Black and Red:

African American Newspapers and Communism between 1910 and 1949

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspective that African American newspapers presented about the Soviet Union and communism between 1910 and 1949. The analysis indicated three major themes. Black newspapers initially argued that Jewish oppression in pre-Communist Russia was like African American oppression in the United States before the Civil Rights Movement. The idea was that if communism could help liberate the Jews, it could help liberate African Americans. Secondly, the Scottsboro case in the 1930s brought the Communist Party to the forefronts as they strongly supported the nine African American young men on trial. Lastly, the opinion of the Soviet Union was overwhelmingly positive between 1910 and 1949. Nevertheless, due to strong pressures from domestic political groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), communism did not flourish in the United States.

*Keywords:* Social movements, communism, African American, Soviet Union, Newspapers

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For a moment in history, many African Americans aligned their political ideology with communism. During the early 20th century, the Soviet government encouraged any American with technical skills to move to the Soviet Union[[1]](#footnote-1), and this especially included a call for African Americans (Matusevich 2008). Newspapers that catered to African Americans had accounts of them leaving the United States for the Soviet Union. This article explores the content of black newspapers regarding the rhetoric used to describe the Soviet Union, immigration to the region, and travel and performances there for political purposes between 1910 and 1949. This project posits that communism and the Civil Rights Movement, as social movements, informed each other in their early stages. The proof is in the newspaper articles from the early 20th century that looked to communism as inspiration for equality in the United States.

It follows that black newspapers connected African Americans together in a way that shaped and informed the social movements at the time. Some argue that the black press was a means to fight against racism by creating solidarity (Detweiler 1922; Oak 2012) and relieve African American anger and dissatisfaction rather than attacking the oppressive system (Simmons 2006). Others saw the black press a tool for the upper class African Americans to establish control and identity; in essence, instructing others on what to think, feel, and how to interact with dominant society (Myrdal and Bok 1995). Nonetheless, most scholars agree that the black press was one of the most single powerful forces that shaped African American political thought. Therefore, excavating information through the newspapers helps place authors, texts, and racial markers as subjects negotiating the world around them.

I investigated two questions in the framing of this project. First, what did black newspapers present to African Americans about the Soviet Union? Secondly, what caused African Americans to abandon communism as a viable ideological strategy to inform the Civil Rights Movement? To answer these questions, I analyzed black newspapers published between 1910 and 1949. This was a crucial time as communism had just developed in the Soviet Union and African Americans began talking about communism as a political strategy. The early 20th century was a time when all political ideological approaches were available to African Americans to use to fight for racial justice (Dawson 2001). I begin this paper with a discussion about my research methodology, which leads to a discussion of my findings. In summary, this project’s central consideration is how the black press viewed the Soviet Union and how these views informed African American political ideology through the communist social movement.

**The Relationship between African Americans and the Soviet Union**

Focusing on African American perspectives of the new Soviet Union and the communist system provided key insights in to African Americans’ mobilization against racial violence, exclusion, and oppression in the United States. The views of the Soviet Union and communism were a compelling range of positive and negative views that developed and shaped the early Civil Rights Movement in the United States (Dawson 2001, 87). Michael Dawson (2001) examined in his influential book, *Black Visions,* six political ideologies: black liberalism, disillusioned black liberalism, black Marxism, black conservatism, black feminism, and black nationalism as political operatives for African Americans. Three of the six categories (i.e. black liberalism, black nationalism, and black Marxism) were either shaped by their conflict with communist ideology or came out of a direct connection with communist ideology. Black liberalism stressed the importance of a race-neutral political approach and supported capitalism, which was a response against communism. Black nationalism emphasized that African Americans were an oppressed nation brought together by their shared experiences, which was a similar perspective as communist ideology. Black Marxism saw class as a race issue because capitalism was built from free labor which placed African Americans at a disadvantage. This ideology was strongly supported by communism. This paper uses Dawson’s framework but pans outward to look at communist influence as a political operative for African Americans generally.

Black newspapers demonstrated the change in black political ideology that Dawson addressed in his book. The years between 1910 and 1949 are crucial to investigate as they were formative in shaping the political voice that African Americans asserted to gain civil rights. African Americans initially linked their political ideology with communism because it was a viable option that offered a different economic system that could possibly undermine capitalism and thus racial oppression (Blakely 1980; Blakely 2007; Garder 1999; Haywood 1978). The divisions in black political thought that came later related to “core concepts such as citizenship, equality, black power, self-determination, separation, integration and justice” (Dawson 2001, 5). Black liberalism was the strongest fraction that undermined communism and took hold of the 1960s fight for civil rights. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) emerged and black liberalism, which is still the most influential political ideology today for African Americans, captured black audiences. Each of these concepts has been a struggle within the history of black political movements and among African Americans.

