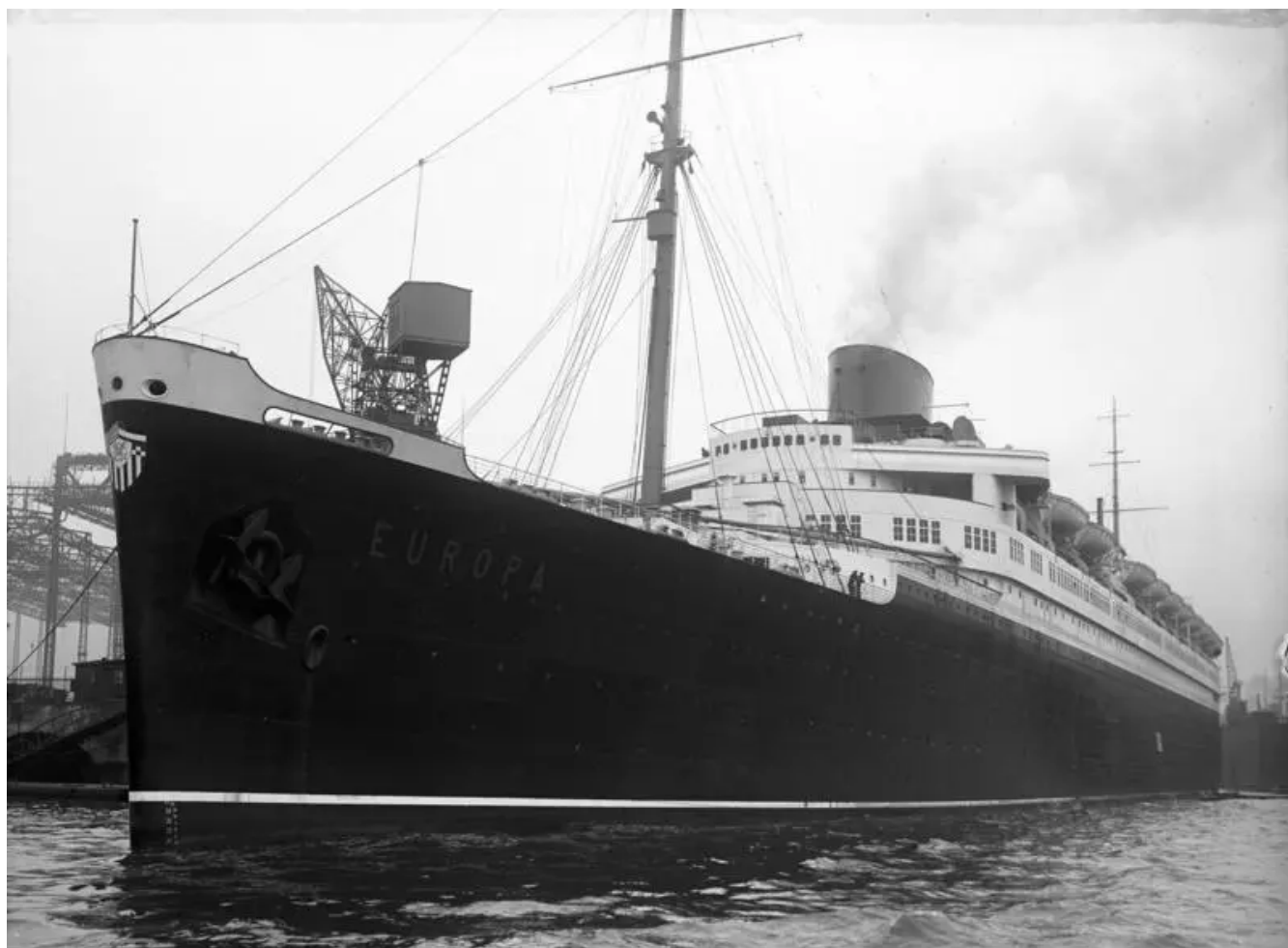


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# Comrades, We've Been Screwed!



One day in the summer of 1932, families sunbathing on a beach in Odessa, a southern port city of the Soviet Union, saw a sight new to them. Sprinting along the sand was “a dark amazon pursued by two or three of the darkest tallest and most giraffe-like males...all naked as birds and as frolicsome as Virginia hounds, diving like porpoises into the surf,” wrote an eyewitness, the American poet Langston Hughes.



Portrait of Langston Hughes. Photo by Gordon Parks / Library of Congress

These young Black Americans and Hughes were part of a group of 22 touring the Black Sea coast as guests of the German-Soviet film studio Meshrabpom. They were there to shoot a movie about Black American history that would use nearby locations as stand-ins for American cotton fields. The visitors held hopes that their movie, a production titled *Black and White*, would rank as a cinematic landmark and strike a blow against American racism.

