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A Party in Shambles: African Americans, The Communist Party, and the Crisis of 1956

By

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Abstract

The year 1956 was transformative for the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). In February, Nikita Khrushchev denounced Joseph Stalin's reign and cult of personality. Later that year, the CPUSA itself took up the mantle of self-criticism to explicate all the wrongs of the Party. While traditional historiography notes that the number of Party members sharply decreased during this time, this thesis aims to delve further into the crisis and complicate the established narrative by focusing on African American communists. The thesis will therefore move beyond a Soviet-centric narrative, instead showing that the general attrition of African Americans from the Party in the years leading up to 1956 show that for African Americans, their decision to leave the Party was less about Stalin than it was the state of racial and Party politics at the time. By the mid-20th century, it had become clear to African Americans that the CPUSA was no longer the center of radical Black politics. Instead, with the advent of the civil rights movement among other movements for racial equality, African Americans began to leave the CPUSA to find organizations more aware of and willing to support the struggle for racial politics. Ultimately, this thesis argues that the crisis of 1956 caused many African American leftists to undergo an intensely personal struggle. While the end results varied, all decisions were based on the Party's ability to effectively counter American racism.

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Introduction

As he assumed the role of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev grappled with the consequences of his predecessor Joseph Stalin's reign. He had a new vision for the Soviet Union that would look remarkably different from the rule-by-fear that Stalin imposed. Therefore, in February 1956, Khrushchev condemned Stalin in a speech given to the Twentieth Party Congress called "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences" (later referred to as the secret speech). Khrushchev was harsh in his condemnation: "Stalin showed in a whole series of cases his intolerance, his brutality, and his abuse of power. Instead of proving his political correctness and mobilizing the masses, he often chose the path of repression and physical annihilation, not only against actual enemies, but also against individuals who had not committed any crimes against the party and the Soviet Government."[1] When the speech was leaked out of the room and published within and outside of the Soviet bloc, it was "earth-shattering."[2] Not only did the speech unearth horrors previously unknown to many of Stalin's supporters, but it was a harsh blow to his legacy and to those he had inspired.

Much of the scholarly work on the secret speech has assessed its impact within the Soviet sphere, most notably in bloc states like Hungary, which had an uprising later that year. However, a portion of the scholarship has been dedicated to assessing the impact of the speech outside of the Warsaw Pact. When the speech was snuck out of the country and published overseas in June 1956, it caused a major disruption in conceptions of communism abroad. According to the traditionally accepted narratives of the speech, this exposure of Stalin's atrocities came as a

[1] Nikita Khrushchev, "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences (Khrushchev's Secret Speech)," From the Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 84th Congress, 2nd Session (May 22, 1956-June 11, 1956), C11, Part 7 (June 4, 1956) (The Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1956), 9389–9403.
[2] Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd, *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s*, 1st edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2013), 32-33.

shock that destroyed the utopian ideas of many in the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). Soon after, its membership plummeted. The speech also gave the United States an opportunity to create a large amount of propaganda, effectively winning their decades long fight against American communism.[3]

However, these traditional narratives, which draw a clear causation between the secret speech, disillusionment with the CPUSA, and dropping Party numbers, are too simplistic. While these explanations may hold true for white members of the CPUSA, this is not the case for African Americans who did not necessarily turn away from the Party in similar numbers or for the same reasons. Due to a combination of forces, including pervasive racism in America, anti-communist prejudice, the close relationship between the CPUSA and Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and failures among members of the CPUSA to adequately address issues of race, African Americans had been leaving the CPUSA before the publication of the secret speech. Unlike white communists who may have joined out of admiration for Soviet ideology, African Americans joined the CPUSA in large part because it was one of the most radical organizations working toward racial equality at the time. CPUSA members of all races fought against segregation, imperialism, and capitalism, which was new to many African Americans who were not used to white people treating them as peers.

Therefore, the 1956 crisis did not have the same heart wrenching impact on African American communists. Regardless of whether they chose to stay with or leave the Party, the 1956 crisis was not the defining moment for African Americans. While white communists were concerned with the revelations about the Soviet Union, African Americans in the Party took more issue with Soviet influence on the CPUSA in general along with the limitations of the

[3] Philip Deery, "Finding His Kronstadt: Howard Fast, 1956 and American Communism," *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 58, no. 2 (June 4, 2012): 181–202.

CPUSA's willingness to fight for racial equality. While the crisis of 1956 may not have driven African Americans from the Party, it did illuminate the existing divergences between fighting for communism and fighting against white supremacy.

This thesis is temporally centered on the publication of the secret speech, but it will be addressing this time using the terms "the crisis of 1956" or "the 1956 crisis." This phrasing references not only Khrushchev's secret speech and its publication in the United States, but also the response by the CPUSA, namely Eugene Dennis's speech and the Draft Resolution to the 16th National Committee. The broader terminology will give a more holistic view of the reaction of American communists to this period of crisis.

Historical Overview

One of the reasons that prominent African Americans stuck with the CPUSA following the secret speech was the long history of communists fighting for racial equality. Since the early days of the Soviet Union, there was an emphasis on cooperation with African American communities who were seen as having a revolutionary potential within the United States. It is therefore impossible to fully understand the outcome of the crisis of 1956 and African Americans' reasoning for either staying or leaving the Party without understanding the history of American communism. Ultimately, the crisis of 1956 was not just about the events of 1956 or Nikita Khrushchev, but rather was about the period from the mid-1920s through the 1960s in which African Americans were both drawn to and pushed away from the CPUSA.

<u>Black Belt Thesis (1927)</u>

As early as 1915, the Black Belt of the United States had captured the eye of Eastern European communists such as Vladimir Lenin. The Black Belt was a swath of the southern United States which had commanded a significant role in the development of American political

and racial thought since the Civil War and abolition of slavery. In 1929, 86% of African Americans lived in the South, with 74% living in agrarian communities. 50% of those lived in the Black Belt where they made up the majority demographic of the population.[4] Believing that the "degradation and oppression" of African Americans in the South would make them more likely to become communists, the Sixth Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) put forth the Black Belt Thesis in 1928.[5] The Thesis argued that the Black Belt comprised a nation of oppressed people who had a right to self-determination. This self-determination would give African Americans political and economic control over their lives as well as the power and right to secede. While the Thesis was ambitious in setting up a formalized relationship between the Soviet Union and southern African American communities, it ultimately did not succeed, and was soon abandoned.

Despite the Thesis's lack of formalized success, it was part of a significant change in the landscape of the South at the time. In 1929, when the CPUSA originally set up their first headquarters in Birmingham, AL, it vastly exceeded expectations. The original three organizers became 90 members within a year, with between 80-90% of them being African American. That year, the Party endorsed Walter Lewis, a Black man, for governor. Lewis ran on a platform of racial equality and self-determination, arguing that it was the only way to end lynching and achieve equal rights.[6] By 1933, the official membership in Birmingham was over 500, although the organization reached over twice as many as that.[7]

Despite this, the Thesis was generally considered unpopular among African Americans. For one, it presumed that African Americans would want to be considered an independent nation

[4] James Ford, "The Negro Question: Report to the Second World Congress of the League Against Imperialism," *The Negro Worker*, August 1929.
[5] Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978), 224. Quoting Lenin's "New Data on the Laws Governing the Development of Capitalism in Agriculture."
[6] Kelley 4
[7] Kelley 17

of people. However, at the time, many African Americans were fighting to be accepted by American society. What they wanted most was to be full-fledged Americans, not citizens of their own nation.[8] Otto Hall, one of the Black men who was present for the Comintern meetings where the Thesis was developed, argued that the most effective way to convince African Americans to join the Communist Party was to promote social equality, not nationhood. This would prove the Party's commitment to African American society without asking them to give up their identity as Americans.[9] However, this was ignored, and the Comintern and CPUSA still decided to try and implement the Thesis, resulting in its ultimate discardment.