Few scholars have examined the relationship between communism, the Soviet Union, and African Americans. The ones who have examined the relationship either looked at it from a historical perspective or a social ideological perspective. My work takes in to account how the social, historical, and political come together to inform life experiences. And, I examine how history is recorded through printed communication like newspapers using both qualitative and quantitate methodologies. This work brings a unique understanding to the relationship between African Americans and communism by tracing their interactions as presented in black newspapers early in the development of black political ideology and the communist movement. This project goes deeper beyond the theoretical conception of why African Americans did not choose communism as a viable political option, to looking at evidence presented in black newspapers between 1910 – 1949. Newspapers captured the essence of what was happening at this pivotal movement in history.

**Method**

I used an inductive approach to perform a content analysis of the dominant ideologies and themes presented to African Americans in black newspapers between 1910 and 1949. I analyzed the findings of 15 black newspapers that contained 377 articles related to my topic of interest. I used content analysis to ensure reliability of the dominant themes as newspapers reflect broad issues that I may not capture objectively and robustly in personal interviews (Mayring 2000; Prasad 2008). The results of this study will help to summarize the range of opinions about the Soviet Union and communism in black newspapers and to trace how the opinions changed over time given the political climate. The data come from themes that developed out of the articles.

**Data Extraction Procedure**

If an article was not associated with African Americans, it was excluded from the analysis. The newspapers were electronically archived in three different databases: *America’s Historical Newspapers* *for African American Newspapers 1827-1998*, *Chicago Defender*, and *Ethnic Newswatch*. The databases did not contain clear and relevant subject terms related to African Americans, communism, and the Soviet Union. Therefore, I used a combination of words to search for terms to generate a large sample, such as: “Soviet Union,” “Russia,” “USSR,” “Eastern Europe,” “Communism,” “Communist,” “Utopia,” “Black,” “Negro,” “Colored,” or “African American.” The search generated 555 articles published between 1910 and 1949. The articles were represented in 15 newspapers that I then reviewed for their significance to the research topic. I narrowed the data down to 377 articles. More than 70% of the articles came from black newspapers like, the *Chicago Defender, the Detroit’s Plaindealer, the Cleveland Gazette, the Mississippi Negro Star, and the Arkansas State Press*. Appendix A contains a complete list of the 15 newspapers I used in this analysis.

**Data inclusion and exclusion process.** After collecting the articles, I printed them from the electronic archives. The data collected are from all sections of the newspaper, which included news, news briefs, opinions or editorials, and feature or "lifestyle" stories, book and movie reviews, letters to the editor, reader comments. It was important to include these sections to get the full range of topics presented about the Soviet Union. I read each article to determine its relevance to African Americans, communism, and the Soviet Union. I excluded articles that simply mentioned the Soviet Union and communism but did not describe those terms in relation to African Americans. I also excluded articles that were republished from other newspapers. For example, early in the 20th century black newspapers would often reprint articles from the *Chicago Defender* because it was the only black paper to print a daily post at the time (Michaeli 2016; Staples 2016). I excluded articles from the analysis when it was reprinted. Thus, I only examined the original articles. For the purposes of my research, it was important that each article specifically linked African Americans to communism or the Soviet Union.

**Defining the nine different categories.** I next categorized each article based on the various themes the texts presented and I coded them per those themes. This method is used in qualitative research to develop thematic categories from raw data analysis (Thomas, 2006). Each category presented a specific theme as African Americans were grappling with changing the systems in place that negatively impacted them. Categorizing the texts in this way would assist in mapping out the various perspective the newspaper presented about the Soviet Union. The goal was to objectively capture what was presented in the data without influencing the results.

The nine categories that emerged from this inductive study were the following: (1) positive towards the Soviet Union (POSITIVE), (2) negative towards the Soviet Union (NEGATIVE), (3) neutral towards the Soviet Union (NEUTRAL), (4) visiting or touring the Soviet Union (VISIT), (5) African American women in the Soviet Union (WOMEN), (6) African Americans living in the Soviet Union (LIVES), (7) Soviet Union supported pan-African movement towards freedom (PANAFRICA), (8) positive attitudes towards the United States and Western Europe (POSWEST), and (9) negative attitudes towards the United States and Western Europe (NEGWEST). These themes informed the analysis for this study.

