-called black belt regions of the U.S. South. Numerous scholars have discussed at length the debates surrounding the 1928 decree, and African American Communist Harry Haywood, one of its main architects, documented them in his 1978 autobiography, *Black Bolshevik*. Suffice it to say that unlike Haywood, most African American Communists, including James Ford, Otto Hall, William Patterson, and Roy Mahoney, initially rejected the idea. They insisted that U.S. blacks constituted an oppressed racial minority, not an oppressed nation whose members sought inclusion in the larger American nation. Thus, they warned, black laborers would interpret advocacy of self-determination as segregation.⁵⁴

Jay Lovestone, a white American Communist and leader of the soon-to-be-defeated Lovestone and John Pepper faction of the CPUSA, opposed the proposal for a different reason. Lovestone contended that because "a second industrial revolution" would eliminate the "slave remnants in southern agriculture," a black liberation movement could only be "reactionary." Comintern authorities denounced Lovestone's position as a "right opportunist" argument, and his opponent in the CPUSA, William Foster, wisely advocated African Americans' right to national self-determination. In the end, independent of the divisions

within the CPUSA, the persistent support for the proposal of Comintern authorities Otto Kuusinen, Boris Mikhailov, Max Goldfarb, Charles Nasanov, and, most important, of J. V. Stalin effected the declaration in 1928 of African Americans as an oppressed nation with the right to self-determination.⁵⁵

As Cedric J. Robinson and other scholars have argued, the policies of the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) and Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) influenced the Comintern's recognition of African American nationhood.⁵⁶ But Soviet nationality policy and contemporary definitions of the terms "race" and "nation" also informed the Sixth Congress's decision. As Francine Hirsch details, Soviet anthropologists defined "race" as a phase of historical development that was replaced gradually by the "unification of peoples" into nascent "ethnohistorical units," or "nationalities" and "nations," which were founded upon a common language, culture, and consciousness.⁵⁷ According to this logic, if Soviet leaders classified African Americans as a "race" or even *narodnosti* (the lowest level of development within the process of nation formation), then they would have been characterizing them as behind in historical development. This would have made them no better than U.S. officials and Western imperialists who purposefully denied the historic national character of nonwhites, embedding them in the present to justify their subjugation.⁵⁸

The 1928 Comintern decree was also consistent with Soviet nationality policy, which afforded the officially sponsored non-Russian nationalities of the USSR the nominal right to national self-determination. Besides encouraging their cultural development, Soviet leaders established an ethnicity-based affirmative action system that privileged non-Russians over ethnic Russians in terms of hiring, admissions, and promotions. Terry Martin and Yuri Slezkine argue that even after 1933, when authorities in Moscow began systematically promoting Russian language and culture, they neither abandoned affirmative action policies, especially with regard to the nationalities of the Soviet "east" (whom they deemed to have suffered the most from tsarist oppression) nor launched any concerted effort to eradicate their

national identities.⁵⁹ Therefore, by demanding that white Americans place themselves in a disadvantaged position in relationship to African Americans, and recognize their right to national self-determination in the black belt regions of the U.S. South, Comintern officials were operating within the logic of the Soviet affirmative action empire. They were, in other words, holding white Americans as fellow members of an oppressing nation to the same standard as Russians.

However, in the two years following the Sixth Comintern Congress, the U.S. Communist Party failed to dedicate greater attention to work among African Americans. Its inaction was the result of continued apathy toward African Americans, as well as confusion over what the decree, also known as the black belt thesis, concretely meant with regard to everyday policy toward blacks, especially in the North. As a consequence, the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) issued a new resolution in October 1930 clarifying the Party's approach to African Americans in the U.S. North and South. Written largely by the Finnish Communist Otto Kuusinen, the resolution ordered U.S. leaders to actively recruit and fully incorporate black workers into the life of the trade unions, to educate and promote them to leadership positions, and to unite them with white laborers in common organizations in the North rather than segregating them in separate organizations.⁶⁰ The ECCI emphasized that in the North it was imperative for the U.S. Communist Party to promote black equality and integration while advancing the program of national self-determination in the South. Only through the promotion of the latter was it possible for southern black Americans, who "are living in slavery in the literal sense of the word," to have true social equality. This required seizing "the landed property of the white masters," redistributing it to black tenant farmers, who would control the governing bodies, and granting white residents minority rights if the black majority exercised the right to political separation. In addition to making these clarifications, the ECCI admonished white American Communists that in the "struggle for equal rights for Negroes," it was their Leninist duty, as members of the oppressing nation, "to march *at the head* of this struggle. They must everywhere make a breach in the