The Black Belt Thesis was resurrected following WWII as the CPUSA decided to take a stronger stance against domestic racism. However, controversy ensued again, as the geography of African American life had changed and was more concentrated in northern and urban centers. Because of this misrecognition, the readoption of the Thesis would be enveloped into the controversy and crisis in the mid-1950s.

Scottsboro Boys (1931)

Perhaps more impactful than the adoption of the Black Belt Thesis for African Americans at the time was the CPUSA's efforts in the Scottsboro Boys trial. In 1931, a group of African American boys were arrested for allegedly raping two white women. While the NAACP was hesitant about defending the boys at trial, the CPUSA was more than willing to fight the legal battle through their legal arm, the International Labor Defense (ILD), headed by William Patterson.[10] The fight that ensued between the CPUSA and NAACP for who would protect the boys was notable in the African American community at the time as it positioned the CPUSA in

[8] Beverly Tomek, "The Communist International and the Dilemma of the American 'Negro Problem': Limitations of the Black Belt Self-Determination Thesis," *WorkingUSA* 15, no. 4 (2012):555; Haywood 223
[9] Oscar Berland, "The Emergence of the Communist Perspective on the 'Negro Question' in America: 1919-1931: Part Two," *Science & Society* 64, no. 2 (2000): 201.
[10] David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography 1868-1963*, First edition (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2009), 512-513.

a favorable light compared to the NAACP. The mother of one of the boys, Eugene Williams, summed up the opinions of "growing number of ordinary Negro men and women to whom the aggressive, public tactics of the Communists held far greater meaning than the cautious approach of the NAACP… 'we are not too ignorant to know a bunch of liars and fakers when we meet up with them and are not too ignorant to know that if we let the NAACP look after our boys, that they will die.'"[11]

The Scottsboro Boys trial had a long lasting impact for African American communists. Nelson Peery, a lifelong leftist and one-time member of the CPUSA explained his original attraction to the Party by focusing on the impact of the trial on the CPUSA's public image: "The Communists? They fought for the Scottsboro Boys. They fought for the working class of people. They led the Soviet Union. Everybody and everything I hated, hated them. They were against the government, and that was fine with me."[12] The Scottsboro Boys trial worked off the foundation started by the campaign for the Black Belt Thesis as the CPUSA began to make serious inroads with the African American community, particularly in the southern United States.

Angelo Herndon trial (1933)

Following the CPUSA's public defense of the Scottsboro Boys, the International Labor Defense (ILD), the legal wing of the CPUSA, took up the case of Angelo Herndon. Herndon was a Black communist community organizer. While he was arranging a demonstration in support of poverty relief, he was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to twenty years in a chain gang.[13] After multiple appeals, the case appeared in front of the Supreme Court and was overturned. Benjamin Davis, one of the main lawyers from the ILD (at this time led by William Patterson) and a future

[11] Lewis 513-514
[12] Nelson Peery, *Black Fire: The Making of an American Revolutionary*, First Edition (New York: New Press, The, 1995), 35.
[13] Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 36

CPUSA leader on the case rose to prominence within the Party.[14] The ILD itself gained so much support from this case that "one contemporary observer distilled the importance of this case: 'There probably isn't a Negro in the United States who is not familiar with the case of Angelo Herndon.'"[15] Following the Scottsboro case, the Herndon case, which was so successful, codified the CPUSA as a pillar in the fight against southern racism.

Increased Support for the CPUSA

One day, as Nelson Peery and his pastor Father Thompson strolled by two apartment buildings under construction, Father Thompson commented, "'I'll be glad when they finish those apartments,' he said. 'Why, Father?'" responded Peery. "'Because when the Communists take over, they're going to put colored people in them.'"[16] This anecdote stuck out in Peery's mind years later as he wrote his autobiography. It shows that along with the tangible legal actions that the CPUSA took in order to gain support from African American communities, they also offered hope in the fight against racism. The fact that white communists were involved in the struggle for racial equality gave confidence to people like Peery that a more racially equitable society was possible. The CPUSA presented a confidence in the future that African Americans were unfamiliar with. Richard Wright described his burgeoning interest in the CPUSA led to his "cynicism—which had been [his] protection against an America that had cast [him] out—slid from [him] and, timidly, [he] began to wonder if a solution of unity was possible." The CPUSA let out "a passionate call for the experiences of the disinherited, and there were none of the same lispings of the missionary in it... It urged life to believe in life."[17]

[14] Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 36
[15] Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 35
[16] Peery *Black Fire* 35
[17] Richard Wright, *American Hunger*, Reprint edition (New York, N.Y: HarperCollins, 1982), 63-4.

Unsurprisingly, these tangible and intangible benefits led to an influx in support for the CPUSA by African Americans. Over a two year gap (from June 1934 to 1936), the Harlem branch of the Communist Party went from approximately 50 members to over 850. In May 1936, there were approximately 14,775 white people and 1,039 Black people affiliated with the CPUSA. In May 1938, those numbers were up to 24,542 white people and 1,841 Black people.[18] The rapid increase in constituents continued into the 1940s. In a three-month window in 1943, there was a 400 member increase in the membership of the Harlem section of the Communist Party alone. Benjamin Davis, at that point a key figure in the Harlem section said of this increase "we've just begun."[19]

Unfortunately, this sharp increase in membership would end in the 1950s with the Red Scare and increased persecution against communists. Additionally, civil rights organizations like the NAACP were facing increased pressure not to work with communists, and embraced a policy of liberal anticommunism.[20] Civil rights groups like the NAACP "had to walk a fine line" between fighting for racial equality within the United States without critiquing the system as a whole, lest they invite charges of anti-American sentiment or communism.[21] The political situation also served to further isolate the CPUSA who was now standing alone in their communist politics and critique of racism and colonialism from an international perspective. While many left the Party at this point, the most committed communists, such as Davis, Patterson, and Robeson, would remain associated with (officially or not) the CPUSA and their fight to end American racism.

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[18] Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 54
[19] Gerald Horne, *Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary*, Revolutionary Lives (Pluto Press, 2016), 88. Quoting a letter from Benjamin Davis to Eslanda Robeson.
[20] M. Berg, "Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (June 1, 2007): 78.
[21] Dudziak 11; McDuffie 162-3; Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

Soviet Propaganda and American Racism Abroad

Along with domestic organizations like the CPUSA and NAACP combatting racism, the United States was dealing with international propaganda that highlighted their racial inequities. Particularly the Soviet Union, which itself claimed to be free of all racism, used American race relations as the subject of propaganda targeted towards "Third World" nations as well as African Americans. "Newspapers throughout the world carried stories about discrimination against nonwhite visiting foreign dignitaries, as well as against American blacks," writes historian Mary Dudziak. "At a time when the United States hoped to reshape the postwar world in its own image, the international attention given to racial segregation was troublesome and embarrassing."[22] This embarrassment was compounded as some African Americans started to mirror the same language that the Soviet Union was using. In 1950, Paul Robeson explicated his thoughts on the topic in a pamphlet he called "The Negro and the Soviet Union": "The Soviet Union's very existence, its example before the world of abolishing all discrimination based on color or nationality, its fight in every arena of world conflict for genuine democracy and for peace, this has given us Negroes the chance of achieving our complete liberation within our own time, within this generation."[23] The Soviet Union's policy of anti-racism served as a foil to the United States' inability to end violent racist action. In 1951, this embarrassment was further compounded when a group headed by William Patterson submitted a petition to the United Nations which charged the United States with perpetuating a genocide against African Americans: "The genocide of which we complain is as much a fact as gravity. The whole world knows of it. The proof is in every day's newspapers, in every one's sight and hearing in these

[22] Dudziak 12
[23] Paul Robeson, "The Negro People and the Soviet Union," *PRISM: Political & Rights Issues & Social Movements*, 1950, 12.

