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Mark Solomon. *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998. viii + 403 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57806-095-5.

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One Group's Liberation; Everybody's Freedom

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"In Harlem, on a single day in the spring of 1933, the ... Unemployed Council fought seventeen evictions, returning possessions in three cases; a major Scottsboro [1] meeting was held at the Abyssinian Baptist Church; a ... branch of the Food Workers Industrial Union was formed; and three hundred people demonstrated at the Home Relief Bureau, demanding money for rent and nondiscriminatory work at union wages" (p. 258). Mark Solomon's meticulously researched *The Cry Was Unity* tells the exciting tale of Communist efforts to reconcile African American nationalism with working-class internationalism. Between 1917 and 1936, the far left played a major role in what was then known as the "Negro community." There the Communist Party (CP or CPUSA) surpassed all other radical groups in dynamism and, eventually, significance. In rich detail, Solomon narrates and analyzes the journey from the insular African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) to the ecumenical National Negro Congress (NNC). Throughout, the author proudly links modern multiculturalism to its Communist progenitors.

Solomon utilizes stateside primary and secondary sources, plus materials at the former Russian Center for Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History (RTtsKhIDNI), aided in Moscow by historians Galina Khartulary and Valery Klokov. Although print size in *The Cry Was Unity* taxes middle-aged eyes, it allows a treatment more comprehensive than the page count would suggest. Pithy passages enliven the text, and the author makes a greater effort toward balance than have many previous scholars.

In early 1919, before domestic Communist organizations had appeared, ABB head Cyril Briggs used his pan-Africanist journal, *The Crusader*, to release "the twentieth century global revolutionary tide" in black America. He argued capital "was not divided by prejudice or nationality," exploiting workers of every color (p. 7). Briggs understood that existing "trade unions were racist;" still, most African Americans were working-class. He ridiculed "Negro conservatism" as "pointless," since "blacks had nothing to conserve" (p. 8). He "found in African antiquity" Marx's "primitive communism" (p. 13). Subsequent ABB cooperation with "reds" brought Soviet alliance, patronage, and guidance. "Heretofore anonymous men and women" now possessed "an international stage where they would be taken seriously." For the first time, a white nation state's power was at the black liberation struggle's disposal (p. 16).

Such sentiments and actions infuriated Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the preeminent African American nationalist before Malcolm X. Garvey fixated on Briggs's light complexion, accused him of being "a white man" and excoriated Communists for allegedly wanting to smash government and destroy capital (p. 24). Briggs replied that "Garvey had confused capital with capitalism. The former was wealth, while the latter was control of that wealth by the few over the many. The ABB did not oppose government in principle; it simply opposed imperialist government." The Briggs-Garvey feud became "increasingly bitter and personal" (p. 25), and reached a public climax when the former sued for defamation. Their magistrate "had trouble understanding what was libelous about calling someone white," but nevertheless found for Briggs and "instructed Garvey to publish an apology" in his paper, *The Negro World*. Solomon observes the UNIA possessed an advantage among black workers that the ABB lacked: it "vibrantly expressed outrage at the dominant white society without directly and dangerously confronting the bourgeois order." Yet Garvey offered no effective response when Briggs reminded readers "that racial consciousness alone was not enough to win freedom in the modern world." There, power rests "partially on race," yet "centrally on corporate, class, national, and military forces" (p. 28). In a move that enhanced neither man's standing, Briggs "became a marginal source

for the government's effort to nail Garvey" for mail fraud (p. 26). Briggs "needed no urging" (p.25) to accept money from the Communists, who recognized "that the social distance between classes in the black community was far less than among whites." Soon the party's *Daily Worker* was likening "oppression of African Americans" to European imperialism (p. 31).

In 1922, African Americans made a significant impact on the Communist International (Comintern). That year its Fourth Congress heard Otto Huiswoud, an immigrant from the Dutch West Indies (now Surinam), argue that U.S. blacks could lead the "liberation movements of colored peoples" (p. 42). The gathering responded by creating a Negro Commission under him. Two years later, "native-born, Tuskegee-schooled" Lovett Fort-Whiteman eclipsed Huiswoud after writing an angry letter to Comintern chief Gregori Zinoviev.

Fort-Whiteman, the first African American to study in Moscow, contended Negro Communists "were seeking to undermine the influence of petty-bourgeois black leaders," but had received little tangible CPUSA help. He proposed an American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC) to achieve "working-class hegemony" in the community (p. 47). The Comintern obliged, soon anticipated "attendance of delegates from Africa and the Caribbean, and hoped that the congress would form a 'peasant section,' linking it with South Africa, Liberia, Angola, Kenya, the West Indies, the Philippines, and Brazil" into what Solomon calls a "global 'Negrotern"' (p. 49). By 1925, Fort-Whiteman served as "chief organizer of the Party's work among blacks" and had initiated a program to train ten students, fresh from U.S. ghettoes and new to the revolutionary cause, at KUTV, Moscow's anti-colonial University of the Toilers of the East (p. 51). Enraptured with the USSR, he "expended a good deal of energy" seeking, "at various times, invitations" to work there. He attended the Sixth Congress in Russia in 1928, and remained to "teach political science at the Cercerin Institute. He never returned to the United States and died shortly before World War II" (p. 58). In an endnote, Solomon writes that Fort-Whiteman "was reportedly jailed for a time during Stalin's purges" (p. 330).