walls of segregation and 'Jim Crowism' which has been set up by bourgeois slave market morality. . . . They, the white workers, must boldly jump at the throat of the 100 per cent bandits who strike a Negro in the face."⁶¹ The October 1930 resolution, as chapter 5 demonstrates, became an important tool used by Communists on both sides of the Atlantic to condemn the conduct of members of the CPUSA, who continued to underestimate and subordinate the struggle against racism.

Despite many African American Communists' initial opposition, the 1928 Comintern decree of nationhood was of immense significance to the black liberation movement. Mark Naison emphasizes that "by defining blacks as an oppressed nation, even in this bizarre fashion, the Comintern had, within the Leninist lexicon of values, endowed the black struggle with unprecedented dignity and importance."⁶² U.S. blacks were not the "reserves of capitalist reaction," the degraded status that some U.S. Communists had heretofore assigned them.⁶³ Instead, the struggle for black equality was itself integral to the revolutionary process and therefore not subordinate to the class question. Regardless of our personal opinions of the notion of "black self-determination," Robin D. G. Kelley argues, "the policy compelled the Communists to pay attention to black workers and farmers in the South. The point was not to promote separatism but to expose the basic denial of black citizenship in the South." Hence, "the Communists' 'black belt' policy," Kelley stresses, "resulted not in a separatist movement but in active support for black civil rights."⁶⁴ Alan Wald makes a similar point, writing that self-determination meant "the beginning of paying close attention to all issues—cultural as well as political—that affected African Americans."⁶⁵ As *Opposing Jim Crow* illuminates, the 1928 decree of African American nationhood also had immense implications for the importance afforded the struggle for black equality in the Soviet Union.

Chapter 1 argues that the first major event that signaled the emergence of Soviet antiracism as a priority policy was the August 1930 trial of two white Americans, Lemuel Lewis and William Brown, who assaulted Robert Robinson, an African American worker, at a major

tractor factory in Stalingrad. Throughout the nationwide campaign against and trial of Lewis and Brown, trade union authorities and all-union editors depicted workers around the country as outraged at the racially motivated assault on “our brother” Robinson, and firmly committed to building a new socialist society where racists were absent. The Stalingrad court’s decision to expel the white American assailants of a black worker sent a clear message that American technique and industrial knowledge were valued in the construction of Soviet modernity, but American racial norms were not. Robinson himself was depicted as an innocent, hard-working black laborer who represented all African American workers—the Soviet Union’s allies—whom white Americans routinely victimized. His representation as the “poster child” for Soviet antiracism reached its culmination when he was elected, in December 1934, to the Moscow City Soviet. By drawing attention to the success Robinson had achieved as a skilled toolmaker and instructor to Soviet workers in the four years since the trial, officials could easily demonstrate how this black worker had tangibly reaped the benefits of antiracism since first arriving on Soviet soil.

Although Robert Robinson was made the poster child for Soviet antiracism, representations of U.S. blacks’ inclusion in Soviet society and the indictment of U.S. racism were not limited to this black toolmaker and the Stalingrad trial of his white American assailants. Rather, as chapter 2 investigates, throughout the early 1930s, the black male body was used in the Soviet press and literature to simultaneously signify American racial apartheid and Soviet antiracism. African American males—adults and children, real and fictional—were portrayed in photographs, cartoons, articles, short stories, and poems as being excluded from American society by lynching, imprisonment, and discriminatory labor practices. Concurrently, Soviet workers were shown embracing black men as equals at political conferences, factories, and in classrooms. Acceptance in the Soviet body politic was shown restoring African Americans (represented in the black male body) to the full humanity that American racial oppression had denied them. Representations of African Americans as heroic, persecuted revolutionaries disappeared from the Soviet press and literature by the

second half of the 1930s. The work of the popular Soviet humorists Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov best illustrates how a more ambiguous, depoliticized yet sympathetic portrayal of U.S. blacks assumed precedence by the second half of the 1930s, thereby signaling the shift to a more soft-line form of antiracism reflective of the policies of the Popular Front era (1935-39).