**Categorizing the newspaper articles.** The data in Figure 1 shows a wide distribution of articles that represented different perspectives of the Soviet Union. In the content analysis 152 of the 377 articles were positive towards the Soviet Union. These showcased the progressive achievements of African Americans in the Soviet Union and cited positive attributes, views, policies about the country. I further categorized these articles as “living in the Soviet Union” (21 articles) if the article referenced an African American person living in the Soviet Union. I categorized an article “negative towards the Soviet Union” (58 articles) if it clearly indicated adverse attributes to the country and communism. I labeled articles “neutral” (44 articles) if they simply detailed facts without announcing biases for or against the Soviet Union. Neutral articles tended to focus on agreements between the United States and European countries, the movement of soldiers to a specific region in the world, etc. I labeled articles “visits” or “tours to the Soviet Union” if they indicated actors, musicians, artists, scholars, or political leaders traveling to the region for political tours or educational exchange programs.

The next category presented perspectives about the United States and Western Europe considering the Soviet Union. These articles compared the Soviet Union and their policies to that of the United States and Western Europe. The articles often identified the United States and Western Europe as colonizers while the Soviet Union was portrayed as demonstrating equality between the masses. On the other hand, there were articles that were positive towards the United States and Western Europe. These tended to emphasize the efforts of the American and Western European governments to save Europe from the disastrous wars. This category encompassed a total of 6 positive articles and 61 negative articles. Most articles published about the United States and Western Europe were not favorable towards these countries, only 2% reflected a positive message while 12% were very negative about the countries.

The last two categories addressed African American women and the pan-African diaspora. There were six articles that talked specifically about African American women and the Soviet Union. The articles tended to show a positive attitude towards the Soviet Union and communism specifically as it related to women. There was one negative article that mentioned Ada Wright that was published in the *Chicago Defender* in 1933. She was the mother of two of the boys from the Scottsboro case. She was kicked out of Bulgaria for being too disruptive. There was a special additional article that referenced the achievements (e.g. singing, dancing, teaching) of African American women who travelled to Russia (before it became the Soviet Union) in 1914 (*Broad Axe* 1914). The newspapers reflected that women were entertainers, attended workshops that dealt with home economics, and some had permanently moved there with their husbands.

I placed articles that focused on the continent of Africa in the Pan-African category. One article that stood out talked about Ethiopia getting aid from the Soviet Union while Britain only talked about giving aid to the country (“Ethiopians Get Soviet Aid While Britain Talks” 1946). There were numerous articles published about pan-Africanism after 1949, which is out of the scope of this study. These articles questioned the role of the United States and Western Europe in African countries due to colonization and capitalism. However, they supported the influence of the Soviet Union in African countries (“Soviet Note Blocks Deal on Ethiopia” 1937). It is important to mention these articles because they were the first to reference the struggle Africans had to establish themselves as independent from colonial rule.

**Data Analysis Process**

After identifying and categorizing the nine themes, I obtained results by coding the articles by categories and placing them in Microsoft Excel to see the relationships among the data. I placed a “one” in each category when an article fit in to that specific category. In reference to the first question, I performed a content analysis of the newspapers to capture the opinions at the time. The underlining purpose was to identify the point at which black newspapers were no longer supportive of communism. In reference to the second and underlining question, I mapped the newspapers out by decades to capture when the opinions changed towards the Soviet Union. This next section goes into greater detail about the process of mapping the results. This was a very different process from extracting the data for analysis as part of the methodology.

I extracted the articles from the databases using words and phrases, but I coded the documents using a system that took the entire article into account. I then ran an analysis in excel to compare the different thematic categories with one another. The results presented in Figure 1 address the 377 articles included in the study. Excel is considered an excellent and simple way to analyze and track entire coded texts to test patterns or relationships among the data (Ose 2016). I used a coding method developed by Solveig Ose who considered entire texts for analysis not just phrases. According to this method, all the data is collected and separated into logical categories, in my case I used those as headings in for each category. The purpose of this type of analysis is not to quantify qualitative data but to structure large amounts of unsorted data (Ose 2016). To code the data in this study I added a numeric value of “one” to each category where the article exemplified one of the nine themes. For instance, if an article was positive about the Soviet Union, I placed a value of “one” in that category.

