Avrutin, Eugene M. "'The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth'." *Racism in Modern Russia: FROM THE ROMANOV TO PUTIN*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 47–83. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350097308.0009>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 09:44 UTC.

Copyright © Eugene M. Avrutin 2022. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

CHAPTER 3

“THE MOST HOPEFUL NATION ON EARTH”

In November 1922, Claude McKay, the Jamaican-born American writer of peasant origins, participated in the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, or Comintern. Established to promote world revolution by advancing an anti-colonial and anti-racist agenda, the Comintern strove to become the global party of the proletariat. A total of 343 voting delegates, representing fifty-eight countries, gathered for four weeks in Moscow and Petrograd (renamed Leningrad in 1924). The Fourth Congress was tasked to lay the groundwork for massive resistance to fascism, to work on women's liberation, and to investigate anti-colonial struggles, including the Negro problem. McKay traveled to the Soviet Union to escape what he described in his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, as the “suffocating ghetto of color consciousness.”¹

At the opening of the congress convened at the historic Bolshoi Theatre, McKay sat beside Grigory Zinoviev, the official chair of the Communist International, and delivered a spirited speech on the plight of American racism. McKay's dark skin color—his unmistakable African features, including unusually high, arching eyebrows, and bright smile—fit the Comintern's crude conception of model blackness. According to McKay's recollections of the events, “Russians wanted a typical Negro at the Congress.” It turned out that Otto Huiswood, the official delegate of the American Workers Party of America, did not meet Soviet racial ideals. Huiswood, unlike McKay, was too “yellow” in complexion to serve as the face of Soviet propaganda.²

Image 3.1 Grigory Zinoviev, Claude McKay, and Nikolai Bukharin in Moscow, circa 1923. © Courtesy of Claude McKay Collection. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

By all accounts, McKay enjoyed exceptional status in the Soviet Union. He remembered the visit fondly. “Photographs of his black face,” McKay recounted, were soon “everywhere among the highest Soviet rulers, in the principal streets, adorning the walls of the city.” “Never in my life did I feel prouder of being an African, a black, and no mistake about it.”³ McKay spent six months in the Soviet Union, primarily in Petrograd and Moscow, touring military bases and publishing articles, poems, and stories in the Soviet press on the historical complexity of American race relations. When he returned home, W. E. B. Du Bois invited McKay to publish his impressions in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). To Russians, McKay observed, he appeared “merely another type,” an exotic curiosity. “I could not detect a trace of ignorant snobbishness among the educated classes, and the attitude of the common workers, the soldiers and sailors, was still more remarkable. It was so beautifully naïve; for them I was only a black member of the world of humanity.”⁴

“The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth”

McKay was one of hundreds of African Americans who traveled to the Soviet Union to witness the transformation of a new age. After seizing power in October 1917, the Bolshevik party spent considerable resources promoting its commitment to fighting racial oppression in global affairs. The revolution emancipated peasants from the power of landowners, soldiers and generals from the authority of autocratic generals, and workers from the arbitrary will of the capitalists. The Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia, issued on November 2, 1917, promised the “abolition of any and all national and national-religious privileges and disabilities,” the “free development of national minorities,” and the right to self-determination.⁵ As the doctrines of white solidarity swept the globe—from South Africa to North America and Australasia—Communist Russia emerged as the most hopeful nation on earth for its commitment to racial equality and human rights.⁶

The Pitfalls of Revolution

The revolution promised a new political order rooted in social progress, the advancement of history, and the assurances of a just life, but the utopian visions were quickly submerged in flames. Approximately 15.5 million people, or 9 percent of the population, perished in the civil war, resulting in one of the greatest demographic catastrophes in Russian history. Some died as a result of mass violence, many others from disease, hunger, and the hardships of everyday life. Between 1918 and 1922, as many as five million people succumbed to starvation. With the economy in a free fall, food production ceased to function. Prices on basic staples rose precipitously, including on bread, meats, eggs, sugar, fuel, and raw materials. The women, men, and children caught up in the enormous social dislocations caused by war, revolution, and civil war experienced unparalleled trauma and brutality.⁷

Ukraine—a politically and territorially volatile region, covering roughly the southwestern provinces of the Russian Empire and the eastern section of Austria-Hungary—was particularly hard hit. The

Racism in Modern Russia

civil war in Ukraine witnessed the total breakdown of authority. The military conflict precipitated the inversion of hierarchies and the collapse of civilizational norms and social inhibitions. When the Germans withdrew from Kiev on December 14, 1918, Symon Petliura, Ataman in Chief of the warlords comprising the Ukrainian armies, vied with several other military groups to establish control over the Ukrainian lands. Political actors on all sides of the military conflict—from the Directorate of Ukraine and its allies to the Reds, Whites, Polish legionnaires, and peasant bandits—practiced extreme violence. Violence, in 1919 and 1920, was not only the work of soldiers or paramilitary units; civilian populations with intimate knowledge of one another joined in the bloodshed, as well.⁸

The military operations—the ruthless attacks and counterattacks by all protagonists involved in the conflict, coupled with the rise of militant nationalism—caused unprecedented mass casualties. The Jewish community suffered unparalleled bloodshed. According to the most conservative estimates, no fewer than 50,000 Jews died as a result of 1,500 pogroms in some 1,300 localities. In all likelihood, the mortality rate was much higher, destabilizing virtually all aspects of Jewish communal existence in Ukraine and, in some cases, systematically eliminating entire communities. Some scholars have estimated that the violence accounted for as many as 150,000 deaths, with an additional 200,000 individuals wounded or crippled, 300,000 children orphaned, and 100,000 spouses widowed. Wartime conditions uprooted tens of thousands of Jews from their homes. Many of the refugees suffered attacks as they roamed the countryside in search of shelter or new homes. The dramatic social crises accompanying the fighting—the rise in typhus and other epidemic disease, chronic shortages, and ravaging hunger – caused numerous additional deaths. In all, according to the Russian Red Cross Committee to Aid Victims of Pogroms, one million Jews may have suffered as a consequence of the events of the 1918–1921 period.⁹

Politically and operationally, the mass carnage was the product of a new paramilitary violence that broke out in much of Central and Eastern Europe. The wartime pogroms were typically carried out by trained soldiers or paramilitary units, intent on identifying and

“The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth”

exterminating Jewish or Jewish-looking subjects. The violence toward Jews was not isolated or accidental. The goal, in other words, was not only to terrorize, humiliate, and plunder, but also to ethnically cleanse, or physically remove, all remnants of Jewish life.¹⁰ In Proskurov, Cossacks—forming the core of the White Army detachments—divided themselves in small groups in search of Jews. The pogrom lasted approximately four hours, resulting in at least 1,500 casualties (some sources identified as many as 4,000 deaths). Relying mostly on knives and bayonets, the Cossacks slaughtered men, women, children, and the elderly in the most barbaric fashion. In Bobruisk, Polish soldiers murdered Jews for counterrevolutionary activities, burying the bodies in mass graves. Similar military-style operations occurred in town after town across the southwestern borderlands.¹¹

Amid the coordinated attacks against Jews, military units pillaged Jewish belongings, humiliated and terrorized unarmed civilians, and carried out sexual violence against Jewish women and girls. A great deal of the violence against Jewish civilians was sanctioned from above, as part of a free-for-all struggle to control the Ukrainian lands. But with the collapse of state authority, it was often challenging to distinguish perpetrators from trusted allies. Long-lasting communal relationships self-destructed at a moment's notice. Civilian populations committed mass violence against their neighbors, usually for purely mercenary reasons. Peasants torched Jewish homes, including houses of worship, plundered Jewish belongings, and organized mass violence – in some cases, helping military units to eradicate all signs of Jewish communal life.¹²

