

The Red and the Black: The Russian Revolution and the Black Atlantic. Ed. David Featherstone and Christian Høgsberg. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022. vii, 287 pp. Notes. Index. Photographs. Tables. £85.00, paper.

Revolutionary Lives of the Red and the Black Atlantic since 1917. Ed. David Featherstone, Christian Høgsberg, and Alan Rice. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022. v, 317 pp. Notes. Index. Photographs. \$130.00, hard bound. doi: 10.1017/slr.2024.19

Red and Black Atlantic

What impact did the October revolution have on the global Black freedom struggle? How did the global Black freedom struggle shape the short and long-term manifestations of the October revolution? Numerous prominent scholars including Allison Blakely, Robin D.G. Kelley, Kate Baldwin, and Maxim Matusevich¹ have published influential studies in the past several decades that explore the answers to these profound questions in tandem to dispel the remarkably persistent Cold War trope that reduces Blacks who engaged with communist politics as puppets, if not dupes, of the “Reds.” A group of scholars seeking to expand on the insights of this rich literature came together in October 2017 at the Institute for Black Atlantic Research, University of Central Lancashire in Preston in the United Kingdom for a conference dedicated to investigating *The Red and the Black: The Russian Revolution and the Black Atlantic* from which the first volume takes its title. Contributors to this two-volume edited collection document the diverse organizations, institutions, and individuals across the Black Atlantic who were inspired by the humanistic promises of the world’s first communist revolution and invested it with their own revolutionary meanings and visions.

The *Revolutionary Lives of the Red and Black Atlantic since 1917* that editors refer to as the companion volume focuses on activists as varied as Hubert Harrison, one of the leading Black socialists of early twentieth century America; Walter Rodney, the Guyanese Marxist and Pan-Africanist intellectual whose lectures and unfinished chapters on *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World* were published in 2018; and the Black American poet and playwright Amiri Baraka, who only professed his commitment to Marxism-Leninism in 1974. Contributors persuasively argue that if we want to fully understand the widespread reach of the October revolution, then we

1. Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963* (Durham, 2002); Allison Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington, DC, 1986); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990); Maxim Matusevich, ed., *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters* (Trenton, 2007).

must examine the numerous radical figures throughout the Black Atlantic who were not directly affiliated with the communist parties in their countries and whose anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist activism far outlived the Communist International. By deepening our knowledge of the dynamism and multidimensionality of “the Red and the Black” (2) these volumes implicitly promise to place into dialogue the work of scholars of the Soviet Union with those who research the Black Atlantic. This objective remains a challenge that we should continue to pursue. Of this interdisciplinary group of thirty-one scholars only three, including Matusевич whose beautifully written afterword to the first volume charts the evolution of the rhetoric and practice of Soviet anti-racism, has training in Slavic Studies.

Indeed, one of the most captivating chapters in the first volume was written by Winston James, the preeminent historian of the Caribbean and African Diaspora. James focuses on the London experiences of Claude McKay, the Jamaican-born US radical-poet, about whom he recently (2022) published a wonderful biography, *Claude McKay: The Making of a Black Bolshevik*.² Since leaders in Moscow embraced McKay as the first ambassador of the Black Atlantic at the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922, editors identify him as encapsulating the complex relationship between the Red and the Black. McKay, like other Black radicals who subsequently traveled to the Soviet Union from the United States, distinguished between the whiteness of Americans (including communists) and that of Russians who afforded him preferential treatment over the light-skinned Otto Huiswoud, the Americans’ official delegate, because of his dark skin pigmentation. McKay also initiated the practice of Black radicals educating Soviet “Reds” about anti-Black racism—the degree to which they learned from this anti-racist knowledge production is open for debate. McKay’s relationship with Soviet authorities is also emblematic in that it began with tremendous promise but progressed towards disillusionment and antipathy. As Olga Panova explains in her insightful chapter on African American literature in the Soviet Union, the reception of McKay’s literary work changed dramatically by the late 1920s. Critics replaced their praise of him as a revolutionary Black writer and ally of the Soviet people with scathing assessments that condemned his novels (*Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*) as ideologically harmful betrayals of the Black proletariat and revolutionary struggle. Particularly instructive is Panova’s analysis of the impressions of McKay that his guide and interpreter in Petrograd, Nikolai Chukovskii, recorded. As Panova argues, although we cannot simply take Chukovskii’s commentary at face value it nonetheless establishes that “McKay concentrated on racial issues, not Communism/Marxism—the former being a vital problem for him, and the latter primarily a means that might help to solve this problem” (107).