United States."[24] Following WWII and the Holocaust, the charge of genocide was calculated to show the true gravity of the situation within the country. Mary Dudziak argues that this propaganda pressured the United States government into promoting civil rights domestically. She argues that the disgraceful status of American civil rights actually became a national security hazard. Court cases like Brown v. Board of Education, in this context, were the United States' way of countering Soviet propaganda and reimagining their image abroad.[25]

Literature Review

These events that predated the 1956 crisis had just as much, if not more, influence on how African Americans responded to the crisis than the event itself. This thesis aims to show that what has been presented in existing literature as an abrupt end to the CPUSA was, in fact, anything but.

There is evidence that Khrushchev's secret speech had a momentous impact within the Soviet bloc. Notably, scholars like Kathleen E. Smith, author of *Moscow 1956,* draw a direct line from the events of 1956 to those of 1991, pointing out that Mikhail Gorbachev, the last General Secretary of the Soviet Union, considered himself "among the children of the Twentieth Party Congress."[26] However, scholarship on the American response to the Soviet thaw, especially among African Americans, is more varied in its approach.

This thesis will offer an alternative view to two common approaches in the existing literature. The first, put forth by scholars such as Phillip Deery, Irving Howe, and Lewis Coser, centers the secret speech as the focal point of the CPUSA's decline. This approach does not take the long view that this thesis will, but instead narrows in on the publication of the secret speech

[24] Civil Rights Congress (U.S.) and William L. Patterson, *We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Government against the Negro People* (New York: International Publishers, 1951), 4.
[25] Dudziak 12
[26] Kathleen E. Smith, *Moscow 1956: The Silenced Spring*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 5.

and the immediate aftermath. Neither Deery's nor Howe and Coser's work specifically mentions African American communists, but both look at CPUSA membership numbers to argue that the secret speech was a pivotal moment for the Party.[27] By contrast, this thesis will argue that the crisis of 1956 was just as much about Eugene Dennis's speech and the Draft Resolution as it was about Khrushchev's secret speech. Additionally, this thesis will focus on the attrition of African Americans from the Party leading up to 1956. While Howe and Coser write that the factional disputes following 1956 were between "true Stalinist believers and various kinds of 'revisionists,'" I will argue that African Americans had a variety of compelling reasons for joining and either rethinking or maintaining their relationship with the Party.[28] These reasons were more associated with the Party's ability to understand and combat the intersectional oppression of African Americans, however, than the current state of Soviet politics. Reframing the crisis in this way allows African American attrition from the CPUSA to be seen within the wider history of Black radical politics. This reorientation will allow this thesis to do justice to the intensely personal struggle many African Americans undertook as they attempted to realize an end to American racism, a reorientation of the national consciousness regarding racial equality, and a solidification of African American radical politics.

The second approach in the literature focuses on African American leftists, but through the view of national politics. This view does not look at the personal aspects of the fight for racial equality and class consciousness. Instead, this view, which includes work by scholars like Mary Dudziak, author of *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, focuses on the impact of the American federal government on African American radical

[27] Deery
[28] Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party A Critical History*, 1st edition (Beacon Press, 1957), 554.

politics.[29] This approach highlights the oppression that African Americans and communists faced at this time without dedicating as much time to the agency that African American leftsist still possessed. Additionally, while this approach delves into the role of the Soviet Union as a foil to the American government, it does not note the role that the Soviet Union played in the imaginary of the CPUSA or Black leftists.

Instead, this thesis will draw upon scholars such as Kate Baldwin, Erik Gellman, and Erik McDuffie to compile a history that takes into account interactions between leftists and African Americans from the early 20th century through the 1960s. It will also draw from biographical and autobiographical texts from Barbara Ransby, Carole Boyce Davies, Nelson Peery, Gerald Horne, and David Levering Lewis to craft a narrative that attempts to do justice to the inherently personal struggle that many African Americans undertook as they attempted to fight for radical politics, racial equality, and class consciousness.

Thesis

Nelson Peery had originally been drawn to communism well before his conversation with Father Thompson. For Peery, communism and racial equality were intertwined to the extent that he could not understand why any white person would even be interested in communism.[30] Even though, in Peery's experience, it seemed that most Black people in the Party originally got involved in order to get a union job or just because communists "were 'good people,'" they were soon recruited to the cause.[31] The Communist Party allowed African Americans a space where racial equality and labor issues were prioritized, which meant that impoverished African Americans could fight for both causes at once. However, there were limitations to the

[29] Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Revised edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).
[30] Peery *Black Fire* 123
[31] Peery *Black Fire* 78

prioritization of racial equality, which always took a backseat to labor issues. Peery admitted that in his experience, the CPUSA, which was predominantly white, did not always fully understand the scope of American racism, even if their overall goal of upending the current system and promoting equality across all classes and races were aligned.[32] Ultimately, however, this discrepancy would only further expand in the Party, with African Americans increasingly frustrated by the lack of prioritization of racial equality in favor of a focus on the Soviet Union and global socialism.

The role of African Americans in the CPUSA was complex, particularly as African Americans and communists alike encountered increasing difficulties during the 1950s. Peery's optimism about the Party was short-lived, and by 1953 he had been expelled from the CPUSA.[33] For African Americans who were still involved in the Party by 1956, the decision they had to make regarding whether or not to stay in the organization was a difficult one. For many of them, this was their social network and livelihood as well as their political affiliation. However, for others, the CPUSA was no longer on the forefront of the fight for racial equality and no longer served the same purpose in American radical politics.

Among African American leftists, there was still a wide variety of priorities and beliefs in terms of the role of the CPUSA and the CPSU and the goals of worldwide socialism and racial equality. This meant that following the crisis of 1956, there was no one reaction by African Americans. Rather, the exact way that each person felt about and dealt with the crisis was individual and based on their personal experiences. While historians often aim to make claims about particular opinion groups and social movements, this is a situation that cannot be generalized. In order to do justice to the difficult situation that many African American leftists

[32] Peery *Black Fire* 297
[33] Nelson Peery, *Black Radical: The Education of an American Revolutionary*, F First Edition (New York: The New Press, 2007), 154.

were in, this thesis will not generalize the situation and will not present one cohesive opinion that African Americans had at this time. Rather, it will delve into a wide set of beliefs and cover a variety of opinions and motivations.

Ultimately, I argue that for African American communists, the crisis of 1956 was part of a long history of attrition from the CPUSA. The secret speech was not a singular pivot point for African Americans in the Party, but it actually represents a longer process of realizing that the Party was no longer on the forefront of the fight against American racism. By the 1950s, and particularly during the period that began in 1956, the CPUSA was too entrenched in Soviet politics and the class struggle for racial equality to hold the same priority. Meanwhile, African Americans were still experiencing the daily struggle of segregation and a lack of civil rights. As they began to feel that the Party was more interested in increasing its population numbers than making substantive change, African Americans looked to other activist organizations.

The thesis will begin by delving into the motivations that separated African American communists from white communists. This will form the preconditions for the second section, which will look at the events of 1956 and how African Americans responded. Finally, the thesis will examine the impact that the crisis of 1956 had on the future for African American activism. Ultimately, this thesis aims to complicate this time, the most integral period for American communism.

Section One: African Americans Join the CPUSA

As the Scottsboro trials were beginning in Alabama, Paul Robeson was preparing to take the stage in London for a string of performances as the titular character in *Othello*. Traditionally, Othello, a Moor, had been played by a white actor in blackface so Robeson's portrayal of the character caused a tremendous stir and garnered much praise.[34] As he immersed himself in the character, Robeson was keenly aware of the parallels between his role and Scottsboro trials, both of which depicted Black men (or boys in the case of Scottsboro) fighting against an unjust state. Robeson was good friends with William Patterson, the head of the ILD and a lawyer on the case. Patterson was also involved with the CPUSA and passionate about leftist politics. Between the CPUSA's fight to defend the Scottsboro boys and his conversations with Patterson, Robeson became equally enchanted with the CPUSA, an ideology that would stay with him and his wife Eslanda for decades to come.[35]

Robeson, like many African Americans including Nelson Peery, originally became involved with the CPUSA through his social network and connections. While he may have had more esteemed connections than many, finding communism through conversations about race relations, the economy, or politics was not uncommon. While economic and political factors appealed to both white and Black radicals, many African Americans joined the CPUSA particularly in order to fight racism. After the fight between the CPUSA and the NAACP over who would represent the Scottsboro boys, the CPUSA began to look like a more radical and progressive organization than the NAACP that was still committed to racial equality.