In July 1918, the Bolshevik leadership articulated its position on pogroms and anti-Semitism more generally. The Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), or the executive authority of the new revolutionary regime, instructed “all Soviet institutions to take uncompromising measures to tear the antisemitic movement out by the roots.”¹³ Vladimir Lenin (1917–24) and the Bolsheviks saw anti-Jewish persecution in essentially counterrevolutionary terms—as an attempt to destroy the political legitimacy of the party in an effort to restore Tsarist rule. To eradicate anti-Semitism, organizations disseminated leaflets, published newspaper articles, and coordinated

Racism in Modern Russia

educational work. Lenin's March 1919 speech on pogroms, recorded on a gramophone, played widely in workplaces, agitational-political trains, and political demonstrations. "Only the most ignorant and downtrodden people," Lenin proclaimed, "can believe the lies and slander that are spread about the Jews."¹⁴

The Soviet state condemned anti-Jewish behavior—including pogroms and ritual murder allegations—not as crimes against the Jewish people per se (the Soviet Criminal Code did not include anti-Semitism as an official category), but as crimes against the legitimacy of the Soviet state. Bolsheviks promoted enlightened propaganda to debunk the evils of religious fanaticism and superstitious behavior, including the ritual murder tale. They set up revolutionary tribunals to punish anti-Semitic or counterrevolutionary behavior. A handful of individuals received sentences ranging from solitary confinement up to six months to execution by firing squad for the worst offenses. Jews, in hopes of resolving social conflicts, turned to Soviet institutions for justice: to revenge the murder of family members or to reclaim belongings taken over by their neighbors. Occasionally, Soviet officials administered elaborate trials to discipline anti-Jewish activities, as they did in Moscow in 1922, when an elderly Jewish man was accused of ritual murder. The police wound up arresting the old man (a member of the Jewish burial society) for carrying the corpse of a recently deceased boy from the morgue to the local cemetery. The court ruled that the Jewish man was the victim of "prejudice," for which the three accusers were severely reprimanded.¹⁵

Black Visitors

Contemporary observers had long compared the experiences of the Jews of Tsarist Russia with those of Black Americans. In an article entitled "Lessons from Russia," published in *The Crisis* before the outbreak of the Great War, the celebrated economist Isaac Max Rubinow noted that the Jew in Russia, much like the Negro in Jim Crow America, was considered an "outlaw under the law," with Jews laughed and sneered at by the members of the Slavic race. "A specific

“The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth”

Jewish crime has been invented in Russia—now that sounds quite familiar, does it not?—though the Jewish crime—ritual murder—is altogether the product of a wild imagination. And pogroms happen in Russia and are as brutal or worse even than lynching is in the South.”¹⁶

The Black American community, with support from Rubinow and other like-minded Jews from the Pale of Settlement, did not hide its disdain for Tsarist reactionary policies. Black journalists referred to the predominantly Black neighborhood as a “ghetto,” a term usually associated with Jewish poverty and segregation in Tsarist Russia.¹⁷ Black Americans organized fundraising efforts and demonstrations to protest Russia’s treatment of Jews. They published articles and opinion pieces to voice their concerns, usually in newspapers with modest print runs. The *Cleveland Gazette* was one of a handful of Black newspapers that felt Russia “treated [Jews] worse than our [Black] people in the South have ever been,” while a Black Chicago magazine scornfully observed that Russia was “the most barbaric and corrupt government on the face of the globe.”¹⁸

The October Revolution changed Russia’s image on the world stage. The scientists, engineers, farmers, artists, thinkers, and writers who visited the Soviet state were inspired by a vision of world revolution that liberated humanity. Black Americans, in particular, looked to Soviet Russia as a place where they would not be judged by the color of their skin. Du Bois read stories in newspapers about the harrowing aspects of the Soviet experiment: from the collapse of industry and famine to homelessness and emotional despair. In late summer of 1926, at the age of fifty-eight, he traveled across the Atlantic, on what would be the first of four trips, to investigate. With stops in Moscow, Leningrad, Nizhni Novgorod (Gorky), Kiev, and Odessa, Du Bois had the occasion to visit schools, universities, factories, and stores, as well as palaces, museums, and libraries. In an unpublished work based on his travels to the Soviet Union, entitled *Russia and America: An Interpretation*, Du Bois asserted that he had witnessed poverty and misery—the “hordes of incredibly dirty, ragged and wild children of war and famine” and the “long lines of ragged people, waiting to buy a loaf of bread”—but that he was also struck by the sheer enthusiasm

Racism in Modern Russia

for revolution. Du Bois felt that his own travails trained him to know what racial discrimination looked like:

I have seen Irishmen crawling out of the filth of their bogs to step in my face and crow; hillbillies and crackers from Alabama and Arkansas could spit on me to the applause of thousands; German peasants newly free could insult me; and Italians and Slovaks and a thousand others could not only deprive me of a living but depend on white American mobs and police to jail or even lynch me for protesting.¹⁹

The Soviet Union, by contrast, did not restrict its citizens in terms of where they could sleep, eat, study, or use a public bathroom because of skin color or nationality.

The visit made an enormous impression upon the civil rights activist. Upon his return to America, Du Bois characterized the new Soviet state in *The Crisis* as “astonishing and new and of fateful importance to the future of civilization.”²⁰ In *Russia and America*, Du Bois expanded his views. Intimately linking racial politics with autobiographical experience, he declared that Soviet Russia was “the only modern country where people are not more or less taught and encouraged to despise and look down on some group or race. I know countries where race and color prejudice show only slight manifestations, but no countries where race and color prejudice [seem] so absolutely absent.” Du Bois approached the Soviet experiment through the historical experiences of “ten million American Negroes.” In America, he was met with “everything from curiosity to insult,” but in the Soviet Union, Du Bois recalled with fondness, “women sit beside me quite [confidently] and unconsciously.”²¹

William L. Patterson, a civil rights activist and the son of a former slave, had a similar experience. Patterson traveled to the Soviet Union under the auspices of the Communist Party Workers’ School to study in The Communist University of Toilers of the East (KUTV). Founded in 1921, the Moscow-based university prepared students from the East for revolutionary work. For more than fifteen years, the university served as a pipeline for launching the careers of influential scholars,

artists, and political figures in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In his autobiography, Patterson remembered the tremendous exhilaration he felt in moving past the biases of race and class that were ominously present in the United States. In Moscow, Patterson concluded, an American Negro "looks at, talks to, works with white men and women and youth as an equal. It is as if one had suffered with a painful affliction for many years and had suddenly awakened to discover that the pain had gone. The Russians seemed to give a man's skin coloration only a descriptive value."²²

Patterson's future wife, Louise Thompson, a social activist and a leading organizer of the highly publicized Soviet propaganda film, *Black and White*, about race relations in the American South, reflected in an interview with a journalist that "Russia was the only place where I was able to forget that I was a Negro."²³ On another occasion, Thompson commented that "we come from a country where everything is denied us—work, protection of life and property, freedom to go where we will and to live where we will—where we are despised and humiliated at every turn. And here [in the USSR] we are accorded every courtesy—free to go where we will and eagerly welcomed—given every opportunity to enjoy ourselves and to travel—free to pursue any work that we choose."²⁴

