



Black Americans in the Soviet Union

An Analysis of Newspapers

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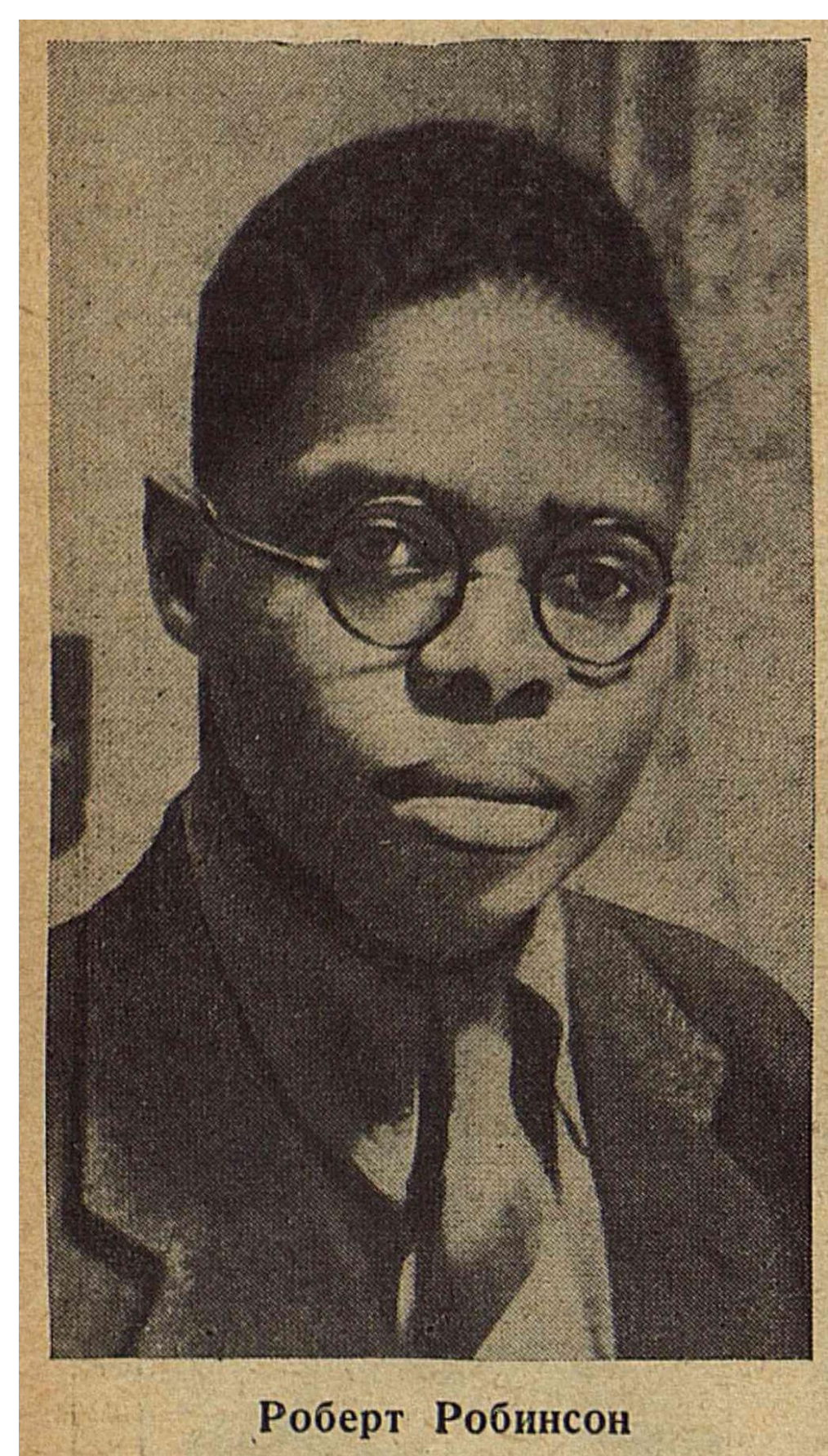
Abstract

The 1920s-1930s witnessed an increase in African American interest in the Soviet Union. Prominent Black Americans, including actors, authors, musicians, and political leaders, travelled or even moved to the Soviet Union.

