



# Moscow in the Harlem Renaissance

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## Abstract

Through a detailed analysis of two key African American writers who interacted with the Soviet Union during the Cold War period, this project hopes to identify the potential influence of Soviet interactions on the New Negro movement. Dorothy West and Langston Hughes were two of the notable Black artists and intellectuals prominent in the Harlem Renaissance who were invited to Moscow, Russia, in 1932 in order to film a Soviet-funded movie on racism in the United States.

By a thorough reading of both writers' work and respective archival letters, I hope to indicate the role that Moscow played in shaping the ways in which Black intellectuals perceived the shifting economic position of Black America in the early 20th century.

## Context

In 1932, the USSR invited a group of Black American writers, actors, and artists to Moscow in order to produce a film entitled *Black and White*. The film was intended as an exposé on racism in the United States. While the film would ultimately never come to fruition, many members of the team would stay in Moscow for several years afterwards, mingling with the artistic elite of Soviet Russia before returning home. The trade of propaganda between the intellectuals of the New Negro movement and the Soviet Union was robust and complex, stemming as far back as the 1890's and continuing into the Cold War era. Black Americans, particularly educated Black Americans, were invited to and exchanged ideas within the Soviet Union.

Crucially, the USSR was not the lone operant of communist influence in the United States. At this same point in time, many Black nationalists and activists across the African diaspora became vocal proponents of communism, such as Claude McKay and Louise Thompson Patterson. Thus, socialist sentiments did not necessarily arise in the social consciousness of the Harlem Renaissance at the point of Soviet contact.

While there has been plentiful research in regards to Soviet propaganda, including that which was targeted towards Americans, there has been a dearth of research regarding the ways in which the Soviet Union intentionally targeted and collaborated with Black America. There has been even less research into how these interactions might have colored the ways in which the Black intellectual and artistic class would analyze and report on the patterns of the era.

## Methodology

The two primary research methods for this project are...

- 1) Detailed literature analysis of short stories, poetry, and critical essays
- 2) Transcription and review of archival collections

Both Dorothy West and Langston Hughes's work and their letters are compared before and after their 1932 voyage in order to understand the ways in which the trip may have influenced their views on the economic position of Blacks in the United States.



Dorothy West  
(June 2, 1907 – August 16, 1998)



Langston Hughes  
(February 1, 1901 - May 22 1967)



American Crew of *Black and White* (1932)

## Results

### Pre-Moscow

#### Dorothy West

- "The Typewriter" (1926)
  - 'In a brief moment the weight of years fell from him like a cloak. Tired, bent, little old man that he was, he smiled, straightened, tapped impressively against his teeth with a toil-stained finger, and became that enviable emblem of American life: a businessman.' (pg. 14)
- "Funeral" (1930)
  - 'Mr. Tilly said softly to the father: "The company pays for the funeral, brother." The father exclaimed in gratitude: "God bless them! [...] All this talk 'bout organization! Sometimes I think the Pullman porter is biting the hands what feeds him.'" (pg. 74)
- To Rachel West from Dorothy West (1931)
  - "Third class seems quite different from second class. The cabins are the [sauce]. Ours in fact is airy and of good size. But the promenade deck is [almost?] tiny. I can't take [the group walks Ed] and I used to take every night. And the table service is not the [ko? ho? no?]. It doesn't gleam with [siders? silers?]. The waiters are not so expert. And there is very little variety in food and that is not choice. So Molly and I are going to try and come back second class." (seq. 28)

#### Langston Hughes

- "Song to a Negro Washwoman" (1925)
  - 'Yes, I know you, wash-woman./I know how you send your children to school, and high-/school, and even college.' (pg. 41)
- "Elevator Boy" (1926)
  - 'I been runnin' this/Elevator too long./Guess I'll quit now.' (pg. 85)
- Correspondence with Claude McKay (1931)
  - "I only wish the Negroid aspirants would quit wrangling about what should and what should not be done and do some work like the white folks..." (seq. 4)

### Post-Moscow

#### Dorothy West

- "Jack in the Pot" (1940)
  - 'She took the ten five-dollar bills and pushed them between a fold of the package. It was burial money. She could never use it for anything else.' (pg. 41)
- Correspondence with Claude McKay (1935)
  - "You don't like people who use a pencil to write. You don't like your friends who gossip with waiters and such common folks. You don't like to ride on subways. AND ALL THE REST." (seq. 19)

#### Langston Hughes

- "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." (1934)
  - 'By Texas, or Georgia, or Alabama led/Come together, fellow workers/Black and white can all be red:/Put one more S in the U.S.A.' (pg. 177)
- .Correspondence with Jacques Romain (1931 - 1946)
  - Multiple letters dictated from Jacques Romain, founder of the Haitian Communist Party

## Conclusion

While the 1932 Moscow trip did not seem to wholly shape the political ideologies and intellectual focuses of these writers, their time in Soviet Russia seems to have caused them to further develop existing concepts of poverty and disenfranchisement in the United States. Both writers went into the trip aware of and critical of the economic disparities of African Americans; both emerged with more distinct political and economic themes in their creative works.

Ultimately, this case study most strongly indicates that Black intellectuals recognized, understood, and criticized the economic position of Black America, but that international engagement was correlated with firmer expression of those critiques within intellectual, artistic, and social circles.

## References

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