While Soviet authorities struggled to understand the primacy that McKay and other Black radicals assigned to racial issues, Winston James demonstrates how McKay’s deeply painful experiences with the humiliations of everyday racism in London—which he was equally distressed to witness other working-class Black men endure—made it difficult *not* to assign race such primacy and simultaneously inspired his Bolshevization. McKay lived

2. Winston James, *Claude McKay: The Making of a Black Bolshevik* (New York, 2022).

and worked in London for little over a year beginning in December 1919 and returned to the United States in January 1921. Yet James contends that his experiences with anti-Black racism and the intellectual-activist connections that he forged with a vast array of individuals, including supporters of the anti-colonial liberation movements in Ireland and India, encouraged him to identify the “revolutionary socialism of the Bolshevik variety” as the antidote to eradicating “imperialism, colonialism and racism” (67). At the same time, McKay’s time in London did not leave him with a sentimental view of the white Left. McKay criticized English socialists for their refusal to support the liberation movements of the Irish, Indians, and Garveyites, and was well acquainted with the racist actions and attitudes of some Irish revolutionaries and members of the English working class. However, James emphasizes that McKay still supported their movements because he identified them as critical to bringing about the demise of the British empire.

As McKay’s Bolshevization suggests, the ferocity and pervasiveness of anti-Blackness served as one of the most effective recruiters for Bolshevism even if local white adherents were themselves not unproblematic in their outlooks on race. To this end, editors stress the need to situate Blacks’ responses to the October revolution within the context of the era’s intense anti-Black violence and discrimination that included the experiences of Black soldiers during the First World War, the savage anti-Black pogroms that rocked several US cities, and the application of the right to national self-determination in the war’s aftermath only to the putative politically mature populations of east central Europe, not the colonial possessions of western liberal democracies. Philosopher Matthieu Renault is the only contributor, however, to indirectly engage with the issue of whether the Soviet Union itself should be considered in the framework of empire—a debate that Soviet historians like Adrienne Edgar, Adeeb Khalid, Terry Martin, and Ron Suny have elsewhere brilliantly explored.³ Renault uses the writings of Vladimir Lenin and Langston Hughes on internal colonization to highlight the tensions in the Bolsheviks’ project of promoting socialist modernization in the former regions of the tsarist Russian empire while also decolonizing that empire under the banner of national self-determination. Renault considers how this contradiction ultimately complicated the relationship between the Red and the Black.

Yet despite this contradiction between practice and rhetoric, contributors illuminate how many Black radicals shared the sentiment that the Soviet Union was of unparalleled significance to their liberation struggle, not least because the enemies of Black freedom and equality despised it. Accordingly, even Marcus Garvey, who was unapologetically anti-communist, still declared in public remarks after Lenin’s death in 1924 that persons of African descent worldwide would mourn the Soviet leader’s passing since the revolutionary developments in the land of the soviets were of great consequence for all

3. Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, 2004); Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, 2019); Valerie A. Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny, *Russia’s Empires* (New York, 2017); Terry Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001).

oppressed people. To be sure, scholar Jak Peake emphasizes that Cyril Briggs, the founder of the African Blood Brotherhood, explored any political ideology or movement that advanced the cause of Black sovereignty to which he was most loyal. From the perspective of Wilfred A. Domingo, the Jamaican-born, US-based socialist intellectual, Lenin's articulation of national self-determination elevated anti-colonialism to the center of the world communist movement and thus affirmed the inseparability of the Black and the Red. Scholar Peter Hulme moreover notes that Domingo, like other Black radicals of the era, derived hope from the experiences of Jews in revolutionary Russia. Domingo conjectured that if Bolshevism could end violence against Jews, then it had the potential to end anti-Black violence in the United States.