Soviet racial enlightenment inspired dozens of Black Americans to make the transatlantic pilgrimage to the Soviet Union. Their numbers, along with the parade of highly skilled workers and sympathizers, steadily increased in the late 1920s. They came not as unwitting dupes of Communist propaganda, but as active participants in the shaping of the new Soviet regime.²⁵ Some were drawn to the Soviet Union by the prospects of earning a decent wage, others hoped to study in institutions of higher learning and to help build the world's first socialist society. Most went for short visits, a handful married white Russian women and decided to stay for longer stretches of time.²⁶

One such figure was Harry Haywood, who, after witnessing the bloody race riot in Chicago in July 1919, committed himself to struggling "against whatever it was that made racism possible." Haywood rejected Black nationalism, as well as the politics of the NAACP for its "blind acceptance of white middle-class values and

Racism in Modern Russia

culture,” and, instead, joined the American Communist Party. Along with several other Black Americans, he enrolled in KUTV and continued his studies of political economy, historical materialism, and the history of the Communist Party at the International Lenin School. Haywood stayed long enough in the Soviet Union to marry Ekaterina (Ina), a white ballerina student with a nice command of English, although it does not appear that the couple lived together long, if at all, save for occasional weekend trysts at Ina’s mother apartment. Over the years, Haywood tried, unsuccessfully, to bring Ina back to the United States, but eventually lost contact with her after several attempts. Among other things, it turned out that Haywood’s divorce papers from his first marriage in America were not finalized.²⁷

At a time of severe economic shortages, to say nothing of long bread lines, most Black visitors lived comfortably in the Soviet Union. They received perks such as free housing, food, clothing, weekly allowances, and all-expense paid vacations to the Black Sea. High-profile visitors received a warm reception, with unparalleled access to important political and cultural figures. The poet Langston Hughes and the actor Wayland Rudd were “lionized no end” and “introduced [at cultural gatherings] as representatives of the great Negro people,” according to Hughes’s highly stylized memoir, *I Wonder as I Wander*. Along with Rudd, Louise Thompson, and nineteen other Black Americans, Hughes traveled to the Soviet Union in 1932 to make the film, *Black and White*. The group, treated as honored guests, resided in a luxurious hotel one block from the Kremlin. Hughes gloated that his salary, “in terms of Russian buying power,” was “about a hundred times a week as much as [he] had ever made anywhere else.”²⁸

Anti-racism was at the very core of official Soviet state policy. And it is not all that surprising that the small colony of Black American visitors generated a great deal of media attention. By the time the New Economy Policy collapsed in 1928, a vast propaganda campaign elevated the status of Black Communists in the global project of building socialism. Educational and artistic resources—including photographs and drawings in the mass press—were deployed to promote Soviet racial enlightenment and to abolish racist stereotypes. The Sixth Congress of the Comintern adopted a resolution in 1928 that

placed African Americans at the center of a “fight against all forms of white chauvinism.” Consequently, Soviet visual culture depicted Black Americans not in exotic sensual stereotypes, but as oppressed victims of capitalism or as conscious political subjects.²⁹ The well-publicized project, lasting approximately until the 1960s, condemned US racism, while glorifying the Soviet Union’s commitment to racial justice and human rights. Newspaper articles, photographs, children’s stories, pamphlets, literature (in translation), and graphic art reinforced the message of Soviet exceptionalism and moral superiority in the struggle against global racial oppression.³⁰

The Scottsboro case—when nine African American teenagers, ranging in age from thirteen to nineteen, were falsely accused of group raping two white prostitutes on a freight train in May 1931—became an international symbol of white racial oppression. More than two hundred demonstrations against the injustices of the rape trial were organized throughout Europe, Latin America, and South Africa. By the time Langston Hughes and his group traveled to the Soviet Union, the case had become an international cause célèbre. The American Communist Party capitalized on the hysteria of the Scottsboro case to recruit Black Americans, while Soviet journalists, writers, and graphic artists exposed the hypocrisy of American racist violence and segregation. Dmitri Moor’s cartoon—first published on the front page of *Komsomol’skaia pravda* [Komsomol Truth], the official organ of the Communist Youth Organization, and subsequently reprinted widely—depicted a white American capitalist, painted in gold, green, and black, masquerading as the Statue of Liberty, in the service of white supremacy. The greedy male capitalist holds an electric chair in his right hand, with the Scottsboro boys, shown in austere black and white, shackled by their wrists awaiting execution.³¹

In a society committed to the ideals of internationalism, race was never absent. Black students in Comintern schools complained that they were called “monkeys” or were laughed at or spit on because of their skin color. One student from a French African colony complained that he had experienced more racism in Moscow than in other capitalist countries: “No one spat at me there [Italy or India] the way they do here in Moscow.”³² Despite these and other similar

Image 3.2 “Freedom to the prisoners of Scottsboro!” Soviet propaganda poster, drawing by Dmitri Moor, 1932. © Courtesy of Ne Boltai!

anecdotal incidents, Black visitors to the Soviet Union were typically perceived as objects of curiosity. In his autobiography, Haywood, echoing several Black American visitors, noted that his skin color was seen as something strange and different. “Children followed us in the streets,” Haywood recalled. “If we paused to greet a friend, we found ourselves instantly surrounded by curious crowds—unabashedly staring at us.”³³ Other Black Americans noted that they were mistaken for Uzbeks or other Central Asian peoples, although “a little bigger and a little darker than most.”³⁴ Ultimately, the promises of constructing a post-racial order proved challenging to carry out. Soviet racial scorn, it turned out, was directed not at Black visitors—the face of global racial injustice—but at fellow citizens in its own backyard.

Labeling People

A new approach to nationality policy accompanied the Soviet narrative on racism and anti-racism. The Bolsheviks took over an expansive land and a multiethnic and a multilingual population. The goal of early Soviet state policy was to develop class loyalties, while doing away with separatist nationalism and oppression. Promising national self-determination or what Joseph Stalin called “real rights in the localities [the populations] inhabit,” the new government in power worked to restructure the former empire as a federation of republics established along ethnic political units, committed to the ideals of internationalism and the universal desire for equal rights. By 1922, the Bolshevik party succeeded in consolidating much of the former empire into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Portions of the northwestern borderlands (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia), the principality of Finland, the Congress of Poland, and sections of the southwestern borderlands remained outside of the official Soviet borders as constituted at the time. In due time, these territories would bear the brunt of state-sponsored paranoia, targeting presumed foreign collaborators and alleged threats to state security.³⁵

In the years following the revolution, the Bolsheviks, grounded in Marxist ideology, remained highly suspicious of national self-

Racism in Modern Russia

expression. This did not stop them from supporting policies that strengthened the national consciousness of ethnic minorities—many of whom were deemed backward—while helping overcome long-standing group prejudices. The Bolshevik party viewed national self-expression in paradoxical terms, as an unavoidable transitional period to a new international socialist order. To transform the old empire into a multinational socialist state, it ratified, in 1923, a series of resolutions promoting the development of distinct national cultures, languages, and territories. The idea was that national identities would eventually coexist peacefully with Soviet socialist culture and that all ethnic groups would have equal legal rights, with the expression of ethnic violence punishable by law.

The Soviet Union took the lead in sponsoring highly contradictory affirmative action policies and programs explicitly benefiting certain ethnic groups or nationalities that had suffered discrimination under the Tsarist regime.³⁶ To implement the experiment, the state relied on the category of nationality. The results were remarkable on many levels. At breakneck speed, literacy, schools, and cultural expression in native languages were promoted, including literature, movies, newspapers, journals, and theater; new alphabets were established; and members of local nationalities were promoted to key leadership positions, in many cases replacing ethnic Russians.