Chapter 3 examines the nationwide campaign to liberate nine African American male teenagers who were condemned to death in Scottsboro, Alabama, in April 1931 on false charges of raping two white women. By focusing sustained attention on the plight of nine young African American men, the Scottsboro protest personalized, or gave a “face” to, U.S. racism in the same way that the Stalingrad trial and election of Robert Robinson to the Moscow City Soviet personalized black males’ inclusion in Soviet society. Soviet citizens from all corners of the USSR were represented as composing protest resolutions, letters, and poems and attending rallies en masse to voice their outrage at the persecution of their “revolutionary brothers” in Scottsboro. While it is impossible to determine whether Soviet antiracism cultivated a sincere conviction against racial prejudice among officials and citizens, the Scottsboro protest demonstrates that it succeeded in dominating the field of discourse in teaching citizens and authorities how to “speak antiracism.”

African Americans of a wide array of socioeconomic and political backgrounds likewise spoke Soviet antiracism. George Padmore, the high-ranking Communist turned pan-African radical, and editors of African American newspapers like the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Afro-American*, and *Chicago Defender* demonstrate how blacks who were bitter detractors of Communism and critics of Soviet opportunism nonetheless spoke of the USSR as a society where racism was absent. As chapter 4 shows, they forged the Soviet Union’s antiracist image to bring the United States to account for the incessantly hostile treatment of its black citizens. The ill-fated Soviet film *Black and White* is especially instructive of African Americans’ role as indispensable supporters and architects of Soviet antiracism. Due to its intended directness in attacking the U.S. racial regime, Comintern leaders abandoned pro-

duction of *Black and White* in August 1932 out of fear of jeopardizing American diplomatic recognition, which then appeared imminent. This decision constituted the gravest threat to the USSR's antiracist image prior to the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact. Yet the majority of the black American cast members (most of whom were not Communist Party members) used the controversy to publicly reaffirm as sincere the Soviet commitment to antiracism, while privately articulating discontent to authorities in Moscow.

A pioneering group of African American Communists, who integrated Moscow's International Lenin School in 1931 and negotiated the power, promise, and limitations of Soviet antiracism, constitute the main protagonists of chapter 5. When reality failed to correspond with the image of Soviet racial equality, with regard to the conduct of white Americans and their treatment by school officials, these African American Communists criticized the disparities not only as "racist" but, more important, as "anti-Soviet." They demanded from Soviet leaders the freedom from racism that the country's antiracist image promised them. African American and African students at KUTV used similar strategies to voice their criticisms of aspects of Soviet society that they deemed problematic. Similar to the experiences of the African Americans who integrated the Lenin School, when an African student at KUTV violated Soviet antiracism by not merely criticizing its shortcomings but by challenging its validity with accusations that the USSR was just as racist as the United States, several African American Communists immediately responded by defending the Soviet Union's image as a society intolerant of racism. Like the majority of the *Black and White* cast members, they recognized that they had more to gain in actively supporting Soviet antiracism, or saying nothing publicly about it, than in joining their white American oppressors in dismantling it.