The USSR was a land of topsy-turvy racial behavior. White Soviet citizens gave up seats on buses for the Americans, led them to the head of lines, eagerly sought to date them, and reserved prime seating for them in concert halls. Yet many of the group members sensed that they did not match the expectations Soviets held of Black Americans, that they were not dark or proletarian enough. The Black visitors had never experienced anything in the US like this mix of reactions. The group’s joyous dashes across the sands of Odessa, along with the magic of living freely in a worker’s paradise legally free of racism, preceded great disappointment. Their movie about American white supremacy, funded by international communism, was never made. But spending months in this land, a country not yet recognized by the government of the United States, would change their lives.

After the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in 1917 to create the world’s first socialist state, they focused their political outreach on the struggles of oppressed

people beyond their borders. In short order, The Communist International Comintern, an organization that advanced communism worldwide, made a commitment to the struggle for Black equality and declared Black Americans members of an oppressed nation with the right to determine their own fate. The goal was to eliminate segregation and other forms of racism in the U.S., which didn't endear communists to American white supremacists. The trial and communist-led defense of the Scottsboro Boys, falsely accused in 1931 of raping two white women and exonerated years later, further alarmed racists about any partnerships between Black Americans and the Communist Party.

Undeterred, the Comintern authorized the Meshrabpom Film Corporation of Workers' International to produce a propaganda movie about the tragedy of American capitalist racism. Enter James W. Ford, the Black vice presidential candidate who would run on the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) ticket in 1932. He visited the USSR at the end of 1931 and returned to the US with a description of the film Meshrabpom was planning.

The organization of the film would not have occurred without the energy of the five-foot-tall, chain-smoking Louise Thompson, 31, already an influential force in Black progressive politics and culture.

She had graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, and then worked for a few years at the New York School for Social Work. During the '20s she became an editorial assistant to Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. She went on to coordinate seminars on race and labor for the Congregational Educational Society but grew disenchanted with the program's patronizing approach. Thompson studied Marxism and, talented at bringing people together, established the Harlem chapter of the Friends of the Soviet Union in 1931.

Thompson heard about the Black and White production from Ford, who asked her to organize and go on the trip. She agreed to, though she worried about being away from her mother, who was terminally ill with cancer. The project appealed to her because of its promise to make the world aware of racial inequity

in the US; she believed the movie would follow Black American history from the beginnings of slavery to the hard lives of modern industrial workers.

So Thompson went to work. She mailed countless letters and press releases asking for financial support for the project and recruited young Black Americans to fill out the cast. But in the depths of the Great Depression, Thompson could not shake loose much money, not even enough to cover the cost of the cast's transportation to the USSR. And experienced stage and film actors backed away from covering their own travel expenses.

The young group she ultimately assembled included only two authentic actors mixed in with writers, journalists, students, social workers, office clerks, and a couple of laborers. Some decided to come along on a lark. Only one held a Communist Party membership. Years later, Thompson, speaking in an oral history interview, called them "non-actors, non-non-actors."

The two real actors, Sylvia Garner and Wayland Rudd, had significant stage experience. The group also included Loren Miller, an editor of the California Eagle Black newspaper; Dorothy West, a short story writer and Harlem Renaissance figure; Homer Smith, a postal clerk from Minneapolis who had driven efforts to integrate professional schools at the University of Minnesota; Henry Lee Moon, a reporter with the New York Amsterdam News; Ted Poston, one of Moon's reporting colleagues; and the baby of the company, 23-year-old Howard University graduate student Frank Montero. Thompson also succeeded in snagging her biggest target for the group, the literary giant Hughes, of whom Thompson felt "we were the best of friends and comrades."



Louise Thompson and Langston Hughes on board the SS Europa.

Certain American communists opposed the composition of the group. The cast "is definitely non-working class, bourgeois, poorly suited to the demands of the casting for the film, and without any signs of being a product of mass [recruiting] work among Negro workers," an officer with Workers International Relief

protested in a memo to CPUSA colleagues. It wouldn't be the last time these objections would arise.

Nevertheless the composition of the troupe did not change, and it was scheduled to leave New York City for Bremerhaven on June 14 aboard the ocean liner S.S. Europa. Homer Smith expressed the hopes of many in the group: "I yearned to stand taller than I had ever stood, to breathe total freedom in exhilarating gulps, to avoid all the hurts that were increasingly becoming the lot of men (and women) of color in the United States," he explained in a memoir he published decades later.

Louise Thompson felt similarly. "We were leaving this America, in a sense, searching for an alternative to a social system which possessed all of the means for feeding and clothing all its members but these means were in the hands of a few," she wrote in her unpublished autobiography. In addition to hearing of the absence of unemployment in the USSR, "we were told also that there was no racism practiced in the Soviet Union.... This was something new under the sun."

Hughes, acknowledged as a leader of the group despite his often-mischievous attitude – to Thompson, he referred to the Europa as "an ark" – regarded Wayland Rudd and Sylvia Garner, the experienced actors, as "the only really mature people in our group." The rest were youthful intellectuals eager to temporarily escape the racial strife of Depression Era-America and see Europe. Hughes later remembered in his memoir *I Wonder as I Wander* that nobody had yet seen the script for *Black and White* or knew much about the film.