This chapter will examine the reasons behind the influx in CPUSA membership among African Americans before the 1950s. The men and women who joined during this era would be

[34] Horne *Paul Robeson* 38
[35] Horne *Paul Robeson* 41-42

the same people who had to deal with the aftermath of 1956. Importantly, their reasons for joining the Party would ultimately affect how they would react following the revelations about Stalin.

Economics and the Fight for Racial Equality

The Great Depression and Marxist Ideology

While traditional histories of Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin imply that they fundamentally changed how American communists viewed the CPUSA, this presupposes that Americans primarily joined the CPUSA for reasons that had to do with Stalin or the Soviet Union. However, for many African Americans, this was not the case. Instead, the reasons were often based on domestic issues, not international ones.

Many African Americans (as well as white people) joined the CPUSA during the late 1920s and early 1930s. The country was hit hard by the Great Depression that began in 1929. As witnesses to the failures of a capitalist system, particularly one with few economic safety nets, more people began to embrace Marxist ideology. The Party's population numbers rose dramatically during this period, certainly in part due to this widespread disillusionment with American capitalism.[36]

While the CPUSA offered an alternative economic theory to capitalism, more importantly, it also may have offered a job. The CPUSA had connections to a variety of unions and it was significantly easier to get a union job if affiliated with the CPUSA.[37] Additionally, the CPUSA itself hired both men and women to work in its organization. There were jobs for grassroots organizers and secretaries along with jobs at CPUSA-affiliates like the *Daily Worker* and ILD. Ultimately, during a period as economically fraught as the Depression, the Communist

[36] Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000*, Reprint edition (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2002), 141; Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 54
[37] Peery *Black Fire* 78

Party may have offered much needed connections as well as a social network of people collectively dismayed with the state of the economy and society at the time.

The Party and the Struggle Racial Equality

Along with the economic motivations for joining the Party, many African Americans joined because of the CPUSA's politics on racial equality. The Party's defense of the Scottsboro Boys and Angelo Herndon proved to many African Americans that the CPUSA was committed to promoting equality for African Americans.[38] For many who were looking for a more radical organization than the NAACP, the CPUSA seemed to offer a mixed-race organization with white members who actually seemed to care about racial equality.

As of the 1950s, Black leftists were dealing not only with ongoing racism in the United States, but also the beginnings of the Red Scare and McCarthyism. While the NAACP, the leading organization fighting for racial equality in the nation, refused to work with leftists, the CPUSA attempted to support their African American members and affiliates on the basis of their race and political beliefs. These two bases of persecution often overlapped, and oftentimes Black leftists were treated worse than white ones. For African Americans, the Smith Act and Red Scare were inextricably linked with American racism. When Benjamin Davis was asked by a judge to inform on his fellow communists in the South, he refused, believing that any known Black southern communist would be lynched. For this refusal, he was considered to be in contempt of court, and was held in (segregated) prison longer than his white co-conspirators.[39]

The fight for racial equality was a point of collaboration between communist and anticommunist African Americans. Often, collective action would occur between leftists and non-leftists without issue. Within the CPUSA, there was the perception that while there may be

[38] Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974), 79.
[39] "Benjamin Davis, "Letter to Vladimir," n.d., Benjamin J. Davis Papers Box 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

some anticommunists who were vehemently opposed to working with the CPUSA, these "excessive and groundless fears about the Communists [were] shared by very few people in Harlem."[40] According to Benjamin Davis, the second in command of the CPUSA, this situation in the United States at the time, including "the revival of lynch terror and assassination against the Negroes in the South, the jim crow slurs and living standards of the Negro in Harlem… [demanded that they] unite… regardless of [their] differences on the Communist, Republican, Democratic, Socialist or any other Party."[41]

This camaraderie did not extend to everyone. The NAACP had an infamous rivalry with the CPUSA since the Scottsboro Boys trial. The fact that the CPUSA was seen as an alternative to the NAACP did not help smooth over these tensions. In fact, in 1957, the NAACP publicly rejected Benjamin Davis' membership renewal and corresponding donation. While Davis believed that "the struggle for the Negro people's first-class citizenship [is]... everybody's business. And everyone out to help, putting aside all other differences."[42] Even as Davis scolded the NAACP for their public dismissal, he offered to meet with them in person, to smooth over tensions, and to work together.[43] The Party's actions and commitment to racial equality even in the face of personal animosity set them apart from other similar organizations at this time. Their strong commitment and radical politics drew support from African American radicals who were alienated or disappointed by the NAACP.

While a desire to fight for racial equality was one of the original reasons that African Americans were drawn to the CPUSA, for some, this hope was quickly replaced by disillusionment with the Party. Richard Wright, who had been so engrossed in the CPUSA's

[40] "Benjamin Davis, "Attn: James L. Hicks, Managing Editor," April 21, 1956, Benjamin J. Davis Papers Box 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.
[41] "Attn: James L. Hicks, Managing Editor"
[42] Benjamin Davis, "Letter to Roy," November 11, 1957, Benjamin J. Davis Papers Box 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.
[43] "Letter to Roy"

confidence and hope, soon came to realize that the Party's commitment to racial equality was not as deep as it seemed. He was condemned by his fellow comrades for reading so-called "bourgeois" books and for his research on the lives of Black men. For Wright, the plight of African Americans was inextricably intertwined with that of the global working class and he could not understand why his comrades could not see the same. "Why was it that I was a suspected man because I wanted to reveal the vast physical and spiritual ravages of Negro life, the profundity latent in these rejected people, the dramas as old as man and the sun and the mountains and the seas that were transpiring in the poverty of black America," he wondered. "What was the danger in showing the kinship between the sufferings of the Negro and the sufferings of other people?"[44] The CPUSA's disinterest in Wright's work made him question their true commitment to racial equality. As he continued to interact with white communists, he began to question whether they saw African Americans as individuals at all, or whether they just idealized all Black men based on a general conception of the oppressed Black person that bordered on feticization.[45] Similarly, A. Philip Randolph, former president of the National Negro Congress, became suspicious of the CPUSA's purported support of African Americans. He felt that the CPUSA recruited Black radicals to increase Party numbers more than for any altruistic purpose. Like Wright, Randolph felt that the CPUSA was using African Americans as pawns in their global struggle for socialism, not working with them in tangent to fight for racial equality.[46] These allegations would follow the CPUSA for years, emerging again more strongly during the 1956 crisis.

<u>The Re-Adoption of the Black Belt Thesis</u>

[44] Wright 80-81
[45] Wright 86
[46] Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights*, Illustrated edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 151-3, 156.