The epilogue uses Grigorii Aleksandrov's 1936 musical comedy, *Circus (Tsirk)*, to further demonstrate how the growing threat of fascism in Europe and the adoption of Popular Front policies made African American oppression a secondary or soft-line concern of Soviet propaganda. Although ostensibly about U.S. racism, the film elides the

previously hallowed African American man, represents the white American woman as the primary victim of American racial injustice, and identifies the main villain as a German manager with Nazi-like features. In these and other important ways, *Circus* signals how antifascism or the Nazi racial state assumed precedence over U.S. racism in Soviet propaganda in the second half of the 1930s. While the United States resurfaced as a major enemy of the USSR after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939, African Americans could no longer be portrayed as revolutionary allies. It was not until the post-Second World War era that the Soviet indictment of U.S. racism regained the intensity of the early 1930s, and African Americans—returned to their status as valued friends of the first workers’ state—again became valuable contributors to Soviet antiracism.

Before traveling to the USSR, most of the African Americans featured in this book had a history of prior migration. They had either moved from the Caribbean to the U.S. North (primarily to New York) as part of the flow of some 88,000 migrants to the United States from 1900 to 1932, or were part of the Great Migration of African Americans, an exodus from 1910 to 1940 of roughly 1,750,000 people largely although not exclusively from southern regions of the United States to northern cities.⁶⁶ For example, both Robert Robinson, the “heroic” worker in the Stalingrad trial, and George Padmore (whose original name was Malcolm Meredith Nurse), the future secretary of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW), belonged to the first group. According to Winston James, the overrepresentation of Caribbean migrants in U.S. radical movements like Communism was due to numerous factors, including their previous political and organizational experience, majority consciousness, educational and occupational accomplishments, previous travel experience, weaker attachment to Christian churches, and for those from the British Caribbean, a politically protected status in the United States.⁶⁷

Robinson, who never joined the Communist Party, was born in Jamaica around 1907, grew up in Cuba, worked in Brazil, and later migrated to Harlem in 1923. He relocated to Detroit in 1927 before

journeying to Stalingrad in 1930.⁶⁸ George Padmore, who joined the Party in 1927, was born in Trinidad in 1902 and migrated to the United States in late 1924 to study law at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. He moved to New York City in 1926, from where he traveled back and forth to Howard University's School of Law in Washington DC before leaving the United States permanently by the decade's end.⁶⁹

Although Padmore, Robinson, and others were born in the Caribbean, they were identified in the Soviet Union as black Americans and representatives of the African American nation. It would be easy to simply attribute this identification to Soviet leaders' ignorant, essentialist notions of blacks. However, the life of George Padmore illustrates that the situation was more complex than this. Padmore arrived in Moscow in 1929 as a representative of the U.S. Communist Party, an organization in which he became active, as noted above, in Harlem in 1927. Apart from representing a U.S. organization, Padmore had an incentive to identify as an African American since the Comintern had officially recognized U.S. blacks as the revolutionary vanguard. According to Mark Solomon, it was only in May 1931, when Padmore assumed editorship of the *Negro Worker* in Hamburg, Germany (see chapter 4 of this study), that he ceased acting as a representative of an American organization and identifying as an African American.⁷⁰ Moreover, the racism and class exploitation of the United States were the primary sources of and space for the radicalization of Padmore and other Caribbean migrants to the United States in the 1920s, not British imperialism in the Caribbean. While they may have had revolutionary leanings before reaching American soil, U.S. society effected their transformation into revolutionaries. As Cedric Robinson argues, it was in the United States that Malcolm Nurse became George Padmore.⁷¹ For these reasons, Caribbean-born migrants to the United States who made the trek to the Soviet Union are referred to throughout this study as African Americans or U.S. blacks. The purpose is not to essentialize or erase the diversity among blacks in Moscow, but to underscore the importance of American racial apartheid in inspiring them to participate in Soviet antiracism.