Newspaper coverage of their lives and travels differs significantly between the Soviet and American press. This tension is especially interesting because this was a time when the two nations collaborated.

In this ongoing project, I am comparing the coverage that Black Americans in the Soviet Union received in both the American and Soviet Press.

So far, I have studied coverage of the Robert Robinson trial – a soviet trial of two white workers who assaulted a Black colleague. Coverage of the trial in the Soviet press was much less extensive than I expected and nonexistent in the mainstream American press. As I continue my research, I will expand to include more figures and more newspaper sources. I hope that this research will allow for a better understanding of Soviet-American tensions in the pre-cold war era.



Роберт Робинсон

Above: Robert Robinson, *Ogoniok* Magazine, 1935

Right: Ada Wright, *Daily Worker*, 1932

Below: Coverage of Robinson Trial, *Pravda*, 1930.



Mrs. Ada Wright who has toured 16 European countries to rouse the workers of the world for the freedom of Negro boys condemned to death at Scottsboro, Ala.



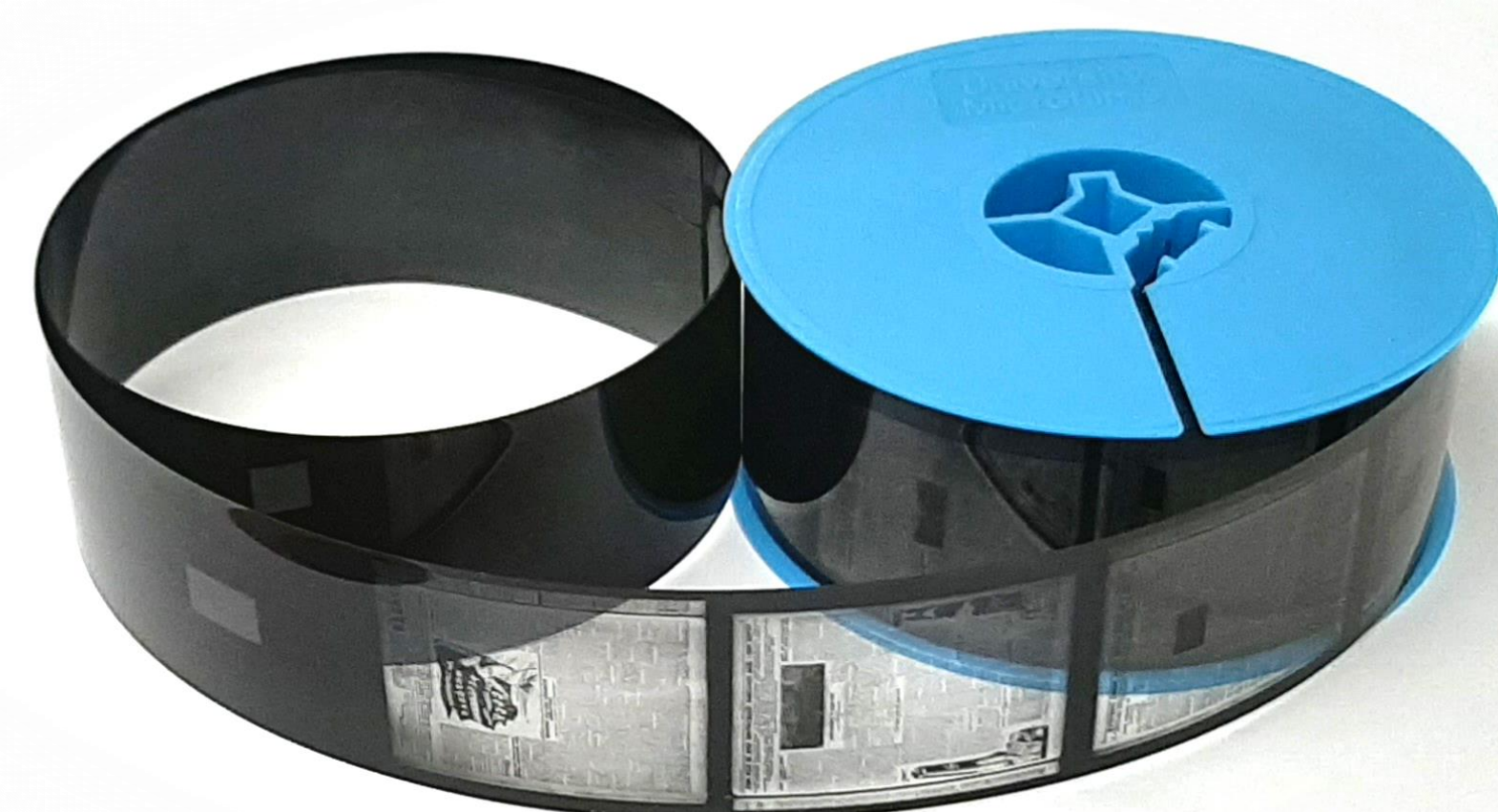
Introduction