Part of the Party's platform following World War Two was to reintroduce the Black Belt Thesis, or the right of self-determination, for African Americans in the South. Many, primarily white, leftists felt that the Thesis had been abandoned too early without any real change to the state of southern African Americans. For communists who were predominantly focused on the working class, the Thesis seemed like a way to reach out to impoverished people and make a real change in the United States. Even as late as 1956, some, like the Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker, believed that "the question of self-determination… is something that has needed doing a long time; and it is something that still needs the most careful study."[47] This section of the Party believed that there was still "general neglect of the farm question in the U.S. The people having the highest percentage of farmers is the Negro; the area still more rural is the South; and the area of most notorious neglect—theoretical and practical of our Party—is farming." Those who supported the return of the Thesis were frustrated at what they saw as empty promises made following the 1956 revelations. Unlike Wilkerson, Aptheker believed that any talk about the South following the secret speech was just that—all talk with no concrete steps or promise of direct action.[48]

However, by the mid-1950s, this characterization of African American life was outdated. "Over the course of six decades," in what became known as the Great Migration, "some six million black southerners left the land of their forefathers and fanned out across the country for an uncertain existence in nearly every other corner of America."[49] By the 1970s, "nearly half of all black Americans—some forty-seven percent—would be living outside the South, compared to ten percent when the Migration began."[50] Unlike their white peers, African American leftists

[47] "Letter from Herbert Aptheker" July 3, 1956
[48] Herbert Aptheker to Benjamin Davis, "Letter from Herbert Aptheker," February 13, 1957, Benjamin J. Davis Papers Box 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.
[49] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, First Vintage Books edition. (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 9.
[50] Wilkerson 10

were aware of this change in the racial landscape as well as the fact that it made the Black Belt Thesis nearly irrelevant. Therefore, African American communists like Doxey Wilkerson believed that the Thesis was not worth fighting for and did not address the current issues facing African Americans.[51]

Given this dynamic, the return to the Black Belt Thesis was a divisive, and for some disqualifying, step for the Party that ultimately served to further tensions within the Party even before the revelations in the secret speech. For many African Americans, this issue showed how white communists did not necessarily understand modern African American life. Even as they fought and organized to promote racial equality, the CPUSA began to seem out of touch with the people they were fighting for. Within this discussion, the Black Belt Thesis and the promise of self-determination for African Americans was one of the hallmarks of this misrecognition. Whether it was supported or opposed by African Americans in the Party, it was at the forefront of their considerations about the priorities and future of the Party.

Women and the CPUSA

African American men and women were both drawn to the CPUSA for the reasons discussed above. Many of the women in the Party, however, had another concern beyond just economics and the struggle for racial equality: sexism and the ways in which it permeated the other issues that the Party focused on. For these women, many of whom were wives of male Party members, the CPUSA offered a more radical political view than other organizations, which included the possibility of gaining more rights for women along with more rights for African Americans in general.

For these women, Black women's liberation was the cause most worth fighting for, and the CPUSA seemed like the best way to achieve their goals. Women like Esther Cooper Jackson,

[51] Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 277

Louise Thompson Patterson, Audley Moore, Claudia Jones, Thelma Dale, Bonita Williams, and Dorothy Burnham "saw in CPUSA-affiliated social movements and their links to the global stage unique opportunities to pursue racial justice and social equality, especially for black women."[52]

Many of these women believed in the ideology set out by Claudia Jones which she titled the "triple oppression" of women. Jones believed that "Negro women as workers, as Negroes, and as women--are the most oppressed stratum of the whole population."[53] Her ideology was laid out explicitly in the 1949 pamphlet "An End to the Neglect to the Problems of the Negro Woman!" that was published in *Political Affairs*, the theoretical journal of the CPUSA. Jones's pamphlet highlighted the mistreatment of Black women in society-at-large as well as within the Party-sphere. As she pointed out, many Black women at the time worked as domestic staff in jobs that were virtually akin to slavery. Like slaves, they were hired at an auction block on the street and were treated as subhuman.[54] Jones argued that these women should be the focus of the Party's political force as they were the most in-need population. However, she also recognized that the Party itself was also dominated by male superiority and white chauvinism. She felt that the Party needed to look inward, criticize itself, and "root out all 'humanitarian' and patronizing attitudes towards Negro women." Jones also gave examples of the condescending attitudes many men showed toward Black women, such as believing they would steal money from the Party or that interested women were "'too backward' and '[weren't] ready' to join the Party."[55] Jones points out that this thinking discouraged women from joining or staying in the Party, ultimately to the detriment of the entire CPUSA. Furthermore, this sentiment was, according to Jones,

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[52] Erik McDuffie, "'No Small Amount of Change Could Do': Esther Cooper Jackson and the Making of a Black Left Feminist," in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, and Dayo F. Gore (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 30-31.
[53] Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008), xxiv.
[54] Claudia Jones, *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!* (New York, NY: National Women's Commission, C.P.U.S.A., 1949), 11.
[55] Jones 14

playing into what the anticommunist establishment wanted by maintaining the social order which deemed men more important than women: "The American bourgeoisie, we must remember, is aware of the present and even greater potential role of the masses of Negro women, it is therefore not loathe to throw plums to Negroes who betray their people and do the bidding of imperialism."[56] Jones's criticisms of male superiority in "An End to the Neglect to the Problems of the Negro Woman!" struck a chord within the Party and would greatly influence how the CPUSA began to think about the intersection between race, gender, and class.[57] Jones would also go on to influence other women in the Party, even as she also disagreed with and clashed with others.

Like many other women, Claudia Jones, also looked to the Soviet Union for an example of what a society with more equal gender relations would look like. Just as the Soviet Union positioned itself to African Americans as being devoid of racism, it was able to take a similar role in the African American female imaginary. One of Jones' contemporaries, Esther Cooper Jackson, also believed that within the Soviet Union,'the social standing of domestic workers [was] equal to any other worker.'"[58] Jackson, Jones, and others who thought like them believed that socialism—and the Soviet Union by extension—was a model for the changes that they wanted to see in American society. Far removed from actual Soviet life by distance and information, they believed that the Soviet Union had liberated women.[59]

However, while these female activists may have had similar beliefs about why they joined the CPUSA, many found difficulties while in the CPUSA. There were tensions and disagreements both between men and women and within the group of female radicals. For

[56] Jones 14
[57] McDuffie *Sojourning for Freedom* 167-171
[58] McDuffie "No Small Amount of Change Could Do" 31-32. Quoting Esther Cooper Jackson.
[59] McDuffie "No Small Amount of Change Could Do" 31-32; Jones 4

instance, there were notable tensions between Black and white women, with Black female activists believing that white women were treated better than them in larger society (which was certainly true) but that white women did not recognize this. As of 1940, "two out of every five Negro women, in contrast to two out of every eight white women, worked for a living." Additionally, "the maternity death rate for Negro women [was] triple that of white women."[60] Despite this, white women often did not realize the drastic difference in quality and standard of life between the races. Instead, they treated "women" as one category of people who all had the same experiences and were equal within their sex. These women would often talk about racism and sexism as being comparable, which, in itself, does not take into account that Black women experience both these oppressions at once.[61] This language and rhetoric made it clear to the Black women in the Party that they were not included by either men or white women within radical circles. Angered by this fact, many Black women decided to push back and fight even harder for their equal rights.

One of the ways that Black left feminists organized outside of the CPUSA organization was to create a group known as the Sojourners for Truth and Justice. Led by Louise Thompson Patterson and Beulah Richardson, the Sojourners were founded in 1951 "to fight for the full freedom of the Negro people and the dignity of Negro womanhood."[62] Much of the work being done by the Sojourners would not enter even mainstream leftist thought for many years. The Sojourners were interested in organizing domestic workers and working internationally with Black women. Through her work with the organization, Jones attempted to call attention to a peace movement founded by women in northern Africa.[63] However, the Sojourners soon found it

[60] Jones 4-5
[61] McDuffie "No Small Amount of Change Could Do" 33
[62] McDuffie *Sojourning for Freedom* 160-1. Quoting "5,000 Negro Women Wanted" from the Louise Thompson Patteron papers, Box 16, Folder 1.
[63] Davies 49

difficult to work with the CPUSA, which was mostly disinterested in their mission or at best ambivalent about the organization. Ultimately, the Party could not recognize the radical potential of the Sojourners' work. Members of both the CPUSA and Sojourners like Jones and Thompson Patterson were torn between the two, resulting in tension amongst the Sojourners. Because of this dynamic, the Sojourners only lasted as an organization until 1953, showing the "destructive impact of anti-Communism and Communist sectarianism on black left feminism during the early 1950s."[64] Despite the disastrous interactions with the CPUSA, Louise Thompson Patterson, as the wife of William Patterson, an influential member of the CPUSA, was unable to leave the Party and work as an independent feminist activist due to the social and personal repercussions of such a decision.[65] This instance of marriage binding women to the CPUSA through their husband's interaction with the Party would be a key part of the reaction among women following the secret speech only a few years after the end of the Sojourners.