What constituted nationality? At the outset, the question was fraught with disagreements. In contrast to the prerevolutionary era, Soviet censuses moved away from native language and religion as the essential components of nationality. Census takers relied on the direct testimony of respondents to determine the nationality to which they belonged. The First All-Union Census, conducted in 1926, counted some 172 official nationalities.³⁷ The Soviet state used the category of nationality—along with markers such as class, sex, and age—to delineate rights, resources, and obligations. Citizens were constantly required to record their nationality. Job applications, school and university registration forms, medical papers, and various other documentary records all had a line marked for nationality.³⁸

The internal passport, introduced officially in December 1932, became the single most powerful tool for ascribing nationality.

“The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth”

Originally, the law on passports and the registration of urban residents (what came to be known as the *propiska*) was intended to improve population counts by controlling the flow of peasants from villages to cities. In the period 1928–32, as many as twelve million peasants left the countryside. Some cities in the industrial heartland of the Dnepr-Donbas region of Ukraine and the Urals trebled in population, while established cities witnessed the influx of a steady stream of labor migrants, attracted by the prospects of working in heavy industry.³⁹ Passports helped stem the flow of illegal internal migration. As time went on, the documents proved particularly useful for carrying out police sweeps—removing populations from urban areas not engaged in industrial or socially useful work; identifying and purging socially harmful or alien elements; searching apartment buildings; sentencing people for criminal violations; and gathering compromising information.⁴⁰

All citizens of the Soviet Union over the age of sixteen and permanent residents in cities and workers’ settlements, in state farms,

Image 3.3 The internal passport of Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, issued on June 11, 1947, with the nationality recorded as Ukrainian. © Courtesy of Laski Diffusion/Getty Images.

Racism in Modern Russia

and at new construction sites were issued internal passports. By the late 1930s, the passport system (which remained in effect until the collapse of the Soviet Union) was employed in all major Soviet cities, industrial centers, and border zones, with some 50 million people out of approximately 162 million acquiring the document. Soviet passports listed the individual's name, age, sex, social position, permanent residence, place of employment, and nationality (on the fifth line). This information contributed significantly to an individual's right of movement and residence, the ability to find gainful employment, and access to goods.

Nationality served as an important factor in how the Soviet state assigned, but also limited, populations' rights and resources. Beginning in 1938, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) stipulated that nationality was no longer the free choice of the individual but was determined by the nationality of the parents. One of the unintended consequences of the state-driven policies—and the emergence of an exceedingly complicated registration system in the 1930s and beyond—was the indoctrination of the belief that each individual's nationality was preserved and inherited for posterity. As we will see in the pages to follow, the fixing of nationality in the internal passport played a vital role in the systematic persecution of populations by ethnic criteria.⁴¹

In official pronouncements, the Bolshevik party denounced the logic of racial thinking. Favoring the view that culture was a product of the environment, Soviet social scientists shared with their French colleagues an interest in neo-Lamarckian theories of inheritance. In their study of race and culture, Soviet scientific experts and government administrators, steeped in the science of Marxism-Leninism, worked to counter the Nazi propaganda machine. Racial traits, they asserted, were not fixed or eternal but were associated with distinct stages of historical development and socioeconomic processes.

Some scholars have argued that the valorization of the Marxist-sociological method in social-scientific thought and government policy—that a person was not tainted irrevocably by his or her biological origins—helps to explain an important difference between the two totalitarian regimes: why Soviet mass terror took on different

forms than that of Nazi Germany. According to this line of argument, Soviet violence of the 1930s and beyond did not set as its goal the total extermination of populations as an object in itself.⁴² More recent scholarship has pointed out that the Nazi regime presents itself as a rather extreme test case in determining the presence or absence of race in the Soviet Union.⁴³ From a comparative perspective, it might be more useful to situate the Third Reich, along with Jim Crow America and apartheid South Africa, on one end of a continuum of racial regimes, and the Soviet Union somewhere on the other end. Soviet racial logics, in other words, were part of broader ideas, practices, and policies in circulation at the time.⁴⁴

Despite formally rejecting biological paradigms, the Soviet Union reproduced the structures and practices of race in surprising ways. As Joseph Stalin (1927–53) consolidated political power in the late 1920s, ethnic hostility gradually replaced class-enemy antagonism. The Soviet Union's racist ideas and policies played out most forcefully in the geopolitically sensitive border zones. In 1928, officials determined to cleanse all unreliable ethnic and national groups from its borders. The measures took several years to implement, and by 1938, according to the most detailed archival study of ethnic cleansing, the operations targeted around 800,000 politically unreliable elements for forcible deportation.⁴⁵ In most cases, military-style executions accompanied the forcible relocation of enemy nations. At first, the Bolshevik operations zeroed in on its international borders. By the summer of 1937, at the height of the Great Terror, the security police expanded its work. No longer bound by geography, the systematic removal and physical annihilation of hostile ethnic groups was at the core of the Stalinist terror campaign. As Stalinism continued to imagine new conspiracies and enemy categories, the lines between social and ethnic categories, center and periphery were difficult to distinguish with certainty.

The threat of war with Nazi Germany, Poland, and other neighboring states furthered suspicions of foreign espionage by capitalist governments. Fears of internal enemies and devastating defeats in the early phases of the war resulted in the systematic repression of non-Russian nationalities. Stalin appealed to the Soviet people to protect

Racism in Modern Russia

the fatherland and to root out deserters, purveyors of false rumors, spies, and saboteurs. The war witnessed an important shift in ethnic cleansing practices: from the partial deportation of populations in sensitive border regions to the cleansing of entire groups of people regardless of location.⁴⁶

The Red Army relied on ethnic categories as noted in passports and other documentary records to remove, deport, and imprison stigmatized nationalities. Special forces supervised high-security areas, which ran along the entirety of the international land and sea borders of the Soviet Union. Soviet authorities imposed rigid controls over its borders, with little movement in and out of the country permitted. In the western borderlands, diaspora nationalities with strong cross-border ties—Germans, Finns, Poles, Estonians, Latvians—were targeted for ethnic purification. Mass violence often accompanied the forcible relocations. Around half of the German and Polish population was removed or physically eliminated from Ukraine; thousands of Finns, Estonians, and Latvians were relocated to Siberia and Central Asia from the Leningrad border region; and in 1940, nearly 10 percent of the population in Soviet-occupied Poland—approximately 200,000 Poles and 60,000 Jews—were deported to Central Asia.⁴⁷

Similar mass terror campaigns, defined largely in ethnic terms, played out along the eastern and southern border zones. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria, which started a fourteen-year war with China, put the Soviets on high alert. In September 1931, Moscow began to shift its security concerns to the Far East. On the Soviet side of the border, Soviets deployed vast resources, stationing more than 800,000 soldiers east of Lake Baikal and around 700,000 troops in Manchukuo. With cross-border contacts cut off, the secret police intensified its search for spies and undesirable elements.⁴⁸ The suspicions against East Asians intensified with the threat of war with Japan, resulting in the expulsion of almost all Chinese migrant workers and Korean tenant farmers. In fact, the Korean population, numbering at least 37,000 families (or some 175,000 people) may have suffered the most in the mass repressions. Between 1935 and 1938, the NKVD forcibly relocated by train all ethnic Koreans from the Far East to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, accounting for around one quarter of

the total population targeted for removal.⁴⁹ At the height of the war, in the summer of 1942, Soviet leadership turned its attention to the southern periphery, a region with a predominantly Muslim population that had long been perceived as a security threat. By 1944, the Soviets resettled approximately half a million Chechens and Ingush from the North Caucasus in Central Asia.⁵⁰

