



# Soviet Propaganda and Black Americans Before WWII

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## Introduction

During the Cold War (1947-1991), both the US and USSR utilized propaganda to portray themselves as the superior state while portraying the other negatively. Black Americans were an important facet of this process, as the USSR used the experiences of Black Americans to criticize the US. This trend stretches back to the beginning of the Soviet Union (1922). Scholarship has been done on various Black Americans who traveled to the USSR during the interwar period. These groups included artists, writers, engineers, agronomists, and more. Some of these travelers were only temporary, while others settled in the USSR more permanently. During this time period, many of these people reported their experiences positively. Our aim is to expand upon the historical understanding of Black experiences and how they were reported within the US and USSR. This contributes to a more nuanced understanding of both American-Soviet relations and the intersection between Black History and Cold War History.

## Methods

- Analysis of microfilm accessed through the Strozier Library microfilm collection. These records were originally transmitted to Washington D.C. by U.S. State Department employees stationed in eastern European cities such as Riga, Latvia.
- Records consist of translated articles originally published in *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, which were broadcast newspapers for the Communist Party and Soviet government, respectively.
- Collection and analysis of newspaper articles published in the *Chicago Defender* and *The New York Times* between 1920 and 1939. These articles were accessed online through ProQuest's Historical Newspapers collection. The *Defender* is an African-American newspaper originally founded in 1905.
- Article are reports directly related to the Soviet Union and the experiences of Black Americans in the USSR

## Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records

RUSSIA:  
from Czar  
to Commissars,  
1914 -1918

## Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records

SOVIET UNION:  
1919-1935  
PART 2.

## Results

### Microfilm Results

- Early reports of the Bolshevik government being “friendlier” towards the US compared to their other allies
- Important officials blamed European propaganda for the strained relations between the US and USSR while also praising the skills of American industry and workers
- Public critique of the American government and its unwillingness to recognize the USSR
- Public critique of the conditions of American workers with specific mention Black workers
- Reports of Black issues were present in Soviet newspapers. For example, during the Scottsboro Boys Trial (1931), petitions were published in *Pravda Vostoka* by Black agronomists working in Tashkent

### Chicago Defender Results

- Journalists like Homer Smith used explicitly pro-Soviet rhetoric when reporting his experiences and those of other black Americans
- Smith connected the oppression faced by Black Americans to the oppression faced by Soviet citizens under the Russian Tsars
- Smith wrote about and interviewed many Black workers and artists who were visiting or living in the USSR
- Prominent Black activists like Willis N. Huggins criticized pro-Soviet figures like William L. Patterson, especially as they defended the USSR after the invasion of Poland (September 1939)



Figure 1 Black and White crew aboard the Europa-Bremen in 1932. This film was a Soviet-German production set to showcase and address racism in the United States