Conclusion

The reasons that African Americans were originally attracted to the CPUSA is integral to understanding how they would eventually respond to the crisis of 1956. Even as many African Americans still admired the Soviet Union, they were much less focused on it than their white counterparts. Instead, joining the CPUSA was a way to fight for Black liberation, gain employment, or fight for women's equality. Before the 1950s, the CPUSA promoted optimism and a radical way to demand change (in contrast to civil rights organizations like the NAACP). These factors drew African Americans to the Party and helped craft the image of the CPUSA that would help African Americans rationalize staying with the Party after 1956. Ultimately, any

[64] McDuffie *Sojourning for Freedom* 182
[65] McDuffie *Sojourning for Freedom* 183

history that does not acknowledge these different motivations cannot recognize the full depth of the reaction to the 1956 crisis.

Section Two: The Crisis of 1956

Much of the writing done on the immediate aftermath of the secret speech is on the absolute shock that was being felt by formerly devout communists. However, this was not the case for everyone. Khrushchev's revelations "left [W. E. B.] Du Bois publicly unmoved." He "adjusted the Russian casualty tables in light of the Atlantic slave trade, the scramble for Africa, the needless First World War, Nazi death camps, an the color-coded poverty and wage-slavery raging within and beyond North America."[66] While the Stalinist period may have been horrific, in the balance of other worldly evils, Du Bois found it to be less so than its counterparts. Many of his peers however, could not do the same kind of calculation that Du Bois did. For communists like Paul Robeson, these new revelations shattered their entire conception of the Soviet Union as the solution to many of the problems currently facing the United States. For these people, the events of 1956 were "psychologically devastating."[67] Some of them, like Robeson, would eventually find ways to make peace with these revelations and move forward still fighting for worldwide socialism.

Ultimately, thousands of former Party members did not feel this way and would leave the Party following the 1956 allegations. Among those who decided to stay, there were two main camps including those that felt that they should follow in Khrushchev's footsteps and turn towards self-criticism, explicating the wrongs of the CPUSA and attempting to move forward as a better Party. The other group disagreed, feeling that the CPUSA was substantially independent from the CPSU and that Khrushchev's revelations had as little impact on them and their work as Stalin's original acts. This group wanted to focus on American inequality and still direct their attention and ire outwards instead of in and on themselves. The conflict between those who

[66] Lewis 699
[67] Lewis 699

would leave or stay, for a variety of different reasons, would play out in the months following the publication of the secret speech in the United States. Importantly, however, this conflict, while it may have been spurred by the publication of the secret speech, for African Americans in the Party was not really about the speech at all, but about the role of the Party in the emerging civil rights movement. Additionally, it was about the importance of racial equality in the United States over anything that was happening abroad, including in the Soviet Union. The ensuing debate was more about the role of the international in the work of the CPUSA, with prominent African Americans arguing that the Party was wasting too much of its energy and resources abroad instead of focusing on the problems taking place domestically.

Eugene Dennis's Speech

Soon after the publication of the secret speech in the United States, Eugene Dennis, a prominent member of the Party, was inspired by Khrushchev's words to reflect on the CPUSA. Just as Khrushchev had acknowledged the flaws of the CPSU and set a plan forth to move forward as a nation, Dennis planned on laying out the ways in which the CPUSA had lapsed from its goals, had messed up its activism, and had alienated those it should have tried to work with. The speech that he gave to the National Committee during its convention from April 28-May 1, 1956 (which was later published as a pamphlet in May 1956) did just this. The speech was the main event of the first meeting of the National Committee in the five years that six of its members had been imprisoned due to their communist ties.[68] Dennis started his speech by calling back to the secret speech: "...let us grasp the achievements of the XXth Congress in their entirety—in relation to the epoch-making changes now going on in the whole world, particularly those which have arisen from the establishment of socialism as a world system, and from the

[68] Eugene Dennis, "'The Communists Take a New Look', Report to the National Committee of the Communist Party, U.S.A.," May 1956, American Left Ephemera Collection, Box 4, Folder 58, University of Pittsburgh, 2.

disintegration of the old colonial empires."[69] For Dennis, the revelations from Khrushchev were commendable in their widespread influence.[70] He attempted to be part of this new wave of socialist self-criticism by illuminating the CPUSA's faults, namely left-sectarianism, a key term that would be repeated often over the next few years as the Party tried to make sense of Khrushchev's speech and what many believed that they themselves had done wrong.For Dennis, left-sectarianism referred to the alienation of African American organizations like the NAACP and the "Negro church movement" who were fighting for the same cause of racial equality as the CPUSA, even if they were not as radical as the CPUSA.[71] Dennis believed that the Party was isolating itself by making its platform so fringe that no other organization lived up to the standards it set or was even interested in working with them.[72] Ultimately, however, Dennis wanted his speech to be just the beginning of "a systemic development, on all levels of the Party, of genuine and deep-going criticism and self-criticism, of correction and self-correction—both by the Party collective and by individual Party leaders and members."[73] However, Dennis's vision for a widespread collective undertaking to improve the Party did not necessarily resonate in the way he intended.

Dennis's criticism of the Party was controversial to say the least. Many believed that despite Dennis's words against left-sectionalism, he was actually contributing to the increase in factionalism within the Party and the Left in general. Others felt that by taking a cue from Khrushchev, he was forcing the Party to get even closer and more connected to the CPSU. Even as Dennis attempted to reform the Party, he was so engrossed with the Soviet system that he did so mirroring their efforts. Many African Americans, including Doxey Wilkerson, felt that this

[69] Dennis 7
[70] Dennis 6
[71] Dennis 34
[72] Dennis 20-21
[73] Dennis 37

was distracting the CPUSA from their American-centric goal of racial equality. Wilkerson would eventually leave the Party, although others who felt this way would not necessarily take such extreme steps.[74] For instance, Du Bois agreed with Wilkerson, but felt that instead of leaving the Party, communists should reconsider their priorities. "What now should be the program of socialists and Communists throughout the world and especially in the United States?" he asked in response to the crisis. "First they should agree to as wide an extent as possible on just what socialism is and how far it is a desirable form of society for their own nation…. What form socialism takes in foreign lands is not our prime business. The form it takes in America is our prime business and we have a right to pursue it under the law."[75] Du Bois's reference to working "under the law" put forth a solely American form of radical politics that did not conform to the standards set abroad, and rejected the communist call for revolutionary action. Instead, Du Bois believed that the CPUSA should work within the American system to fight for racial and class equality. The focus on American instead of Soviet politics would become a rallying cry for many who felt that the secret speech should have little to no role in the American communist ideology.

Regardless of the specifics, almost everyone agreed that factionalism had overrun the Party. In a 1957 issue of *The American Socialist*, the editors of the magazine remarked that "the damage has been done. The Communist Party is a shambles. American radicalism has hit rock bottom."[76] While Wilkerson was on one end of the spectrum, Dennis, Davis, and William Foster (the head of the CPUSA) were on the other end, representing a more pro-Soviet faction (although Dennis wavered often in his exact position).[77] While the Party leadership at this point was existentially exhausted, both from these debates along with increased persecution and, for many,

[74] Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 277
[75] W.E.B. Du Bois et al., "Socialism and Democracy: A Debate between Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois and the Editors," *The American Socialist*, January 1957, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, UMass Amherst Libraries. 9
[76] Du Bois 9
[77] Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 282

incarceration earlier in the decade, they agreed that Left-sectarianism along with factionalism within the CPUSA, was the main problem.[78]

The Sixteenth National Convention

On September 13, 1956, the National Committee of the CPUSA presented a draft resolution for their 1957 Convention that, inspired by Dennis's speech, detailed the missteps of the Party in the past and ways that it planned to move forward. On February 12 1957, the anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birthday, the convention gathered to vote on the resolution. All of the leadership of the Party voted "yes" except for Davis and Foster who voted "yes" "with qualifications." A few weeks later, Foster would change his vote to "no" because "he felt that the resolution was overly critical of the left-sectarian trend and that the proposal for a… merger with other forces) was misguided."[79]

Like Dennis's speech, the Draft Resolution took inspiration from Khrushchev to critique itself and set a path forward for the party: "...we have made a number of errors over the years. These errors need to be rectified and the necessary conclusions drawn therefrom if we are to measure up to the great responsibilities which confront our Party and the working class in the period ahead."[80] By accepting and explicating the failures of the Party, the Draft Resolution attempted to move beyond factionalism within the Party to setting a new Party line that would focus on self-criticism, particularly of the Party's failure to make significant progress on racial equality in America.