The internal passport system facilitated the creation of a human Soviet archive: an exhaustive process that entailed the cataloguing of the population in toto. Registration was not always a model of efficiency. Descriptive notations could be altered or forged. Identity documents could be procured on the black market for the right price. Police officers often failed to maintain up-to-date files of passports and residence registration. In some instances, hundreds of citizens could live in a region without being officially registered. But for all its faults and loopholes, the internal passport document—with the nationality clearly marked on the fifth line—facilitated the systematic identification, removal, and, in some cases, physical execution of entire populations by ethnic criteria.⁵¹ The decision to inscribe the ethnicity of every individual drastically redefined how populations viewed themselves and interacted with the world around them. This system also went a long way in priming people to think in racial terms.⁵²

Soviet Anti-Semitism

In 1928, the Soviet regime came up with an outlandishly unique attempt to solve the Jewish problem. Birobidzhan—a sparsely populated land along the Manchurian border—was designed as an autonomous district, or a new center for Jewish life, rooted in socialist principles, rivaling Zionism’s invention of a modern nation-state in Middle East Palestine. From a geopolitical perspective, the remote territory served as a buffer against Japanese imperial expansion. The idea was to create a Soviet agricultural colony where Yiddish would be the primary language and where Jews would move into agricultural labor and other so-called productive economic sectors. To attract new settlers, the government provided discounted travel, food

Racism in Modern Russia

subsidies, tax exemptions, and other perquisites. By the mid-1930s, schools, newspapers, publishing houses, and other Jewish institutions were set up. The Soviets did not forcibly relocate large numbers of Jews to Birobidzhan, as they did other unreliable national minority populations to border zones. Only a limited number of Jewish activists made the long voyage. The sparsely populated region in the Far East failed to live up to its ambitions as a secular cultural mecca for proletarian Jewish life and culture.⁵³

Despite the failures of the Birobidzhan project, Jews were among the prime beneficiaries of Soviet nationality policies. Unlike in the prerevolutionary era, Jews under the Soviets were not subject to official quotas or restrictions on their mobility. The influx of Jews to Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Kharkov, Minsk, and other large cities in the Soviet Union coincided with an explosion of urban growth. The 1939 census counted some three million Jewish residents, one-third of whom were first-generation immigrants in places outside the former Pale of Settlement. The process of acculturating to Soviet norms was by no means straightforward or painless. While many first-generation Soviet Jews remained committed to religious traditions and ways of life, others took advantage of all that the Soviet state had to offer.⁵⁴ In less than one generation, upward mobility turned out to be a stunning success. Jews climbed atop the sprawling Soviet bureaucracy, becoming highly visible members of the Communist Party and the Red Army. Jews were drawn to institutions of secondary and higher learning, comprising more than three and a half times the Jewish share of the population. No less impressive, Jews made up a disproportionate number of Soviet doctors, dentists, journalists, scientists, university professors, and musicians. In the most prominent universities, the number of Jewish students skyrocketed as well, with the greatest disparities in four specific areas of specialization: medicine, economics, music, and the arts.⁵⁵

The spectacular climb atop the Soviet social ladder was not without challenges. As a global economic crisis erupted, the Stalinist regime attacked Jewish institutions with renewed ferocity. Beginning in 1928, with Stalin and his close circle of political allies steeped in delusional, conspiratorial thinking about the dangers of the capitalist world, the

“The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth”

rate of anti-Semitic incidents ticked up.⁵⁶ The Stalinist state, in contrast to Germany or Poland of the 1930s, did not allow anti-Semitism to become the guiding ideological principle of the land. Under Stalin, at least until the start of World War II, officials continued to condemn anti-Semitism: to speak publicly against the perils of anti-Jewish attitudes and behavior.

But in a period of economic and political turbulence, anti-Jewish sentiment reared its ugly head in a variety of settings. Jews were particularly vulnerable to abuse at factories, schools and universities, and on shop floors. The Soviets closed down all independent Jewish political parties and Jewish institutions; disbanded the Jewish sections of the Communist Party known as *Evseksii*; and blamed Jews for basic goods shortages and the precipitous surge in consumer prices. In Belarus, drunken hooligans intimidated and occasionally beat up Jewish-looking shopkeepers, pedestrians, and train passengers. It was not uncommon for Jewish students to experience physical violence. A member of the communist youth organization known as the *Komsomol* reported that his peers ordered him to take off his pants to verify if he was circumcised. Similar incidents of harassment and intimidation took place all across the Soviet Union. One Jewish violinist of the Bolshoi Theater committed suicide after the artistic director, Nikolai Golovanov, repeatedly harassed him for his Jewishness. Some towns in Ukraine even witnessed murderous anti-Semitic riots.⁵⁷

The war with Nazi Germany exacerbated interethnic conflicts. The German forces attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Hitler saw Germany's eastern frontier largely in colonial terms: a vast space that could be controlled at will on the basis of mythic notions of race. To construct a hierarchical order, the territories were to be liquidated of Jews and other racial enemies. It would be a mistake nonetheless to attribute the inculcation of racial logics solely to the German occupation. In addition to creating administrative hurdles in everyday life, the fixing of nationality in Soviet identity documents provided a convenient map for the Nazi mass extermination of Jews. No clear plan or directive for a final solution (or the total annihilation of Jews) had been outlined. But in the first months of the war, Nazi Germans, with the help of local collaborators, rounded up Jews in

Racism in Modern Russia

ghettos and concentration camps. Jews were shot in fields or ravines, in a brutal and intimate manner, usually on the outskirts of towns and cities, and buried in mass graves. Soviet administrative records and censuses expedited the mass killing operations. To locate Jews, all German officials needed to do was inspect the paperwork assembled by the vast Soviet bureaucracy. Soviet documentary records—from passports and student identity cards to school rosters, censuses, and job application forms—listed the nationality of every person.⁵⁸

In the borderlands, populations came to view themselves and those around them largely through the prism of race. Mass killing permanently altered the ethnographic order. All groups were demarcated by racial categories or visibly distinct markers. Badges and armbands allowed Nazis to differentiate the “Aryan types” from the “barbaric” Slavs and “subhuman” Jews. Ukrainians wore yellow and blue armbands, while Jews wore white bands or the Star of David. The thousands of ethnic Germans who had resided in Right Bank Ukraine wore distinguishing badges, as well. Nazi officials required everyone over the age of eighteen to carry identification papers with their racial or ethnic identities clearly marked. A wrong identity card could serve as a death sentence. But in the protean borderland—where it was often difficult to differentiate people by language and appearance—identification papers could also save lives.⁵⁹ Lev Yurovsky recalled that he had managed to survive the war because of the generosity of his neighbor who had offered him her husband’s passport. Yurovsky subsequently put the document “in order” by doctoring the descriptive data, which allowed him to pass as an ethnic Russian man. Other Jews exchanged their Soviet passports for German documents “without the slightest pang of conscience,” in hopes that they and their children could evade detection.⁶⁰

The war left a long trail of misery and deprivation. The Soviet Union was subjected to immense material and human loss. Some 27 million people perished during the war, with the male population accounting for 77 percent, or 20 million, deaths. The violence wreaked havoc on Jewish communities, with Jewish deaths totaling approximately 10 percent, or 2.7 million, of all casualties. As the war progressed, the Soviet economy suffered a near total collapse. In places with heavy