The findings in this project are not much different from research produced by other communist and Soviet Union scholars such as Allison Blakely and Maxim Matusevich. These authors found that many African Americans had a very positive disposition towards the Soviet Union and vice versa (Blakely 1980; Blakely 2007; Heywood et al. 2015; Matusevich 2008). This project simply affirms their findings by placing it in the context of African American newspapers. The project also connects what Dawson (2001) examines as ideological shifts in African American approaches to political perspectives to a practical change that occurred, which was captured in newspapers. The validity of this study is confirmed by other research and scholars who found similar trends in their studies.

**Perspectives in Black Newspapers about the Soviet Union from 1910 – 1949**

After separating the articles by relevance to my topic of interest, there were a total of 377 articles remaining. Of those 377 articles nine different themes emerged within the articles over a 40-year time span. I then categorized the articles by decades to see when the newspapers changed their opinion about the relationship between African Americans, the Soviet Union, and communism. One of the central aspects to this project was identifying the perspective the black press presented overtime. The goal was to see where the major shift occurred when African Americans no longer supported communist ideology. To capture this change, I organized the data by years. I placed the articles by decade in ten year increments (e.g. 1910-1919, 1920-1929, 1930-1939 and 1940-1949). Organizing the articles by ten years increments worked best because the time aligned with the various political events during the time. World War I occurred between 1910 and 1919. Women got the right to vote in the United States in the 1920s and there was a severe increase in lynching of African American men. The Great Depression happened late October 1929 and lasted until the end of 1939. World War II occurred in the late 1939 and lasted until 1945. The beginning of Cold War occurred in 1945 and lasted through the late 1940s.

**Publications between 1910 and 1919.** Articles between 1910 and 1919 condemned Russia for its harsh treatment of their Jewish minority population. The data showed that 6 articles were published between 1910 and 1949, four of the articles were negative towards the Soviet Union and 2 were negative towards the United States and Western Europe. The four negative articles wrote specifically about Russia’s relationship with its Jewish minority, religious freedom, and alliances in Europe after World War I. For instance, a negative article reported on the struggles Jewish people faced particularly in the areas occupied by Russia (*Cleveland Gazette* 1910). The Langston Hughes identified the African American struggles in the United States with the harassment and inequality Jewish people encountered in pre-communist Russia (Hughes 1946). The articles also linked African American struggles to the African Diaspora in the Caribbean, Western Europe, and Africa, as many blacks were fighting for equality (Hughes 1967).

**Publications between 1920 and 1929.** Of the 44 articles analyzed between 1920 and 1929, eight articles were positive towards the Soviet Union, 14 were negative, and 7 were neutral. Although the articles highlighted job opportunities for African Americans in the Soviet Union, most articles were suspicious of what communism offered. A person by the pseudo name Cameraman wrote in the *Broad Ax* in November 1925 that the Communist Party was “turning to blacks because they couldn’t persuade Whites.” An article published in the *Cleveland Gazette* heavily criticized the Soviet Union because a “million dollar fund [was] available for bolshevist propaganda in the United States and hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children [were] alleged to be starving in Russia.” The *Negro Star,* in 1923, published an article from a commentator who complained that while there were many problems at home in Oklahoma, the newspaper was focusing on the Soviet Union. The *Gazette,* in 1925, compared the horrendous situation of the Jews in Russia to African Americans in the United States. The author argued that both groups in these countries needed their own government’s attention. These articles reflected the need to focus on problems at home in the United States rather than abroad.

**Publications between 1930 and 1939.** Between 1930 and 1939 seventy-four articles published were positive towards the Soviet Union while only eleven articles were negative. The positive perspective of the Soviet Union increased by 60 percent in the 1930s, the negative perspective decreased by 12 percent, and the neutral perspective increased by 46 percent. During this decade, the Great Depression was in full swing and many people did not have faith in the capitalist system. The newspapers emphasized how the Soviet Union began to incorporate people from Central Asia, who were visibly different from ethnic Russians, into society. For instance, an Article published in the *Chicago Defender* argued that “color play(ed) no part in Russia” because anyone over 18 years of age had the right to vote and these rights were enforced by the government (H. Smith 1934). Smith emphasized that millions of African Americans were disenfranchised in the United States because of the Grandfather Clause, Property Taxes, etc. while millions of Soviet Union citizens were electing leaders irrespective of their ethnic or racial background (1934). A newspaper article in the *Chicago Defender* stressed that the Soviet Union, “admits all races” and that “minorities live in harmony with whites” (1932). The overall message the newspapers projected was that there were no barriers to opportunity for African Americans in the Soviet Union, and that African Americans should consider moving abroad.