Yet before the Draft Resolution criticized their record on racial equality, they first championed their own record of fighting for "the struggles of the Negro people for full

[78] Joseph Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 224.
[79] Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 279-280
[80] "Draft Resolution for the 16th National Convention of the Communist Party, U.S.A.', Adopted Sept. 13, 1956" (Political Affairs, September 13, 1956), American Left Ephemera Collection, Box 4, Folder 34, University of Pittsburgh, 12.

economic, social and political equality. [They] made notable contributions in defending Willie McGee, the Martinsville Seven, the Trenton Six, Mrs. Rosa Lee Ingram and Wesley Wells; in combatting segregated housing in Stuyvesant Town, Levittown, and Parkchester in New York, ...and in many other communities throughout the nation; in popularizing the battle for Negro representation…."[81] After this praise, however, the Resolution began to criticize this record. This criticism of the Party's achievements in the field of racial equality was first mentioned yet again in the context of left-sectarianism. The Draft Resolution argued that the CPUSA should work towards unity within the Left instead of divisive actions.[82] This left-sectarianism, for the Committee, was inextricably tied to the Party's failures in the sphere of racial equality because often the sectarianism was between the CPUSA and other organizations that were fighting for racial equality. Just as Dennis had mentioned the NAACP and Black churches as potential allies that had been scorned by the CPUSA, the Draft Resolution notes that often the sectarianism between them and other organizations was over trivial matters such as "organizational measures."[83] Additionally, the Resolution posited that the CPUSA looked down upon other organizations that were not aligned with the working class, believing that wealthier African Americans did not experience the same inequalities: "In minimizing the fact that all the class strata of the Negro people suffered discrimination to one degree or another and therefore had a stake in the struggle for equality and freedom, we clung to negative attitudes toward non-Left organizations of the Negro people and their leaders."[84]

After decrying left-sectarianism and its detrimental impact on the fight for racial equality, the Draft Resolution focused on the Black Belt Thesis and admitted that it was out of touch with

[81] "Draft Resolution for the 16th National Convention of the Communist Party" 41
[82] "Draft Resolution for the 16th National Convention of the Communist Party" 45, 48
[83] "Draft Resolution for the 16th National Convention of the Communist Party" 49
[84] "Draft Resolution for the 16th National Convention of the Communist Party" 50

the reality of the majority of African Americans. While the Resolution did not address the controversy over the Thesis when it was first presented, it did acknowledge that at this point it was out of touch: "Likewise the failure to make timely revisions in our theoretical position on the Negro question handicapped our comrades in developing their relationships with the living struggles of the Negro freedom movement."[85] However, the Resolution continued on to say that while the Thesis would not continue in its present form, it would be revised and reworked into something that the Party could still stand behind. This itself was controversial as certain members of the Party, such as Paul Robeson and William Foster, thought that the Thesis should be completely discarded, calling it "obsolete."[86] The Party's decision to stick with the Thesis, even in a different form, therefore only further contributed to factionalism within the Party.

Near the conclusion of the Resolution, the secret speech was addressed head on. However, instead of strongly condemning the Soviet Union, this section became another form of self criticism, where the CPUSA blamed itself for getting not seeing the truth:

> The Party also viewed uncritically developments in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. It mistakenly thought that any public criticism of the views or policies of the Marxist parties of these countries would weaken the bonds of international working class solidarity or bring comfort to the enemies of peace and socialism. The incorrectness of this view was highlighted by the revelations in Khrsushchev's special report to the 20th Congress of the CPSU. Because it held this view, the Communist Party of our country was entirely unprepared for and deeply shocked by the admissions of crimes, violations of sociality justice, mistreatment of certain national minorities, and the basis for the rupture of relations with Yugoslavia—all at variance with the truly liberating character of socialism. The courage shown in making these disclosures and the profound process of self-correction, begun some years ago and sharply accelerated since the 20th Congress, are irrefutable evidence of the historic role and vitality of the socialist system.[87]

The way that the Draft Resolution praised Khrushchev and the current state of the Soviet Union while also criticizing the Stalinist period (notably without mentioning or directly criticizing

[85] "Draft Resolution for the 16th National Convention of the Communist Party" 50
[86] Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 279-280. Quoting William Foster; Horne *Paul Robeson* 154-5
[87] "Draft Resolution for the 16th National Convention of the Communist Party" 58

Stalin himself) and themselves for not seeing the truth allowed the National Committee to continue to support the Soviet Union. While the Left-sectarian elements of the Resolution were controversial for leaders of the Party like Foster, they still supported the Soviet Union even following the revelations. This support was justified with the excuse that the Soviet Union had changed and were making valuable steps forward, and that all of this was possible only because of the benefits of global socialism. The day after the Resolution was accepted, the *New York Times* would publish excerpts of the document in their paper along with the membership decline following the secret speech: from 80,000 members down to 20,000.[88] The response to Dennis's speech and the Draft Resolution would only further the controversy and factionalism that began with the secret speech.

Response to Eugene Dennis's Speech and the National Convention

For those that stayed with the Party, the immediate reaction to the leadership's decision to pass the Draft Resolution was not positive. While Dennis's speech and the Resolution had many lofty goals for the future of the Party, there was little to no specifics on the substantive actions that would be taken to get there.[89] The factionalism that was originally spurred by the secret speech was only furthered at this time by the controversies following the Dennis speech and the Convention. Both the Dennis speech and the Draft Resolution praised Khrushchev for ushering in a period of self reflection and openness in the Soviet Union. Both texts also drew from the secret speech and attempted to perform the same concept within the United States with the CPUSA. However, many in the Party felt that this was falling into the same trap that had caused the CPUSA to support the brutal Stalin regime. Instead, this coalition, which included well-known members of the CPUSA like Doxey Wilkerson, became infuriated with what they

[88] Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 279-280
[89] "Letter from Herbert Aptheker, February 13, 1957"

saw as the CPUSA's obsession with the CPSU: "the American Communists now found themselves discussing their own problems within the context of what had happened elsewhere."[90] This coalition wanted the CPUSA to focus more on American-centric issues, but also felt that the CPUSA was more advanced than the CPSU and so to follow them would be a poor decision. From the CPUSA's perspective, the CPSU had managed to win the sort of revolution that American communists only dreamed of, so it was natural to look up to them. However, at this point in 1956-7, the CPUSA was talking about reforms that would not enter the Soviet consciousness until the late 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev.[91] Ultimately, this conflict between "Americanization" and "Sovietization" would convince this coalition that the CPUSA was too reliant on foreign groups to ever make significant changes and many would decide to leave the Party.