“The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth”

combat damage, it was often difficult to find shelter. Nearly 70,000 villages and 1,700 towns were destroyed; some 32,000 factories and 40,000 miles of rail track lay in complete ruins; food and consumer-good supply incurred drastic cuts. The postwar economic recovery, with respect to food, housing, and manufacturing of consumer goods, was unusually long and painful. The Soviet Union reached the prewar gross national production level only in 1948.⁶¹

At war's end, amid chaos and confusion, Jewish survivors found themselves in hostile circumstances. In western Belarus and western Ukraine, Nazi Germans took considerable efforts to confiscate Jewish property: money, clothing, furniture, housing, and valuables such as silver, gold, and jewelry. Household and personal items were used by the German administration, redistributed among ethnic Germans, turned over to local policemen or collaborators, or pawned off to eager neighbors. In the post-occupation months, with housing and material belongings in short supply, property conflicts were the norm of the day. In a country devastated by total war, many survivors had no homes or apartments to return to. Others found their prewar apartments inhabited by non-Jewish acquaintances or discovered that their furniture, clothing, kitchen items, and other material belongings were in possession of a former neighbor. Resolving disputes or tracing how property changed hands was no easy task. It was not unusual for Jews to encounter violence or hostilities when they tried to recover private possessions. If all else failed, Jews could petition party leaders or turn to local courts to seek justice, but in most cases, turning to Soviet authorities for the restitution of property proved unsuccessful.⁶²

Postwar rage hampered reconstruction. Long before Soviet authorities began to harass and arrest prominent Jewish cultural figures and medical experts in 1948, culminating in the infamous Doctor's Plot in 1953, anti-Semitism created obstacles for Jews in their everyday life. Emil Draitser, who grew up in Odessa, remembered how shameful he felt when his teacher mispronounced his name in front of the class. In the fall of 1945, on the first day of school, school children made fun of the boy because the name “Draitser” did not sound Russian, and, instead, called him a little kike and a Jew.⁶³ Mary Leder, an American teenager from Santa Monica, California, who

Racism in Modern Russia

emigrated with her parents to Birobidzhan and then went on to live in the Soviet Union for some thirty-four years, recalled that drunks called Jews *zhidy* on the streets, and Jewish children were taunted in the courtyard. Anti-Semitic remarks and accusations “became commonplace in the long lines to buy food,” according to Leder. Soviet authorities did not try to curb the outbursts. “Whereas before the war, anyone who ventured to utter a racial or ethnic slur in public could be hauled before a court of law and punished, it would be a foolish person indeed who tried to take a tormenter to court now.”⁶⁴

In the months following the war, the situation became alarming on many levels, with Jews beset by widespread rumors, threats, and insults. Stalin’s paranoid attack on the loyalty of Jewish subjects and the anti-cosmopolitan campaign played out on the front pages of leading Soviet newspapers, creating an atmosphere of intimidation and fear. Jews were depicted as an eternal alien and singled out for unreliability and unworthiness. Soviet publications referred to Jews as “poor and rotten soldiers.”⁶⁵

Olga Freidenberg, a professor of classical philology in Leningrad, observed that educated people with recognizably Jewish names were subjected to “moral lynching.” “One could see the pogrom as carried out in our department. Groups of students rummage through the works of Jewish professors, eavesdrop on private conversations, whisper in corners. They make no effort to conceal their purposeful vigilance.”⁶⁶ In March 1953, the prominent film director, M. I. Romm, complained directly to Stalin that he was forced to recall his ethnic origins frequently, even though he (like so many other Soviet Jews) was raised in Moscow, spoke only Russian, and had always felt completely Russian.⁶⁷

Unofficial quotas for Jewish students in law, medicine, and culture and the arts added to the daily frustrations. Finding gainful employment proved particularly trying. The internal passport—with the word “Jew” (*Evrei*) on the fifth line—did not help matters. After failing to land a job, one survivor recalled:

I never hid that I was a Jew. Why hide it? It’s not a source of pride, but still. I, so to say, have suffered quite a bit because I was a Jew.

“The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth”

You couldn't get a job if you were a Jew. For me it was harder than it was for my father. My father witnessed limitations before the revolution. He would say, “You passed by a store, and there was a sign in the window: ‘Jews not welcome here.’” It was easier [under the Tsarist regime]. In our times, you come, you see “Wanted,” and they don't hire you. And sometimes they even tell you the reason they don't hire you.

“For nine months,” a recent graduate noted, “I walked from one bank to another. I would call them and ask, ‘Do you hire graduates of the [Moscow Geological Institute]? They would say, ‘Yes. Our institute ranks very well.’ They would tell me to come in. I'd go in. They'd open my passport, and say, ‘You know, we've already hired someone.’”⁶⁸

Soviet anti-Semitism, despite making daily life astonishingly difficult for Jews, did not publicly justify racial discrimination or go to the self-conscious extreme of drawing exclusionary lines. Unlike the United States government, for instance, the Soviet regime did

Image 3.4 A typical internal passport of a Soviet citizen. The nationality is listed as Jewish on the fifth line. © Courtesy of Alexander Frenkel.

Racism in Modern Russia

not regulate familial relations or interethnic marriage according to a one-drop rule, nor was it concerned with maintaining neat divisions between people who married out of their nationalities. On the contrary, Soviet law viewed mixed marriage as a natural form of social relations. Mixed familial unions, at least officially, strengthened the “friendship of the peoples” principle: a metaphor for anti-racism and proletarian unity of an imagined multiethnic brotherhood. “In our country every sixth family includes people of different nationalities,” one Soviet expert proudly declared. “This is one of the clear manifestations of friendly international relations established in the country during the period of Soviet power.”⁶⁹

At a time when the American legal system championed interracial marriage as unnatural and immoral, Soviet civil marriage law allowed populations to marry whomever they wished. With more than 100 different nationalities residing within the borders of the Soviet Union, mixed families came in many different combinations.⁷⁰ Jews intermarried at particularly high rates, with the frequency increasing over the course of the Soviet century. In 1936, around 13 percent of Jews in Belarus chose to marry non-Jewish spouses. The numbers were slightly higher in Ukraine at 15 percent and expanded in Russia to 40 percent. After World War II the rates ballooned even higher. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed, around 60 percent of all males and around 50 percent of all females were married to non-Jewish spouses, with the proportion highest in Moscow and Leningrad.⁷¹

Mixed unions unsettled the categories of Russianness and Jewishness. Official attitudes toward mixed unions remained welcoming, even celebratory, but intermarried couples and their partially Jewish children found it difficult to free themselves of the burdens of their origins. It was not uncommon for mixed Jewish families and children to encounter disparaging comments, including ethnic slurs. Parents and children faced ridicule because they looked Jewish or bore Jewish-sounding surnames. Commenting on the postwar era, Mary Leder noted that Soviet citizens identified Jews by their names, patronymics, and even by their looks. “It always amazed me,” Leder wrote in her memoirs, “how Russians managed to spot as Jews individuals who did not look at all Jewish to me.”⁷²

Race and Cold War Politics

At the same time that anti-Semitism made Jewish life difficult within Soviet Russia, the regime emerged from World War II as a powerful critic of race relations, particularly of its Cold War rival, the US. From 1946 through the mid-1960s, the Soviet Union renewed its focus in cultivating a carefully constructed image of moral racial superiority. Journalists, graphic artists, and radio broadcasters drew on a repertoire of propaganda tools developed in the interwar period. Propagandists made extensive use of American press coverage, often in graphic detail—including newspaper stories, cartoons, and photographs. In condemning everything from lynchings, beatings, and senseless murders of young Black men by white mobs to racial segregation, economic inequality, and civil rights protests, Soviet propaganda exposed America’s hypocrisy as the leader of the “free world,” driving home the message that racial violence was symptomatic of the American capitalist system.⁷³

As the international drama heated up, public opinion took notice. “The entire world is watching America and the way it handles its racial and religious minorities,” the Broadway actor Robert Massey addressed a luncheon at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York in April 1946. “It matters very much now what the rest of the world thinks of America’s treatment of its races.”⁷⁴ The US federal government was particularly sensitive to international criticism of its treatment of ethnic minorities. President Harry S. Truman (1945–53) adopted a moderate pro-civil rights stance, in hopes of promoting democracy, containing the threat of communism, and maintaining public diplomacy efforts.