Many contributors throughout the two-volume edited collection cite the scholarship of historians Robin D.G. Kelley and Minkah Makalani because of their effective emphasis on Black radicals' agency in adapting communist ideas to their own visions and agendas.⁴ Cathy Bergin, for instance, reveals that editors and contributors of the US Black radical press were less interested in specific events in revolutionary Russia beyond the Bolsheviks' opposition to antisemitism. They instead used the October revolution and Russian workers' position outside the category of whiteness as a rallying call to expand the possibilities of Black agency and resistance. As Bergin concludes, the Black radical press pushed race to the forefront of class politics, rejecting its treatment as an afterthought by whites on the Left, and envisioning the October revolution as a vehicle for eliminating racism. Consistent with the focus on Black agency, Tennyson S.D. Joseph argues that fellow scholars are wrong to dismiss C.L.R. James, the prominent Trinidadian socialist, as a "European Marxist." James, he contends, successfully combined Pan-Africanism with socialism to situate the Black liberation movement at the "centre of the global struggle against capitalism" (*Revolutionary Lives*, 250). Moreover, James rejected Lenin's model of a vanguard, hierarchical, centralized party and advocated the mass party as the most effective vehicle for advancing democracy and independence throughout the West Indies. Joseph posits that the recent emergence of decentralized social justice movements such as the movement to make Black Lives Matter demonstrates the salience of James's revolutionary vision.

While the essays in these two volumes highlight the diversity and plurality among the categories of the Red and the Black, Olga Panova's aforementioned chapter reminds us that the work of Soviet publishers and translators ensured that readers in the USSR were presented with a largely one-dimensional view of what constituted the "Black." The richness of African American literature was eschewed for the single notes of social protest and revolutionary activism. One of the main ways that contributors capture the multidimensionality of the Red and the Black is by shifting our focus away from the US to explore Black leftist politics in Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa. David

4. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994); *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, 2002); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill, 2011).

Murphy, for instance, investigates the fascinating figure of Lamine Senghor, a Senegalese World War I veteran who became attracted to anti-colonial radicalism after the French government recruited him to work as an informant. Senghor's activism as a working-class Black radical in 1920s France would have remained largely invisible to researchers like Murphy had the colonial state not collected and archived his speeches, correspondence, and writings that appeared in obscure publications with limited circulation. Senghor protested the communist movement's minimal attention to race and his own marginalized position within it by creating an independent Black organization. Although white communists consistently failed to understand the racial concerns of Black communists, Murphy argues that Senghor nonetheless refused to choose between Pan-Africanism and communism but insisted that both ideologies were essential to the successful struggle for Black liberation.

Despite the persistent challenges that racism posed to Reds throughout the Black Atlantic, historian Sandra Pujals contests the standard narrative that identifies racism alone as the reason for the failure of the Red and the Black to converge successfully in the interwar Americas. Pujals concedes that local communists' apathy about mobilizing Black and indigenous laborers cannot be discounted. However, her analysis of the Caribbean Bureau of the Comintern (which was established in New York in 1931) demonstrates that internal organizational rivalries combined with the imposition of a unified racial agenda for a geographically and linguistically diverse region that boasted different understandings of racial identity ensured its failure. Across the Atlantic, in southern Africa historian Henry Dee examines how both the October revolution and Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) influenced the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU) and its national secretary, Clements Kadalie. Yet Dee contends that the ICU, as the globe's largest Black trade union in the interwar era which welcomed skilled and unskilled, male and female, local and immigrant laborers, had a greater impact on the policies of communists and non-communists alike because of its effective dual emphasis on race and class. The ICU specifically proved to leaders of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), who originally anointed white laborers as the revolutionary vanguard, the necessity of organizing local and immigrant Black workers.