**Publications between 1939 and 1949.** The 1940s had both the most positive articles and the most negative articles published about the Soviet Union. Black newspaper published 74 positive articles and 29 negative articles about the Soviet Union. The highest number of negative newspaper articles, 20 articles, about the United States and Western Europe was also published during the 1940s. African Americans like Padmore, who was living in the Soviet Union and supportive of communism, published editorials and articles about their positive experiences in the Soviet Union. For example, in the *Chicago Defender*,George Padmore wrote that the Soviet Union was the defender of African Americans because they are promoting and encouraging blacks to fight for equality in the United States. One very negative perspective came from Philip Randolph who argued that, “…Negro people cannot afford to add to the handicap of being black, the Soviet Union handicap of being Red” (Randolph 1940). African Americans, like Randolph, were voicing their loyalty to the United States and refused to align with communism because, for them, the focus needed to be more on African American struggles in the United States and less on issue abroad in Europe and in African countries.

The data showed that the major shift in black newspapers began in the late 1940s as most African Americans turned towards domestic issues in the United States. An article published in the *Chicago Defender* said that there are “very few Negroes in Russia and we are Americans so we need to stay and fight in our country for our rights….At least in America we have the same language and we’re a dominate [minority] group so we can fight here for equality and we speak the same language” (Malcolm 1945). More articles of this nature appeared reflecting the idea that focusing on internal issues in the United States was more important to solve institutional racial problems than relying on the Soviet Union and communist ideology. The next section will discuss the results from the data analysis and the three themes that were presented in the articles.

**Results**

In answer to the first question that sought to understand the perspectives of the Soviet Union and communism presented in the black press, 40% of the articles between 1910 and 1949 were positive, 15% were negative, 12% were neutral, 6% mentioned people living in the Soviet Union, 2% were positive towards the West, and 16% were negative towards the West. The number of articles published clearly indicated that black newspapers were positively presenting the Soviet Union and communism. The data showed that there were very few articles published between the 1910s and the 1920s. The bulk of articles were written between the 1930s and 1940s. Most of the positive articles published between 1920 and 1939, while most of negative articles about the Soviet Union were published in the late 1940s.

The second question in this project sought to answer why communism did not survive as a viable option for African Americans to use to fight against racial oppression. It was grounded in the idea that a dramatic shift had to occur overtime that caused African Americans to no longer support communist ideology. The data in Table 1 showed that the largest shift happened in the 1940s. The number of articles that were negative towards the Soviet Union tripled compared to the previous decades. The data also showed that the number of positive articles doubled in the same time frame. As mentioned in the analysis section of this paper, the articles that were negative about the Soviet Union critiqued and challenged the notion that international affairs were as important as domestic affairs in the United States (Malcolm 1945; Padmore 2007). African Americans began to focus more on issues within the United States. The next section goes into the themes that were extracted from the inductive content analysis.

**Three Major Themes Excavated from the Black Newspapers**

I found three major themes throughout the articles. The first is that African Americans identified with the Jewish minority in Russia who were being persecuted by the aristocrats. There were 20 articles that highlighted the perspective that the groups were very similar. African Americans saw communism as a way to liberate themselves from the yolk of oppressive laws in the United States in the same way that Jews were liberated by communism in 1917. The articles were specifically about Russia’s relationship with its Jewish minority, religious freedom, and alliances in Europe after World War I. This was prior to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. For instance, one article said that, “…a fanatical mob attacked the Jews and pillaged their shops and houses in January, 1910. Sixteen men and three women were severely injured. Troops suppressed the disorders” (*Cleveland Gazette* 1910). This article highlighted the suffering Jews experienced in Russia, which speaks to similar instances that African Americans experienced in the United States with lynching and Jim Crow laws.

Under the same theme of the African American connection to the struggles of the Jewish minority in Russia, came an opinion that a divide developed between the two groups. Another article, written by the editor of the *Gazette* in 1914, Harry C. Smith, to the editor of a Jewish magazine, Henry Weitdenthal highlights the notion of this divide. Smith wrote a public complaint in the *Gazette* to Weitdenthal about a theater production that would be put on by the Carnation Club titled, “The Nigger” at the Metropolitan Theater in Cleveland, with a Jewish man taking the lead role. Smith argued that showing this play “would be just as consistent from a racial, prejudice standpoint for our organization to give at one of the local theaters a play, called ‘The Sheeny” (Smith, 1914, p. 26). “Sheeny” was a degoratory term used to describe Jews. He goes on to say that there would not be such a person that would be “guilty of such an insulting act to the Jewish or any other class of people in this community” (1914, 26). Towards the end of the article, Smith mentioned that in Russia, Germany, France, and Turkey, Jewish people are struggling against “miserable prejudice” far worse than African Americans in the United States, so Jewish people should not promote racism (1914, 26). Smith was appealing to Weitdenthal to intervene in the situation as he is a leader in his community.