America’s deeply concerning record on race provided the international community with a trove of sensational material. Soviet newspapers utilized photographs with great effectiveness, as a window onto the troubling experiences of US race relations. They publicized misfortunes of racial violence and discrimination by running shocking, often sarcastic, headlines such as “Racist Orgy for Export,” “Bloody Drama in Los Angeles,” and “The Tragedy of Colored America.”⁷⁵ On the question of race prejudice, the Soviet newspaper *Trud* (Labor) observed that “semi-slave forms of oppression and exploitation are

Image 3.5 Soviet anti-racist cartoon, drawing by Victor Efimov, 1978. The building sign reads “Restaurant.” A Black boy nails the sign “Whites Only” to the wall, as two white American men stand in the background. © Courtesy of Ne Boltai!

“The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth”

the rule” and that the movement of social equality has resulted in “unbridled terror against the negroes,” while *Pravda* (Truth) reported of vicious “pogroms” directed at the Black American community.⁷⁶

US officials felt that the Soviet Union’s propaganda efforts routinely disseminated troublesome episodes of domestic civil rights abuse, which damaged the image of American democracy and fueled international outrage. In 1949, the US embassy in Moscow declared that the “Soviet press hammers away unceasingly on such things as ‘lynch law,’ segregation, racial discrimination, deprivation of political rights, etc., seeking to build up a picture of an America in which the Negroes are brutally downtrodden with no hope of improving their status under the existing form of government.” In 1957, when Governor Orval Faubus ordered national troops to block nine African American students from enrolling at Little Rock’s Central High School, *Izvestiia* (News) characterized the episode in Arkansas a “tragedy,” which aroused “ire and indignation in the heart of every honest man.” In southern states such as Arkansas

fascist thugs of the Ku Klux Klan are organizing a savage hunt for Negro children because the latter plan to sit in the same classrooms with white boys and girls. National guard soldiers and policemen armed to the teeth bar Negro children from entering the schools, threaten them with bayonets and tear-gas bombs and encourage hooligans to engage in violence with impunity.⁷⁷

By the early 1960s, according to Thomas Hughes, the assistant secretary of state for US intelligence and research, Soviet broadcasting on race relations in America had grown to “enormous” proportions. In a two-week period in May 1963, the number of Soviet radio broadcasts and newspaper commentaries devoted to US racism grew to seven times the coverage of the Ole Miss riot of 1962 (when segregationists protested the enrollment of James Meredith on the campus); nine times greater than the freedom riders (when civil rights activists rode buses on the interstate in the Deep South in 1961); and more than eleven times the Little Rock Crisis of 1957. In a classified

Racism in Modern Russia

memo, Hughes wrote that America's "racial crisis provides wonderful grist for a propaganda mill which is constantly ready to exploit and publicize any weakness in western society. The greater intensity of the present crisis may account in large part for the expanded Soviet coverage." Unsurprisingly, America's policies toward people of color had troubling implications for international relations. Soviet broadcasters posed the question: If American public officials "can act like slaveholders towards millions of their own people, what can the nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America expect of them?"⁷⁸

Anti-communist rhetoric dominated the US political airways, while the blunt criticism of Soviet sympathizers threatened US prestige abroad. Civil rights activists such as Du Bois found themselves marginalized for their pro-communist views and censure of US foreign policy. In the last three decades of his life, Du Bois's travels around the world took him from Berlin, Moscow, and Warsaw to Shanghai, Nagasaki, and Cape Town. By drawing connections between racial politics in America and the cruel forces of imperialism around the world, Du Bois reconceptualized racism as a global phenomenon.⁷⁹

While visiting Nazi Germany on an Oberlaender Fellowship in the summer of 1936, Du Bois became acutely aware that Germany's anti-Semitism not only mirrored American color prejudice, but "surpassed in vindictive cruelty and public insult anything" that he had ever witnessed.⁸⁰ The events surrounding World War II and the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis on Jews played a fundamental role in helping Du Bois rethink the unequal treatment of African Americans. Several decades later, lecturing on the destruction of Jews in the Warsaw ghetto at the Hotel Diplomat in New York, Du Bois reflected on the genealogy of his thought process. For Du Bois, the Negro problem was no longer a "matter of color and physical and racial characteristics." "No, the race problem in which I was interested," Du Bois observed, "cut across lines of color and physique and belief and status and was a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice, which reached all sorts of people and caused endless evil to all men."⁸¹

In light of his unwavering commitment to social justice and opposition to racial discrimination, Du Bois continued to ally

“The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth”

himself with the Soviet political project. In the fall of 1936, the civil rights activist hoped to make a second extended trip to the USSR to undertake a study of ethnic minorities. To his surprise, the Soviets rejected the visa application, allowing Du Bois to transit in Moscow for only a few days, en route to China and Japan. Du Bois wound up spending most of his time in the USSR in a first-class sleeping car aboard the Trans-Siberian “Lux Express,” traveling approximately ten thousand kilometers through six time zones.

In the summer of 1949, Du Bois went to the Soviet Union a third time to participate in the Peace Congress in Moscow. This time, the Soviet press devoted outsized attention to the trip. In the 1950s, Du Bois’s star began to rise. Articles by and about Du Bois were published in Soviet newspapers and magazines, while his books and speeches appeared in Russian translation. As his thoughts shifted from Black politics in America to the anti-imperialism of the Pan-African Movement and to the reimagining of racism as an international human rights issue, Soviet Russia continued to occupy a special place in Du Bois’s conception of the global color line. In no other modern land, Du Bois asserted in *Russia and America*, had he witnessed “so little consciousness of racial differences as in Russia today.” Although Du Bois had no illusion that Soviet Russia was an anti-racist utopia, he was impressed nonetheless by its integrationist policies. “Every effort is evidently being made to make the artisan and handworkers the social equal of the [white-collar] worker, the professional man, the teacher, the civil servant.”⁸² Elsewhere, he described the Soviet Union as “the most hopeful nation on earth.”⁸³

His contemporaries described Du Bois as an enemy of the state for making “hate-America speeches.” The publisher Harcourt, Brace, and Company declined to publish *Russia and America* because the book failed to provide “a balanced interpretation” and, furthermore, appeared to be “an uncritical apologia for Soviet Russia and an excessive condemnation of the United States.” Meanwhile, the US passport office repeatedly denied the political pariah permission to travel overseas for refusing to fill out a questionnaire detailing his ties to the Communist Party. Du Bois’s FBI file grew to a hefty tome, encompassing everything from newspaper clippings, pamphlets,

Racism in Modern Russia

personal correspondence to passport application files, detailed summaries of overseas speeches, and radio broadcasts.⁸⁴