Disappointment in the limits of the Soviet Union's commitment to the global anti-colonial and anti-racist struggle is a theme in several chapters. Holger Weiss reminds us that the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW) did not realize its potential in radicalizing Black workers throughout the Atlantic World because Stalin subordinated the international struggle to combat racism and colonialism to the exigencies of the Soviet state after 1933. This sense of betrayal among many Black radicals crystallized in the Comintern's failure to act in the face of Mussolini's imperialist invasion of Ethiopia and Soviet leaders' initiation of trade deals with the fascist dictator. Despite the shift in Soviet priorities, successful new forms of organization and mobilization emerged. Matheus Cardoso-de-Silva outlines how the Left Book Club (LBC), a Popular Front-inspired organization and network that was founded in London in 1935, functioned as a transnational conduit for the dissemination of Marxist, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonial

ideas across Britain and its imperial spaces from Jamaica to South Africa. The LBC's publication of its magazine and two hundred fifty plus books (from 1935 through 1947)—which authorities deemed subversive—educated left-leaning intellectuals of diverse racial backgrounds throughout the metropole and the colonies. As a result, prior to the end of WWII its adherents were already discussing the demise of the British empire and advocating national independence not only for India but also for the colonized populations of Africa and the Caribbean.

Historian Nigel Westmaas takes readers to one corner of the Caribbean to illuminate the shadow of the October revolution on Guyana (formerly British Guiana). Westmaas documents the radical ideologies, activists, and organizations that since 1917 provided the foundation for the emergence of a popular Marxist, anticolonial People's Progressive Party (PPP) by the 1950s. The British used the PPP's decision in 1953 to revoke anti-communist legislation—which Westmaas emphasizes was motivated by leaders' fierce commitment to anti-colonialism rather than any allegiance to communism—to claim a communist conspiracy in the country that facilitated their suspension of the constitution and removal of the PPP's representatives from political power. Anti-communism is also a major protagonist in Marika Sherwood's chapter on the Gold Coast, which she suggests marked the beginnings of the Cold War on the African continent. Sherwood contends that in the wake of the devastation of WWII, western leaders could no longer openly oppose anti-colonial activists' independence movements. Instead, they branded anticolonial activists as communists and claimed that continued control of the colonies was thus necessary to thwarting the Soviet Union's conspiratorial designs for imperial expansion.

The Cold War competition between the Soviet Union and the United States for influence on the continent during an era of African self-definition serves as the critical context for the two chapters on Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University. This university is likely a more familiar subject to the readers of this journal given the important research that historians Julie Hessler, Maxim Matusevich, Constantin Katsakioris, and Thom Loyd have conducted on the Soviet experiences of students from the Global South.⁵ The two chapters in *The Red and the Black* argue that the Cold War continues to distort our understanding of the university's significance to facilitating African decolonization. Rachel Lee Rubin specifically analyzes the personal experiences of university alumni whom she interviewed to challenge the dominant US depiction of Lumumba University per government reports, press accounts, and popular culture as a breeding ground for terrorists. Rubin highlights the paradox that many members of the African National Congress who

5. Julie Hessler, "Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics, and the Cold War," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 47, nos. 1–2 (2006): 33–64; Constantin Katsakioris, "Burden or Allies? Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 539–67; Thom Loyd, "Congo on the Dnipro: Third Worldism and the Nationalization of Soviet Internationalism in Ukraine," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 781–811; Maxim Matusevich, "Expanding the Boundaries of the Black Atlantic: African Students as Soviet Moderns," *Ab Imperio* 2 (2012): 325–50.

are today accorded hero status in the United States received their education at the university. Given the low literacy rates across the continent, she stresses that alumni often returned to prominent positions in their homelands. Rubin concludes by advocating a balanced history of the institution that acknowledges African students' negative experiences without discounting the sense of exhilaration, solidarity, and empowerment that she asserts they simultaneously experienced in Moscow.