The second major theme was that black newspapers supported communism but they also expressed doubts about the Soviet Union in the late 1940s.Articles in black newspapers had a highly positive attitude towards the Soviet Union and communism; 40% of the articles were positive. The Soviet Union offered jobs to African Americans and other opportunities that were not available to them in the United States. The *Chicago Defender* highlighted that the Soviet Union, “admit[ted] all races” and that “minorities live[d] in harmony with whites” in 1932. There were ten articles that compared the governing systems of the Soviet Union and the United States to one another. The black newspapers projected the idea that the Soviet Union offered a better system of equality than in the United States. One article from the *Chicago Defender,* focused on crime and claimed that “crime against human life is down in Russia, while African Americans are being lynched in the US” (1936). Many of the crimes against African Americans are linked to the race problems in the United States during the Great Depression and lack of resources

While the overall positive perspective of the Soviet Union newspapers increased by 60 percent in the 1930s, the negative perspective decreased 12 percent and the neutral perspective increased by 46 percent in 1930*.* The black press supported communist ideology although they seem to have had some problems with it. In the *Gazette* (1935), an article talked about how “Russia is wrong about religion but right about race” and in the *Chicago Defender* one author argued in 1932, that communism meant that the Russian government is under Satan’s authority. In the *Chicago Defender*, an opinion piece by Barnet Page said that, “as between Communism and democracy, democracy is preferable. Organized Communism is government under Satan, with a dictator and his select henchmen in control. Communism considers human beings as puppets” (1932, 7) . On the other hand, the editor of the *Plaindealer* in 1933 was very positive towards Soviet Union because they claimed to be “for worker’s rights and equality” (Communism for Workers Rights, 1933). The newspapers presented a variety of perspectives from 1910-1949.

The third major theme sprung up in relation to the Scottsboro Case, the Communist Party, and the Soviet Union.The Scottsboro, Alabama case was prominent in newspapers around the country (Casper et al. 2007). This was a situation in which nine African American teenage boys were accused of raping two white women on a train in Scottsboro, Alabama. In the southern part of the Unite States, it was not uncommon for African American men to be accused of rape. The nine young men were arrested before they could be put on trial and lynched. The case became an international issue and mimicked to the world the injustices in the United States. The Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) raised funds to support the families in the case and helped with a legal team. This case was headline news for a long time in the 1930s with twenty articles mentioning it.

The CPUSA was affiliated with the Communist International (Comintern), which was established by Lenin in Moscow in 1919 to streamline the communist movement under the umbrella of the Soviet Union (Haywood 1978; Matusevich 2008). CPUSA focused on unemployment during the Great Depression, the Scottsboro case, and civil rights. African Americans learned about the CPUSA from testimonies published in newspapers. Famous African Americans, like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Paul Robeson, and W.E.B. Dubois, supported communist beliefs. For instance, Langston Hughes published an article in the *Chicago Defender* that said, “In Moscow I asked how these things [racial equality] was achieved… I was told that the soviet schools taught that all men are equal” (Hughes 1946)[[2]](#footnote-2). Although Hughes later denounced communism in favor of his literary career, he was still one of its most prominent leaders.

**Discussion**

This research paper sought to trace how the black press presented the Soviet Union between 1910 and 1949. Its central questions were: What did the black newspapers present to African Americans about the Soviet Union? And, what caused African Americans to abandon communism as a viable ideological strategy to inform the Civil Rights Movement? The various socialist movements in Europe and especially communist ideology presented a viable option for African Americans to fight for racial equality. In the 20th century, black political thought became more internationally focused as African Americans attempted to link their struggle with other oppressed groups in the world. However, towards the late 1940s, there is a distinguishable change in the black newspapers as African Americans started to lean more towards internal issues. Scholars like Dawson (2001) have written extensively about this change and shift overtime of African American political thought. The analysis produced by this project only reaffirms his findings through the venue of newspaper publications.