The decision to leave was itself controversial among those that chose to stay. For those like Du Bois who could make the mental calculation that the revelations about Stalin were not that bad, leaving the Party was a serious betrayal. For the CPUSA leadership, talking about leaving publicly and potentially helping to create anti-CPUSA propaganda was even worse.[92] The leadership often did not even fully comprehend the reasons that former CPUSA members would leave. For them, the CPUSA was independent from the CPSU and so the Dennis speech and Resolution were already more than enough to address the problem.[93] As CPUSA members left the Party and explained their reasons for doing so, the leadership often did not internalize that criticism. Rather, in Benjamin Davis's notes following the resignation of Comrades Charney, Watt, Lawrence, and Marino, he noted that the former members were rife with "right

[90] Starobin 225
[91] Horne *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 277
[92] Benjamin Davis, "Editor, Daily Worker," September 10, 1957, Benjamin J. Davis Papers Box 3, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.
[93] Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare* 279; Benjamin Davis, "Let's Get Going! Fight for the Party's Policy," n.d., Benjamin J. Davis Papers Box 3, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

opportunism and revisionism… dogmatism and sectarianism… [all being] ideological dangers [to] the Party."[94] The leadership also made contradictory statements during this time as to the current state of the party. In response to Joseph Clark's resignation from the *Daily Worker*, Davis wrote that it "is a stab in the back of the Party at a moment when it is fighting for its life, and for its revitalization in the service of the people."[95] Yet at other times he took a more optimistic stance, writing that "the National and NY State Committees of the Party, while recognizing the crisis in the Party, pose the question in a quite different manner, as one of growth and of moving forward…."[96] Ultimately, the responses to the wave of resignations following the events of 1956 showed that the reforms posited by Dennis and the Draft Resolution were unlikely to take hold. Any serious criticism of the CPUSA's ties to the CPSU were not taken seriously by the leadership. While almost the entire leadership agreed that the Party had misstepped on the issue of Left-sectarianism and should have attempted to work with organizations like the NAACP, Foster refused to comply. Even among African Americans, there was a great disparity in how they approached the crisis and how they responded to the events that unfolded.

The Black Left Feminist Movement Following 1956

The Black Left Feminist movement had already been losing members before the publication of the secret speech, which in some ways acted as the final nail in the coffin of the movement having success within the CPUSA. McCarthyism and the Smith Act both took a serious toll on the CPUSA as a whole, but particularly on the Black Left Feminist movement. Claudia Jones was deported in 1955, which removed one of the most vocal and visible women in the CPUSA. Additionally, many of the male members of the CPUSA were incarcerated during this time. Many of their wives, led by Peggy Dennis (Eugene Dennis's wife) began a group

[94] Davis "Let's Get Going! Fight for the Party's Policy"
[95] Davis "Editor, Daily Worker, September 10, 1957"
[96] Davis "Let's Get Going! Fight for the Party's Policy"

known as the Smith Act Wives who were dedicated to advocating for these unfairly incarcerated men. With a membership of about 108 members, the organization raised money and protested the actions of the government.[97] However, while this was an impressive resistance to undue governmental control, it helped end the explicitly feminist messaging of earlier campaigns. The Smith Act Wives reduced many of these women to their role as a wife instead of focusing on their previous activism for Black women's rights.

This repositioning of Black women within the Party was only furthered by the publication of the secret speech in 1956 and subsequent fallout. Unlike many of the men in the Party, women often did not have the same option to leave the Party if they were uncomfortable by Khrushchev's revelations. For one, many of the Black women in the Party had husbands who were also in the Party and were socially expected to stay involved if their husband had not decided to leave (similar to the situation that Louise Thompson Patterson had been in following the end of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice).[98] This again forced women into the role of a wife instead of a full and independent member of the Party.

Women were also pressured to stay in the Party because it was one of the only places that many African American women could find employment. As many other leftist organizations began to close or lose money, Black women often did not have other jobs to turn to were they to quit the CPUSA. Instead, if they left the CPUSA, "these activist women [would continue] to face government harassment, [or would find] few employment options that made use of their skills and education or fit with their political interests."[99] For some women, this was still worth the risk to leave the Party. For them, the "intense political debates and internal conflicts… lack of

[97] McDuffie *Sojourning for Freedom* 185, 192; "Families of the Smith Act Victims," n.d., Benjamin J. Davis Papers Box 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.
[98] McDuffie *Sojourning for Freedom* 183
[99] Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War*, Reprint edition (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 131-2.

support for black liberation struggles… and 'the failure of some comrades to extend their political relations into personal friendships'" were enough to make them decide to leave the Party and risk having to find new employment.[100]

For those who decided to stay with the Party, there would not be a serious revitalization of the Black Left feminist movement until the 1970s, which would bring new publications like *New World Review* and *New China*, both which had many women of color working behind the scenes. Prominent women from the Party in the 1950s like Jessica Smith, Halois Moorhead, Eslanda Robeson, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and Vicki Garvin would return to Black feminist activism during this time. In the meantime, Black women in the Party still seriously supported the Soviet Union through the 1956 crisis.[101] Ultimately, Black women in the Party continued to struggle under the weight of the "triple oppression" that Claudia Jones had written about. Their reactions to the crisis of 1956, whether it was sticking with or leaving the Party was a careful calculation of survival and sticking to their political beliefs. While the outcome may have looked different for various people, the struggles they all undertook were often similar in their pressure and the toll that they took.

[100] Gore 132
[101] Gore 156

Conclusion

During her time at Brandeis University, Angela Davis considered becoming involved in the campus section of the Communist Party. Despite being a self-described communist, she decided to stay away from the Party: "I called myself a communist, but refused to be drawn into the small campus movement because I felt that the politicos had approached me in an obviously patronizing manner. It seemed as if they were determined to help the 'poor, wretched Negroes' become equal to them, and I simply didn't think they were worth becoming equal to."[102] The tension that Davis felt between wanting to join the Party and yet feeling unwelcomed by its white members mimics some of the experiences of Black communists around 1956. In many ways, Davis represents the trajectory of Black leftist life following the 1950s. Working outside of the traditional Party mechanism, she was able to fight for the causes she believed in without the CPUSA, putting forth a vision of leftism that no longer looked towards the Soviet Union as a model. In addition to being a member of the Black Panther Party and fighting for prison reform, Davis took up the cause of Black women's liberation.[103] Davis, like Claudia Jones before her, believed that housework had an "explosive revolutionary potential" for Black female liberation.[104] "For Black women today and for all their working-class sisters," wrote Davis, "the notion that the burden of housework and child care can be shifted from their shoulders to the society contains one of the radical secrets of women's liberation. Child care should be socialized, meal preparation should be socialized, housework should be industrialized—and all these services should be readily accessible to working-class people."[105] Davis used Marxist language

[102] Davis *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* 119
[103] Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy*, Illustrated edition (New York: Pantheon, 2016), 256.
[104] Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 244; Davies 44
[105] Davis WRC 232

and ideology in her politics but kept her focus solely on the United States, focusing the future of leftism on the West, not the Soviet bloc.

For Davis, the real promise of leftism, however, was not in the United States but in the so-called "Third World." Like Claudia Jones, W.E.B. and Shirley Graham Du Bois and Eslanda Robeson before her, Davis believed that socialism would take hold among people of color who lived outside of the two superpowers. "In my travels about the world I have come to realize that we are not only lumped together as Negroes, 13 million of us, we are lumped together, in the world view, as Colored Peoples" wrote Eslanda Robeson. "Whether we want to be or not, you and I are not only brothers and sisters in our little American Negro family, we are also fellow members in the very big family of Colored Peoples."[106] This same ideology eventually led W.E.B. and Shirley Graham Du Bois to leave the United States and move to Ghana. Ultimately, by the 1950s, the CPUSA seemed to constrain African American politics more than it aided them in the cause of racial equality. Leaving the Party allowed African American activists to take a broader and more radical stance on the state of global racial politics and their hopes for a better future.

This thesis is far from comprehensive and the story of African American radicalism following 1956 is vast. Further work on global anticapitalism as a product of African American disillusionment with Soviet-style communism would greatly benefit this research. Additionally, deeper research into the impact of communists like Bayard Rustin in the civil rights movement or the Black Panther Party's acceptance of Marxists (which drew Davis into their organization instead of the CPUSA) would illuminate the long-reaching impact of this crisis well into the following decades.[107] While the CPUSA would no longer dominate African American leftist

[106] Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 11.
[107] Davis *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* 163

politics in the same way, radicals would not give up on their fight against the intertwined racial and class oppressions.

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