James Ford and Harry Haywood represent the second major group

of African Americans featured in this book. They participated in the massive internal migration of African Americans of the early twentieth century, which landed both men in Chicago before they ultimately traveled to Moscow. Ford, who was born in Pratt City, Alabama, in 1893, relocated to Chicago in 1919 where he became active in the postal workers' union and the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC) and in 1926 joined the Communist Party. Ford served as a de facto spokesman and figurehead for African American Communists in Moscow in the late 1920s and early 1930s, was named as a member of the Profintern's executive committee in 1930, and ran as the U.S. Communist Party's candidate for vice president in the 1932 and 1936 presidential elections.⁷²

Harry Haywood was the first African American student admitted to the Lenin School in 1927 and played a pivotal role, as mentioned earlier, in the Sixth Comintern Congress's declaration of African Americans as an oppressed nation. Haywood was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1898, but his family moved to Minneapolis and later Chicago where he became involved in the ABB, the Communist Youth League, and then, like his brother Otto Hall, the Communist Party.⁷³ While Ford and Haywood joined the Communist movement after migrating to Chicago, both men had also served as soldiers in the First World War.⁷⁴ The obscene racism that they confronted in the U.S. armed forces, America's insistence on maintaining the racial status quo after the war, and the racial tensions they encountered in the northern "promised land" of Chicago, which witnessed a major race riot in the "Red Summer" of 1919, undoubtedly proved critical in piquing their interest in Communism's promises of complete social equality.⁷⁵

As reference to these four black men and the preceding chapter summaries indicate, Soviet antiracism was a masculine discourse. Even though it condemned all forms of U.S. racism, the specific sufferings of black men received the bulk of attention. The fact that African American men were the targets of the most sensationalized acts of racism helps to explain the gender imbalance of Soviet antiracism. Soviet leaders' own biases against and general ambivalence with regard to women also played a part. Rape, the primary form of racial violence

that white men used to terrorize black women, was not consistently treated as a serious crime in Soviet society.⁷⁶

Another reason for the masculine focus of Soviet antiracism is that, along with Soviet men, African American men were its main contributors. During the 1920s and 1930s, the opportunities for black American women (and women in general) to assume positions of authority in political movements like U.S. Communism were limited, and their male counterparts were more likely to travel abroad in search of industrial labor or for political purposes. Hence, though black women played indispensable roles in the American Communist movement, their importance was not reflected in the ranks of its leadership or the delegations sent to Moscow.⁷⁷ Yet even when black women were present in the Soviet capital, they often were excluded from participating on a level equal to their male counterparts. No black American woman (or white woman), for instance, actively participated in the debates to declare African Americans a nation at the Sixth Comintern Congress, despite the fact that Maude White was then a student at KUTV, as were some of her black American male colleagues who did participate.⁷⁸ Williana Burroughs (Mary Adams), another African American female delegate (see chapter 2), also seemingly played no active role in the debates regarding black nationhood.

Black women's exclusion from meaningful involvement in this monumental process replicated the representation of men (throughout history) as the active political and economic agents of a nation whose masculine accomplishments were responsible for its foundation and defense.⁷⁹ To be sure, Soviet men were depicted leading the struggle with African American men against Jim Crow, which assumed the form of a white American male capitalist.⁸⁰ Thus, the disproportionate attention given to African American men at the near omission of black women is not the intention of this book. Instead, it reflects the reality that Soviet leaders cast African Americans, like the non-Russian nationalities of the USSR, as "brothers" rather than "sisters" in class.⁸¹

It goes without saying that the Soviet Union was not the society free of racism that leaders in Moscow claimed in the 1920s and the 1930s. Yet it is equally problematic to go to the opposite extreme and por-

tray it as riddled by virulent racism. Such a one-dimensional analysis makes the African Americans who contributed to Soviet antiracism appear as dupes of a Soviet Potemkin village. At the same time, it discounts what scholars have identified as a sincere commitment among many Soviet authorities and citizens to creating a new society where all forms of exploitation and injustice were absent. Additionally, any racism black Americans may have experienced in the USSR in the interwar era in the form of “sociological racism” (or racism “from below”) was not reinforced *systematically* by “official racism” (or racism “from above”), as it was in the United States.⁸² The racial climate in the present-day Russian Federation illustrates the significant difference that official racism, especially as represented in the authority of law enforcement officials, as opposed to official *antiracism*, can have on the growth of sociological racism.⁸³ As *Opposing Jim Crow* demonstrates, the Soviet Union in the decades between the two world wars was more complex and nuanced than any black and white depictions allow.