**Diverse Views of Communism**

The black newspapers studied in this project originally fixated on how African Americans would use communist ideology to inform their experiences in the United States. Communist supporters wrote in the newspaper that the Soviet Union demonstrated that equality was possible through communist policies, while others argued that the Soviet Union and communism did not speak to the shared experiences of African Americans (Haywood 1978; Klehr, Haynes, and Anderson 1998). The newspapers captured these changes and the tug-of-war black leaders were having over which ideology would inform the early Civil Rights Movement.

Black newspapers in the first half of the twentieth-century provide an especially valuable window into these diverse African American views of the Soviet Union and communism at a time when virulent anticommunism and Red Scares pervaded U.S. government and society (Fariello 2008; Fariello 2008; Hagedorn 2008; Oshinsky 2005; Shepley 2011). Articles in black newspapers between the years of 1910 and 1949 regularly appeared from communist party members and sympathizers including: Paul Robeson, Robert Robinson, W. E. B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, etc., who glorified the Soviet life for people of color (Carew 2010; Jordan 2001). Their written accounts illustrated blacks in public positions and jobs that were not available to African Americans in the United States.

The articles between 1910 and 1949 indicated an overall positive perspective of the Soviet Union and thus communism; however, African Americans were not convinced enough to abandon capitalism or the democratic system. For instance, an article published in the *Chicago Defender* argued that “…Our forefathers helped build, fight, and die for America. With all its perplexing problems this is our homeland, so let’s stop ‘pipe dreaming’ about some place on this earth where the citizenry are unselfish. Just don’t give up trying to gain our rightful place as men among men in America” (Malcolm 1945). This newspaper article denoted that African Americans should attempt to solve racial problems within the country where they had citizenship. The United States, according to this writer, was a place for African Americans to fight for justice. It is in their homeland that they could influence institutional policies to facilitate change. Later, the African Americans secured major triumphs that included 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The beginnings of the domestic organizations like the NAACP began taking charge of the fight for civil rights (Dawson 2001).

**Other links as to Why Communism Failed in the United States**

Throughout the 20th century, the ideological approaches that African Americans used helped shift policies to redistribute power, which forced the United States to be more inclusive. When African Americans linked the Civil Rights Movement with the Soviet Union, it put international pressure on the United States. The fight between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War is one of the factors that fueled the Civil Rights Movement after 1945. The United States did not want to lose its power by looking hypocritical in promoting democracy when their citizens did not all have equal rights (Blakely 2007; Heywood et al. 2015; Matusevich 2008). The United Stated eventually had to succumb to demands to enforce voting and civil rights for African Americans.

A key piece to this puzzle is the labor parties that were often linked to communism. The Comintern (Communist International), an organization that represented the international Communist Party, directed the CPUSA in 1924 to double its efforts in getting African Americans to join. As a result, the Communist Party created the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC) in 1925, however the organization was not very successful (Dawson 2001; Robinson and Kelley 2000). The ANLC targeted the NAACP as a middleclass organization and both organizations fought over membership. Eventually, the organization lost its membership to the NAACP.

Lastly, another major reason why communism failed as a viable option could have been because the Soviet Union signed a pact with Germany in 1939, which was officially known as the Treaty of Non-aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Black leaders, such as Philip Randolph, resigned from the Negro Congress in protest and many black newspapers in the 1940s were not supportive of the Soviet Union. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union however, many blacks became in favor towards the Communist Party again, but their favor never reached the same level of support.

The major national events of the 1940s led to the idea that the state could solve all societal problems even though the system was unfair. This was also the beginning of the Cold War when most people turned towards the state for security in a world that was very insecure with the threat of nuclear warfare. African Americans (black egalitarians) looked at the use of activism and social reform with in current institutions to change social conditions. They supported the idea that black people’s fate was tied to that of other black (Dawson 2001).

There were many shifts in black political thought that were based on the international and national political climate. As indicated from the data, at various points in history the African American perspective of the United States and the Soviet Union changed. For instance, during periods of war and the Great Depression the articles tended to be more positive towards the Soviet Union. However, as the United States became more stable and a dominant world power, the articles became less favorable towards the Soviet Union.

**Conclusion**

The likelihood of African Americans adopting communist ideology was improbable in the early twentieth century. African Americans did not share a historical connection with Russia or the Soviet Union as it had with Western Europe. The only mention of blacks in historical Russia is of Alexander Pushkin, the most famous Russian poet and founder of modern Russian literature. He was the great grandson of Abram Petrovich Gannibal-- an African brought to Russia, as a gift for Peter the Great, who eventually became a nobleman and military general (Matusevich 2007). Today 80 percent of African Americans still embrace democratic political ideologies, however, during this time all options were on the table in terms of competing political ideologies available to African Americans.