In the 1930s, many Americans were left jobless because of the Great Depression, and Jim Crow laws limited the freedom of Black Americans. At the same time, the Soviet Union was rapidly industrializing. In order to build and operate its factories, it sought the labor and expertise of American companies and workers. Prospects in the USSR appealed to Americans, offering them jobs at a time of record unemployment. For Black Americans, the USSR also offered the promise of a classless and raceless society.

In the backdrop of these events, Robert Robinson arrived in the Soviet Union in 1930. Robinson was an engineer. He was Black, Jamaican-born, and American-educated. He was to work at a brand-new tractor factory being built in Stalingrad. Soon after arriving, he was attacked by two White American workers. After a swift trial, the attackers were found guilty of chauvinism and deported back to America.

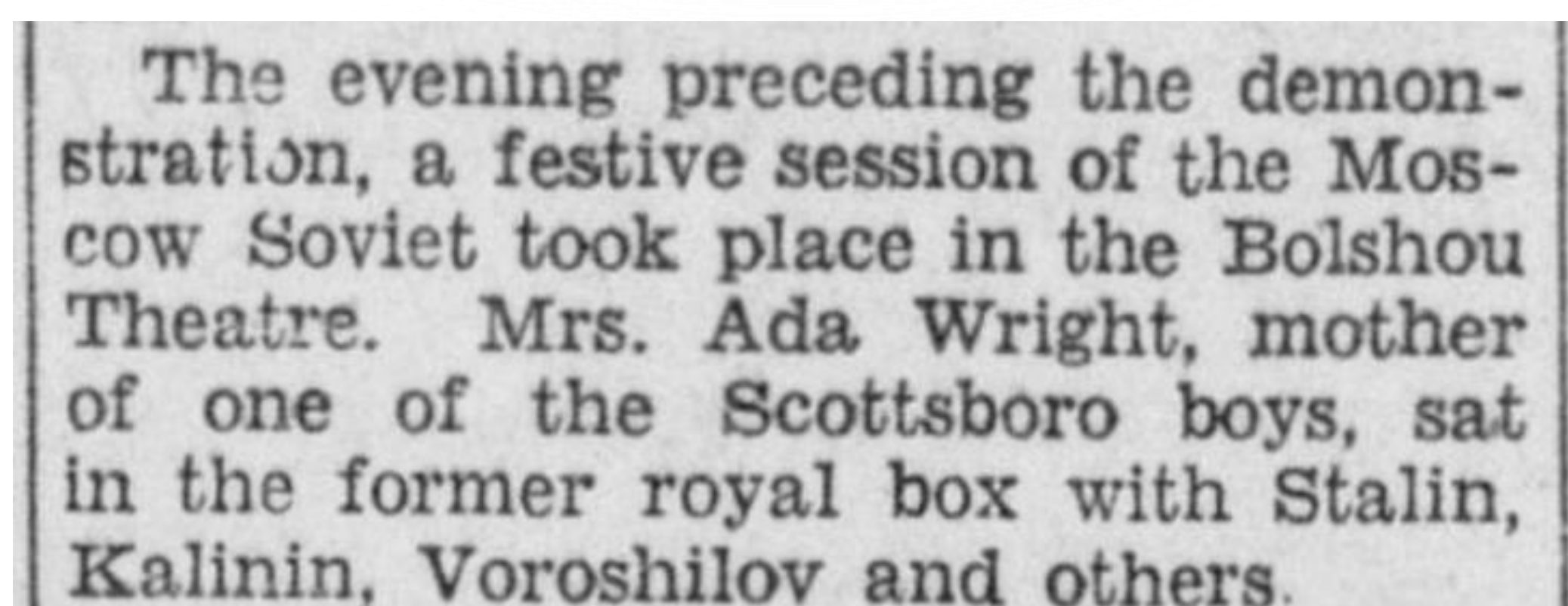
Less than a year later, in Alabama, a fight broke out between a group of stowaways on a freight train. A group of nine Black teens aboard the train were then accused of raping two white women. After a swift trial in the town of Scottsboro, eight of the nine defendants, henceforth known as the Scottsboro Boys, were sentenced to death. What followed was a lengthy process of appeals and retrials. Ada Wright, mother of two of the boys, embarked on a tour to drum up support for their appeals. She travelled the United States, and then Europe, including the USSR, where the government was supportive of her cause.