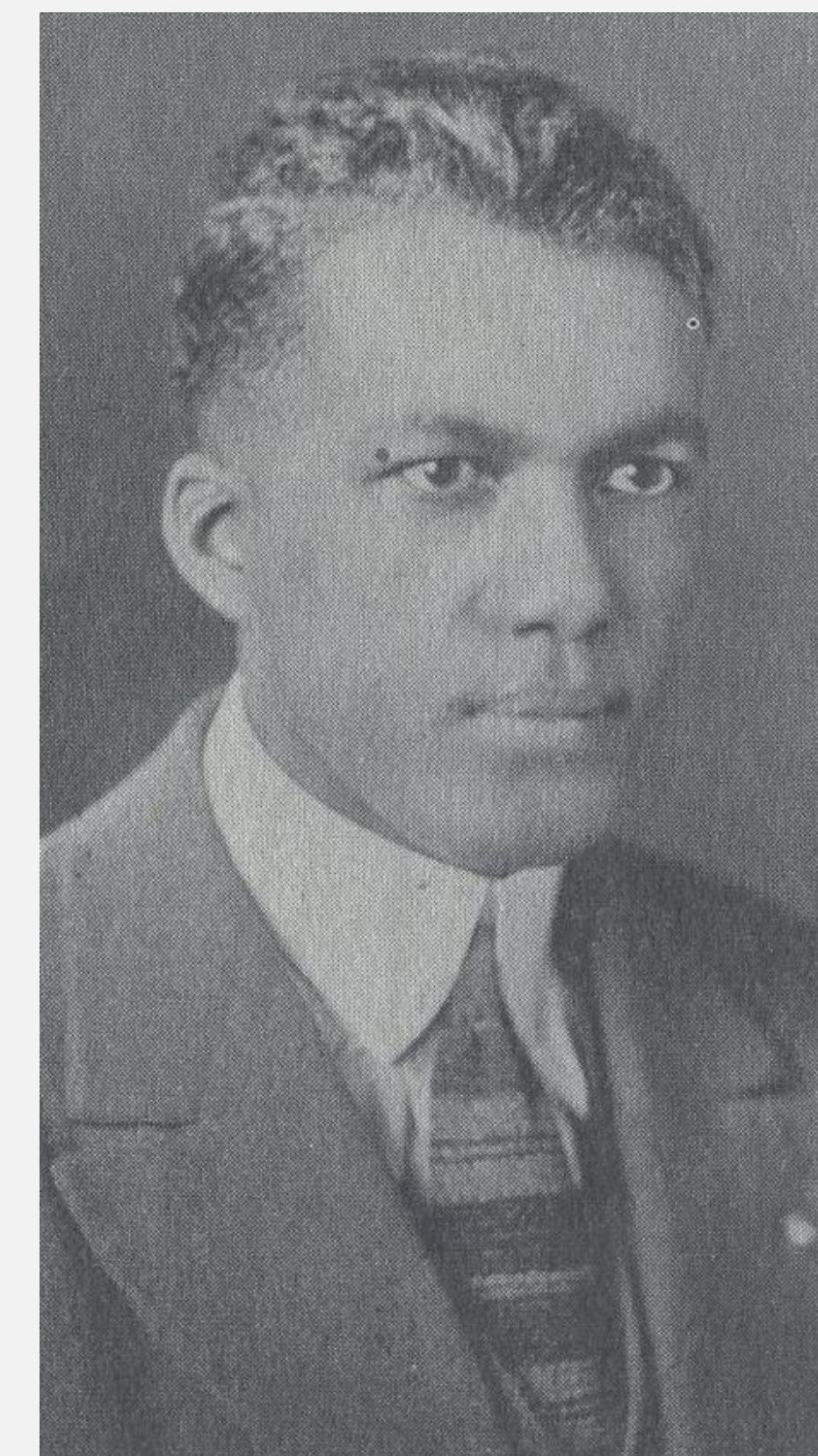
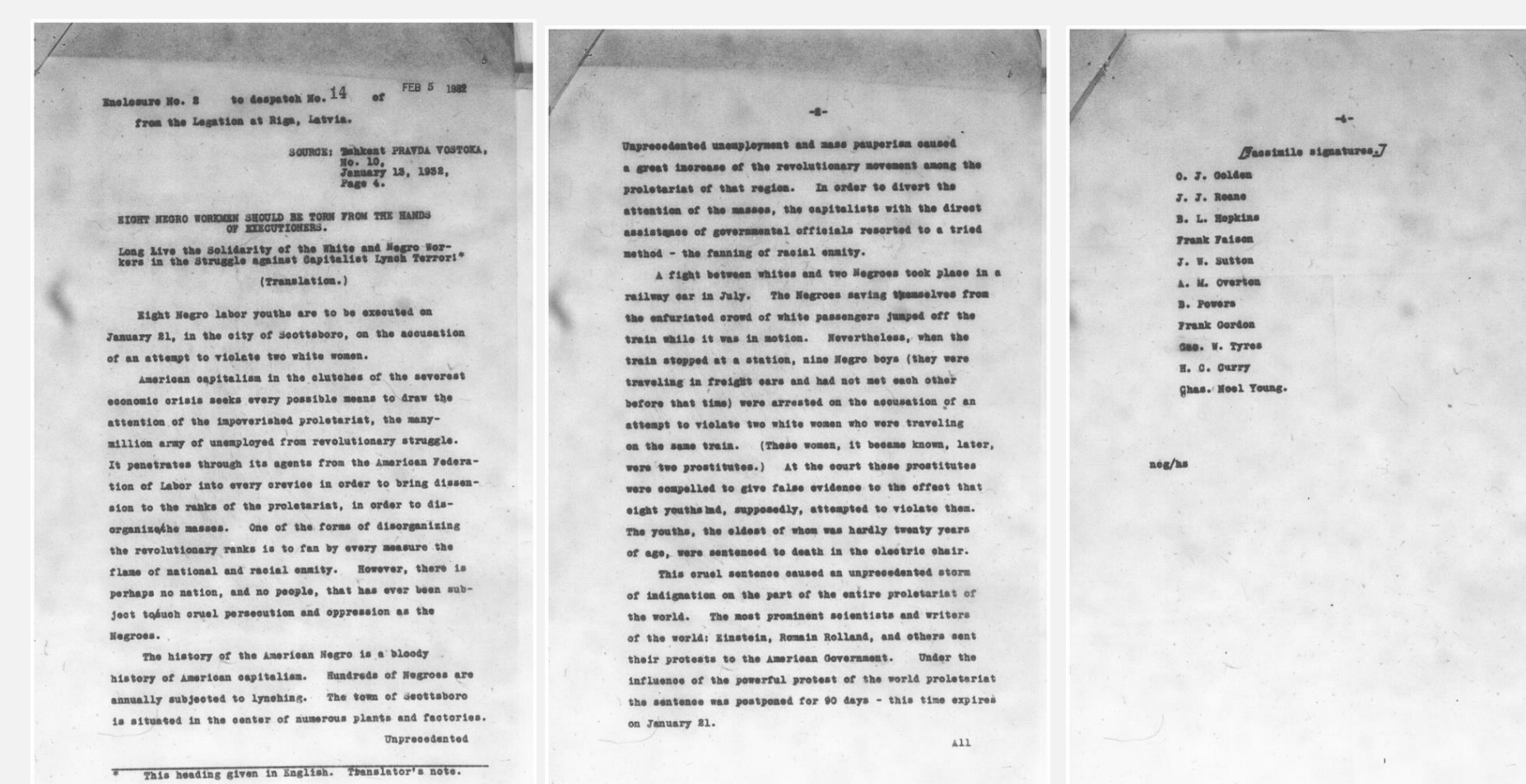


Figure 2 Homer Smith wrote multiple pro-Soviet articles throughout the 1930s



Figures 3 and 4 Willis N. Huggins (left) and William L. Patterson (right)



Figures 5-7 Excerpts of a State Department document recording an article written by Black agronomists working in Tashkent, Uzbekistan

## Discussion

- Commonly believed that the USSR was completely opposed to the US. However, we can see a more complicated system that praised the American industry and economy while also criticizing policies such as Jim Crow
- The USSR portrayed itself as an alternative to America's capitalist society. This proved attractive to Black Americans who remained oppressed under American systems
- Many of the earliest Black Americans to travel to the USSR were engineers and agronomists. This reflects the Soviet reliance on American industry while simultaneously using Black experiences to critique America and improve their own image
- Many of these Black workers would report their experiences in the USSR positively, as seen in articles published by Homer Smith
- Prominent Black artists such as Langston Hughes also traveled to the USSR and similarly reported their experiences positively
- We can see tension within the Black community, as shown in the conflict between Willis N. Huggins and W.L. Patterson
- Further research into varying experiences, especially those of Black women, will be needed to complicate our understandings of how Black Americans interacted with the Soviet Union and ideas of communism

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## References

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