Despite the unwelcome public scrutiny, Du Bois's commitment to the Soviet project remained unwavering. In 1958, on the heels of a landmark Supreme Court decision that reinstated his passport, the elderly Du Bois went on an eleven-month sojourn across the Atlantic, with stops in England, Holland, France, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, the Soviet Union, and China. The Soviet press heralded Du Bois as an international symbol of peace activism. Soviet journalists photographed him at red-carpet receptions; at a New Year's party at the Kremlin; at an honorary degree ceremony at Moscow State University; conversing side by side with Nikita Khrushchev (1953–64) in the Kremlin; and at the African and Asian Writers Conference in Tashkent, where delegates greeted the appearance of the “90-year-old globe trotter,” the father of modern pan-Africanism, with “wild

Image 3.6 W. E. B. Du Bois and Nikita Khrushchev at a conference in the Kremlin, November 7, 1958. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). © Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Image 3.7 W. E. B. Du Bois and Shirley Graham Du Bois with two unidentified children viewing the May Day parade in a large crowd in Moscow's Red Square, May 1, 1959. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). © Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

applause and cheers.”⁸⁵ Du Bois's highly anticipated meeting with Khrushchev played an instrumental role in the creation of the Pan-African Institute within the Soviet Academy of Sciences. On his return to the US, Du Bois received the 1958 International Lenin Peace Prize at a special ceremony at the Soviet Embassy in Washington

Racism in Modern Russia

D.C., in recognition of his “outstanding service in the struggle for the preservation and strengthening of peace in the whole world.”⁸⁶

As the Cold War crisis lingered on, Soviet propagandists touted the modern technological achievements of the Soviet state, its progressive anti-racist politics and commitment to anti-colonial struggles. Under Khrushchev’s leadership, the Kremlin’s approach to Third World alliances softened. With censorship standards relaxed, the Soviet Union committed considerable resources to subsidizing literary and cultural production, including the translation and publication of foreign literatures and the hosting of film festivals, literary conferences, and youth festivals, aimed at showcasing its commitment to non-whiteness.⁸⁷ To develop closer relations with the developing world, the Soviet regime provided political and military support, generous loans and scholarships, and mass technical and professional training to students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In 1961, some 500 African students studied in the USSR at the Lumumba University or “Friendship University,” which catered to third world students. By 1989, around 36,000 students from Sub-Saharan Africa and nearly 39,600 students from Latin America graduated from Soviet institutions of higher education and technical schools. The plan was for students from the Third World to “become not only highly qualified specialists but also persons with progressive opinion, true friends of the Soviet Union,” according to a secret decree issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party.⁸⁸

Third World students arrived in the Soviet Union expecting a mecca, but as Jan Carew described in *Green Winter*, an autobiographical novel about a Black student from Guyana, they found no angels. Much like their counterparts in the United States, foreign students studying in the Soviet Union encountered race discrimination, verbal sneers, racial profiling, and occasionally physical abuse. In Moscow, four Russian students beat up a Somali student for dancing with a white Russian girl, while another Russian girl was expelled from university for a romantic relationship with an African student. A female graduate student from Leningrad State University recalled that Russian women developed romantic relationships with foreign students largely for pragmatic reasons (because foreigners had more money or were

Image 3.8 In 1955 and 1956, the Everyman Opera Company staged fourteen performances in Leningrad of the famed American opera *Porgy and Bess*, followed by twelve performances in Moscow, with the Soviet Ministry of Culture paying the tour costs in full. The US State Department sponsored overseas tours of US musicians and dancers, as well as cultural presentations as “ambassadors of the arts.” But in 1953 and on several occasions thereafter, it declared that a production of *Porgy and Bess* in the Soviet Union would be “politically premature.” The Soviet Ministry of Culture paid \$16,000 a week (\$141,000 in 2014), in addition to transportation costs, food and lodging in the Hotel Astoria and the Hotel Metropol, as well as excursions around the capital cities, entertainment, and large holiday banquets. The production of *Porgy and Bess* received outsized international attention, with journalists and photographers from major US newspapers and magazines covering the premieres and Nikita Khrushchev and other political dignitaries in attendance. © Courtesy of Manuel Litran/Paris Match via Getty Images.

Racism in Modern Russia

perceived as intellectual and well mannered), which triggered feelings of insecurity and hostility among (white) Soviet men.⁸⁹

Similar incidents of name-calling and harassment played out in many other cities in the USSR. African students were called “black monkeys” and “idlers” and were taunted to wash their “black bodies.” Emboldened by anti-racist struggles in the international sphere and the rhetoric of postcolonial liberation, African students protested racist mistreatment, squalid sanitary conditions, and tacit restrictions on socializing and dating Russian girls. In a scathing editorial, African students who were expelled from Moscow State University for participating in a Black African Student Union had no qualms calling out the Soviet Union’s anti-racist, color-blind posturing: “For the Soviet leaders to pose before the world as champions of oppressed Africa while they oppress millions in their own country and their satellites is hypocrisy at its worst.”⁹⁰

Soviet authorities did their best to keep the reports of mistreatment and abuse under wraps, preserving the carefully crafted image of moral racial superiority. In most cases, the incidents did not make for sensational international headlines. On rare occasions, however, an alleged hate crime—a grisly murder of an African student—generated international news coverage. Soviet authorities dismissed the death as an unfortunate outcome of “alcohol-induced stupor,” but African students countered that it was a racially induced crime, a matter of “white against black.” On December 19, 1963, some 500 to 700 African students enrolled in Soviet universities and technical institutes walked in the center of the capital, shouting “Moscow, a second Alabama” and “Stop Killing Africans!” The event received outsized attention in the media, causing Soviet officials to confront a foreign relations nightmare.⁹¹

Blackness—a marker of foreignness and exoticism, if not alienation—increasingly occupied a conspicuous place in Soviet society. Students from Somalia, Ghana, and Kenya were not the only ones who encountered racist taunts, jokes, and profiling in their daily life. In the 1960s and 1970s, tens of thousands of Soviet citizens from the Caucasus and Central Asia traveled long distances to Moscow and Leningrad in search of new educational and economic opportunities.

“The Most Hopeful Nation on Earth”

Tatars, Georgians, Azerbaijanis, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks left small towns and villages for the Soviet capitals hoping to improve their social standing. The lucky few studied in institutions of higher education and technical schools; a handful landed coveted white-collar jobs. Most dark-skinned newcomers from the southern republics and eastern peripheries occupied liminal spaces in the capital cities, without right of residence or access to health care and education. The migrants earned modest salaries in service and construction sectors and sold their wares on street corners and at bus and metro stations, where they were often called “black monkeys,” “*negry*,” “black snouts,” and a litany of other racially insensitive insults ascribed to their hair or skin color.⁹²

In the last years of his life, Du Bois continued to praise Soviet Russia for her “refusal to be white”—for “not lining up against the colored peoples of the world” and “increasing long smoldering resentment.”⁹³ Soviet law supported the upbeat assessment. The Bolshevik state provided its citizens equal protection and treatment, regardless of ethnic origins. It was also the only superpower that spread its anti-colonial and anti-racist message internationally to the Afro-Asian world. But by the time the USSR collapsed, Soviet internationalism had lost much of its global appeal, while, at home, the boundaries between Russians and dark-skinned populations began to harden. People who identified themselves as “Russian” became increasingly conscious of the outsized role that skin color played in elevating their place as the first among equals in Soviet society. This development, it turned out, not only had long-term implications for forging intimate bonds between Russianness and whiteness, but for everyday ethnic relations as well, which took an increasingly sinister turn in the 1990s and beyond.