This project examines the portrayal of Black Americans in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, and how they were used by the Soviet press to attack the American government at a time when the two nations were collaborating.



Above: *Pravda* microfilm reel. Each such reel contains several months of a daily newspaper.

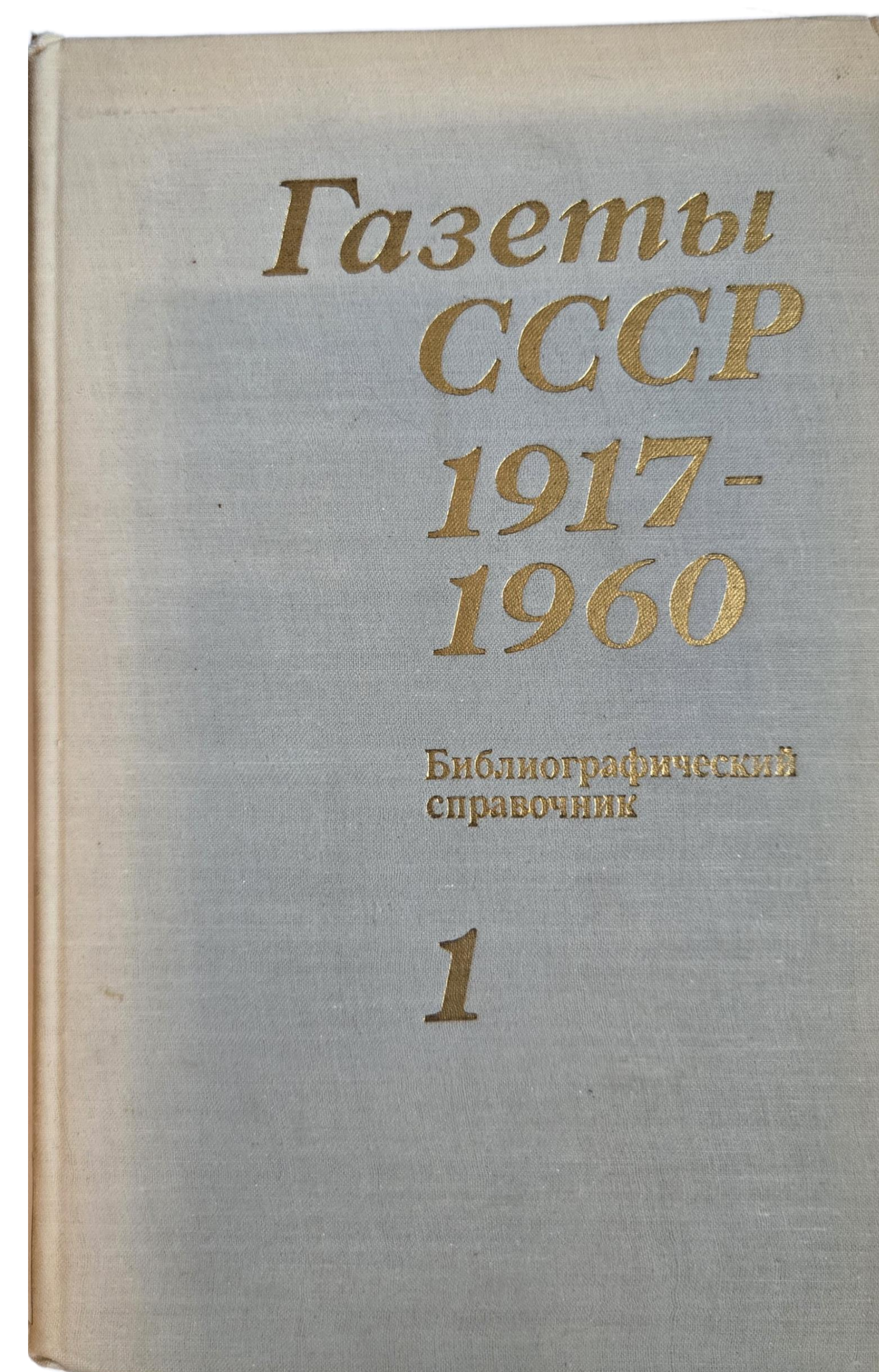
Below: Coverage of Ada Wright's visit to Moscow, *Daily Worker*, 1932.