Harold D. Weaver similarly emphasizes the need to take seriously the experimental, revolutionary nature of Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University in its disruption of the western colonial tradition of setting up institutions that benefitted the colonizing power and discouraged the independence of African nations. He insists, not unlike Rubin, that incidents of hostility from Soviet citizens were more the exception than the rule—contrary to the reporting of mainstream western media, which Weaver claims also grossly understated the advantages the university afforded African students in the sciences. He stresses the accommodating nature of members of the university's first-year Preparatory Faculty and Russian students themselves in helping Africans learn Russian. Weaver, who was the Founding Chair of the Department of Africana Studies at Rutgers University, does not identify his personal connection to the university but at times throughout the essay mentions that he witnessed the warm reception African students experienced in Moscow and the "aggressive" recruiting process that he notes became more coordinated and streamlined by the mid-1960s (242). Weaver concludes that the university met the "industrialization and development needs of African states," including the "indigenization (Africanization) of human resources," by persuading if not "coercing" students to pursue educational programs in "the natural, physical and medical sciences," to which they previously had minimal exposure on the continent (250–51).

In addition to charting the evolution of the Red and the Black through the initial decades of the Cold War, the collection brings to light unsung activists whose contributions to the revolutionary struggle have thus far received little recognition. This includes Raya Dunayevskaya (1910–87), whose family sought refuge in the United States from the pogroms of the Russian Civil War and who developed a deep appreciation for the indispensable role of Black activism to the struggle for human freedom. Nigel Niles and Chris Gilligan, the latter is the Administrator of the Dunayevskaya Archive on the Marxist Internet Archive, argue that the activist-intellectual embodies the inseparability of the Red and the Black, given the centrality of the Black freedom struggle to her conception and practice of Marxist-Humanism. Historian Lydia Lindsey builds on the important work of scholars Carole Boyce Davies, Erik McDuffie, and Dayo Gore to gender the Black Atlantic by examining the intellectual activism of Grace P. Campbell, a founding member of the African Blood Brotherhood, skilled orator, and organizer, who contributed significantly to the Black leftist feminist tradition.⁶ Lindsey documents Campbell's insistence

6. Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, 2008); Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York, 2011); Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and

on the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and advocacy that Black female workers occupy a prominent position in the revolutionary movement. In his afterword to the second volume, historian Hakim Adi invites researchers to investigate the lives of other neglected actors of the Red and the Black, including women who lived and worked outside the United States, and he provides numerous suggestions for interested scholars.

While some contributors explore less known Red activists and organizations of the Black Atlantic, Lisa Merrill and Theresa Saxon in their co-authored chapter discuss Paul Robeson, the world renowned actor and singer whose long-term engagement with and defense of the Soviet Union defied US Cold War geopolitics. Merrill and Saxon compare Robeson's positive reception in the Soviet Union with that of Black American actor Ira Aldridge in nineteenth-century tsarist Russia. They emphasize that while both men could be used by the elite of their respective eras for propaganda purposes, their experiences in tsarist and Soviet Russia significantly influenced their professional careers and affirmed their human dignity in ways that were unfathomable in the United States. By comparing Aldridge and Robeson, Merrill and Saxon remind us, as does Matusevich in his afterword, that the Soviet embrace of Robeson and other Black Americans must be considered in the context not only of communist internationalism, but also tsarist Russia's lack of institutionalized anti-Black racism and non-participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade and colonization of the African continent.

S.A. Smith, a leading Soviet historian of revolutionary Russia, argues that we have gained much greater knowledge of the October revolution upon its centenary, but have become far less equipped to comprehend let alone empathize with the aspirations that motivated its actors. Adopting the perspective of diverse representatives of the Black Atlantic who appear in the pages of these two volumes arguably facilitates our ability to understand and empathize with the freedom dreams that so many activists of the Black Atlantic invested in the world's first communist revolution. The contributors to *The Red and the Black* and *Revolutionary Lives* are careful to humanize rather than romanticize these radical actors. As writer David Austin contends, the most effective way to remember a revolutionary giant like Walter Rodney is to fully explore the shortcomings of his political life and activism in a manner that aids present generations in the quest for the freedom to which Rodney dedicated his life prior to his 1980 assassination at the age of thirty-eight. Although the anti-colonial, anti-imperial, and interracial organizing that the Russian revolution inspired throughout the Black Atlantic was consistently fraught, editors insist that these histories are nonetheless instructive for waging an effective anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggle in the twenty-first century.

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Komozi Woodard, eds., *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York, 2009); and Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, 2012).