It was not until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 that African Americans became interested in communist ideology as a viable political ideology that could lead them to racial equality. The relationship between African Americans and the Soviet Union is fascinating as two dissimilar groups united for a brief time in history for a political and ideological stance (Matusevich 2008). Although the unity was short-lived, it still outlines a significant moment in African American and Soviet Union history and is an interesting story to tell and examine in research. Future projects will include articles published between 1949 and 1990—the fall of the Soviet Union.

The early twentieth century exemplified a time when there were more options and political possibilities for African Americans to employ to fight for racial equality. It was also the time when African Americans developed and gave expression to a rich variety of political ideologies. This moment in history exemplified the short-lived union between African Americans and the Soviet Union as two vary dissimilar groups united for a brief time in history for a political and ideological stance. Communism played a tremendous role in shaping the discourse about racial equality as it related to the United States, and although the unity was short-lived, it still outlined a significant moment in African American and Russian history.

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|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| POSITIVE | 0 |  | 8 |  | 74 |  | 70 |
| POSWEST | 0 |  | 0 |  | 2 |  | 4 |
| NEGATIVE | 4 |  | 14 |  | 11 |  | 29 |
| NEGWEST | 2 |  | 7 |  | 15 |  | 20 |

*Table 1.* The percentage of articles that showed different opinions about the Soviet Union and the West (i.e. the United States and Western Europe). N= 377. Source: Data collected by the author, Crystal H. Brown, from America’s Historical Newspapers: African American Newspapers 1827-1998, the Chicago Defender, and Ethnic Newswatch.

POSTIVE = Positive towards the Soviet Union, NEGATIVE = Negative towards the Soviet Union, NEGWEST= Negative towards the United States and Western Europe, and POSWEST = Positive towards the United States and Western Europe.

*Figure 1.* The percentage of articles that showed different opinions about the Soviet Union and the West (i.e. the United States and Western Europe). Source: Data collected by the author Crystal H. Brown from America’s Historical Newspapers: African American Newspapers 1827-1998, the Chicago Defender, and Ethnic Newswatch.

POSITIVE = Positive towards the Soviet Union, NEGATIVE = Negative towards the Soviet Union, NEGWEST = Negative towards the United States and Western Europe, POSWEST = Positive towards the United States and Western Europe, LIVES = Lives in Soviet Union, NEUTRAL = Opinions were not biased one way or another about the Soviet Union, VISIT = Visiting or touring the Soviet Union, WOMEN = African American women visiting or living in the Soviet Union, PANAFRICA = Soviet Union supported pan-African movement towards freedom, TOUR = Performing or giving political speeches in the Soviet Union.

# Appendix A

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **1910** | **1920** | **1930** | **1940** | **Total** |
| Chicago Defender | 1 | 0 | 34 | 60 | 95 |
| Sacramento Observer |  |  | 2 |  | 2 |
| LA Tribune |  |  | 3 | 7 | 10 |
| Plaindealer |  | 7 | 39 | 44 | 90 |
| Cleveland Gazette | 6 | 8 | 23 | 9 | 46 |
| Negro Star |  |  | 24 | 6 | 30 |
| Arkansas State Press |  |  |  | 31 | 31 |
| Bags and Baggage |  |  |  | 8 | 8 |
| Kansas Whip |  |  | 10 |  | 10 |
| Wyandotte Echo |  |  | 25 |  | 25 |
| The Appeal | 1 | 7 |  |  | 8 |
| The Hutchinson Blade |  | 16 |  |  | 16 |
| Chicago Broad Ax |  | 3 |  |  | 3 |
| St Louis Advocate |  | 2 |  |  | 2 |
| Chicago World |  | 1 |  |  | 1 |
| **Total** | **8** | **44** | **160** | **165** | **377** |

This are the black newspapers used in the data analysis.

1. The Soviet Union was officially called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). It had its roots in the October Revolution of 1917 when the Bolsheviks overthrew Tsar Nicholas II. This project uses the term Soviet Union to refer to post 1917 Russia, USSR, and Soviets. This definition does not include post-1990 Russia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brackets are placed around the inserted word in this quote to let the reader know that “racial equality” clarifies the meaning of the pronoun ‘things.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)