Methods

“The half of knowledge is to know where to find knowledge”

- I used microfilms of Soviet newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia* from FSU's collection.
- Unlike their American counterparts, the two largest national Soviet newspapers were not indexed in the early 1930s. The *Soviet Chronology of Newspaper Articles*, an invaluable resource for these papers did not begin publication until 1936.
- I consulted the *Pravda Digital Archive*, a database of *Pravda* newspapers digitized by East View Information Services, which allowed me to locate one article on the Robert Robinson trial.
- Another method I used to determine dates for events was by consulting indexed American papers like *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Many Soviet events, however, were not covered in these newspapers.
- *The Daily Worker*, an American communist newspaper, has coverage more closely aligned with the Soviet press. It has no index, but the Marxists Internet Archive maintains a searchable database of high-quality pdf scans of *Daily Worker* newspapers.
- I used this database to reconstruct a timeline of Ada Wright's visit to the Soviet Union. My next step will be to find Soviet coverage of her visit in the microfilm collections.



Conclusion

In my research into news coverage of Robert Robinson's trial, I was able to find that his trial received less attention than we expected in the Soviet and American press, with Soviet newspaper *Pravda* printing short articles summarizing the trial's proceedings and the *New York Times* making no mention of the trial at all. It is only in the *Daily Worker*, published by American communists, that I was able to find mention of the trial. As my research into this subject continues, I will search for coverage in more American and Soviet newspapers.

Another subject that I will continue researching is that of the numerous other prominent Black Americans who visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s. I will be researching what sort of coverage the visits of Ada Wright, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, and others received in the Soviet and American press.

References

Pravda. Microfilm. Strozier Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.

- Roll 44 May-Aug 1932
- Roll 45 Sept-Dec 1932
- Roll 46 Jan-Apr 1933
- Roll 47 May-Aug 1933

Marxist Internet Archive Committee. "Daily Worker 1924-1941" Marxist Internet Archive, Accessed January 28, 2024 <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/dailyworker/index.htm>

East View Information Services. "Pravda Digital Archive", Accessed December 22, 2023



Left: *Newspapers of the USSR 1917-1960, A Bibliographical Guide, Vol. 1*
Above: Black Americans, including Langston Hughes, Dorothy West, Louise Thompson, and Lloyd Patterson, in transit to the Soviet Union. *Emory Libraries*.