The Cry Was Unity's most original contribution lies in its detailed treatment of a crucial, yet heretofore enshrouded, doctrine that emerged from the same congress. In 1928 Siberian Charles Nasanov and thirty-year-old black American Harry Haywood, a student in Russia for two years, offered a theory that surpassed all previous attempts to resolve the "contradiction between assimilation and separation" (p. 89). Negroes in the American South, set apart by a "common historical experience" of sharecropping, peonage, tenantry and segregation, "took on a distinct cultural and psychological makeup. They had become a 'nation within a nation,' whose equality could only be assured through self-determination." The theory, a "departure from traditional dogma," raised the "black movement to an exalted position in the Leninist pantheon: as an indispensable ally of proletarian revolution, and, moreover, as ...revolutionary in itself" (p. 70). The vision of "national oppression" propelled "Communists into a frenzy of struggle for equality and black liberation" (p. 87). They led early southern efforts toward unionization, which ignited violent racist and anti-labor resistance.

Meanwhile the Comintern in Moscow, and a reemergent Cyril Briggs at home, called on the CPUSA to look within for evidence of "white chauvinism" – which now constituted "a betrayal of revolutionary theory and practice" (p. 132). White proletarians "could never achieve" their goals while "racial division persisted. Blacks were not to be pitied or patronized; they were to be welcomed as indispensable allies in the battle to change the world" (p. 146). The search quickly led to the "ethnic groups that constituted the CP's largest constituency" (p. 137). Zeal to impress the black community soon resulted in mass trials with results predetermined by the very nature of the charges. Solomon explains some behavior by immigrants. "Beneath the surface of frenzied reactions to blacks who showed up at ethnic social events, one may glimpse not only a desire to protect group exclusiveness, but also the wish to express, however inarticulately, the adoption of 'American' ways." The author asserts that "the distinct contours of white racism, at least, had no analogue in their European experience" (p. 138). The passage leaves a reader puzzled over how to classify centuries of antisemitism in the Old World. Solomon reports that the trials did not impress black nationalists, and the larger Negro community considered the entire campaign "hopelessly sectarian." The campaign against white chauvinism, which had angered ethnics, had not brought a "flood of blacks into the Party" (p. 141).

Indeed, the New Deal's arrival in 1933, and the Comintern's Seventh World Congress in 1935, led to gradual abandonment of the Haywood-Nasanov thesis. By 1943, when party leader Earl Browder announced "African Americans had exercised self-determination by rejecting it," few eyebrows raised (p. 86). Meanwhile, the CPUSA had anticipated, and Moscow had announced in spectacular fashion, the famous Popular Front, a unity of all antifascist forces except ex-Communists. The party battled bravely for human rights in the Jim Crow

South, exposing courts that conducted legal "lynchings" on a business-as-usual basis. Communists were first to demonstrate against Depression-era hunger and unemployment. In the streets of the Negro community, they battled evictions. Despite official atheism, they respected African American "religious and cultural values" (p. 228). In Harlem, the world's largest black city, they achieved unprecedented acceptance. The CPUSA promoted female equality, and openly defied the social ban on intermarriage, a half-century before most of society gave the ideas lip service.

Although *The Cry Was Unity* lacks a well-developed conclusion, Solomon has promised a sequel. Accurately he acknowledges that the Communists "never won a steadfast white working-class majority to support black liberation." That, plus their "pariah status" and "relative powerlessness," explain why they could not convince" more blacks to "fully embrace their revolutionary vision" (p. 307).

This meticulously researched book presents a forceful account that surpasses all previous volumes on the subject. Its value is not enhanced, however, by gratuitous *ad hominem* attacks on Theodore Draper, founder of the scholarly study of the CPUSA (pp. xx-xxi). Such isolated polemics are reminiscent of argumentation that appeared in the 1980s, before Soviet sources opened to non-Communist and anti-Communist scholars. Unfortunately Solomon, while in Moscow, did not find former RtsKhIDNI files that reveal Lovett Fort-Whiteman's application to return to the United States, a request never granted. In *The Soviet World of American Communism*, also published in 1998, Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Kyrill M. Anderson reproduce English-language documents that denounce "Lovett Whiteman" for attempting to mislead "some of the Negro comrades," and for "Trotskyism" [2]. (Solomon did not have access to documents compiled by the Soviet political police, NKVD, revealing that Fort-Whiteman was sentenced to five years' internal exile, and that he died on January 13, 1939 in northeastern Siberia's Sevostlag labor camp, at age forty-four.) A final disappointment concerns the *The Cry Was Unity*'s failure to fully contextualize its account of African Americans into the party's larger history. Although the reader receives indications of the CPUSA's virtual destruction after 1945, nowhere does one find a hint of flaws within the American Communist movement on a scale grand enough to bode the impending disaster. Nevertheless, the book will stand as essential reading for anyone interested in African Americans and the Communist party before the Second World War.

Notes

[1]. The Scottsboro campaign was the defense, in part through worldwide publicity, of nine young, nonpolitical, African American men. They had been sentenced to death, for allegedly raping two white women on a freight train near Scottsboro, Alabama in 1931. See Dan Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[2]. Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) pp. 218- 227.

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