The group disembarked the Europa at the German port of Bremerhaven and traveled to Berlin. That city, on the eve of Hitler's ascension to power, seemed dangerous and desperate. "We felt the city's poverty when prostitutes tried in broad daylight to disengage our young men from the women members," Thompson wrote. Yet all bars and restaurants welcomed Black customers. There were no whites-only establishments. In a Turkish-style coffee house, the dark-skinned server dressed in a Nubian turban and was overjoyed when he heard

group members speaking English. He declared himself a former Harlemiter and said, "Say, what's doing on Lenox Avenue?"

The next leg of their trip was a beautiful Baltic Sea voyage from Stettin (now the Polish city of Szczecin) to Helsinki. After a day in the cafes of Helsinki on June 24, the group members marveled at the midnight sun as they boarded a late-night sleeper train bound for Russia, "the land where race prejudice was reported taboo," Hughes observed. It had taken nearly two weeks, but the Black and White troupe was nearing its destination.

With the arrival of morning, the train reached the Soviet frontier. A red streamer over the tracks telegraphed the message, "WORKERS OF ALL LANDS UNITE." The train slowed to a crawl, and soldiers from several of the far-flung Soviet republics stood on the platform in groups. Their faces were brown, white, and many shades in between. Hughes leaped off the train and scooped up a handful of Russian soil in reverence. Some group members kissed the ground. The group with its 100 bags of luggage changed trains at the border and proceeded again, finally coming to the station in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), where the group members could not believe what awaited them. A brass band played, the crowd sang "The Internationale," and Soviet officials welcomed the Black Americans with speeches.

A banquet followed, and the troupe was stuffed with soup, roast chicken, ice cream, and more – difficult dishes to come by in the midst of a national famine that killed as many as 10 million Soviet citizens.

The group toured Leningrad and left for Moscow the next day. Several Black American expatriates were in the crowd among the flashing cameras that greeted the group's arrival in the USSR's largest city. One, a former actress named Emma Harris, exclaimed, "Bless God! Lord! I'm sure glad to see some Negroes! Welcome! Welcome! Welcome!" A fleet of cars whisked away the visitors, and Russians lined the streets to cheer the Black Americans as they neared their new home, the luxurious Grand Hotel, just a block from Red Square.

The Grand, exasperatingly, had no toilet paper because of a national shortage. But it had much else: room service, food in large quantities, plush furnishings, and a bar nearby where a band played jazz – terribly, however. The hotel became the home base of the Black Americans as they awaited the start of their filmmaking duties. Thompson spent hours gossiping and cooking with Hughes, Miller, and Matt Crawford, who shared a room with pre-czarist decor. Although there would be no work for the cast to do for weeks, the Americans received 400 rubles a month from Meschrabpom, an amount roughly equivalent to \$1,320 today. They had money to burn. “I get a wave for two rubles, fifty kopecks,” Thompson informed her mother via letter of her hair salon treatments. “So you see I am not missing many of the comforts of home,” punctuating her point by drawing a happy face.

Other members of the group found different ways to occupy themselves. Sylvia Garner became a singing star on Soviet radio, although she had to excise all references to God, the Lord, and Jesus in the spirituals she sang. (She once tweaked the censors by singing “dog” instead of “God.”) Ted Poston, one of the journalists in the troupe, amazed Russian girls with his dance moves; two Russian women fought in the street over the attention of a pair of the visiting Americans; and Homer Smith observed that “most of the girls from the cast were dated for days in advance.” Several romantic affairs blossomed and fizzled, including one failed tryst that ended with a Black and White cast member disrupting the Grand Hotel with screams after drinking poison. Some in the group “went wild,” Thompson admitted years later. “I mean, it’s what young people gonna do.”



At an event hosted by members of the Bolshoi Ballet, the renowned film director Sergei Eisenstein approached the shy Dorothy West with a request for her to dance, not with him, but for him. She politely refused, but Eisenstein persisted in his request for a performance, eventually angrily

Ted Poston (left, during the resumption of his journalism career after the trip), was a hit with Russians awestruck by his dancing. Photo by Alfred T. Palmer/Office of War Information/Library of Congress

demanding, "I am the great Sergei Eisenstein, and you will dance for me!"

West bolted from the room in terror, and four of the Bolshoi dancers followed and comforted her. "We sang Russian songs all the way to my hotel," West

remembered, "they lustily singing the words, I joyously da-da-da-ing with them, my tears dried, my heart amended, the evening restored." Eisenstein later apologized to her.

But the Black Americans found few such unhappy moments in the USSR. "Here we come from a country where everything is denied us – work, protection of life and property, freedom to go where we will and to live where we will – where we are despised and humiliated at every turn," Thompson observed in her autobiography. "And here we are accorded every courtesy – free to go where we will and eagerly welcomed – given every opportunity to enjoy ourselves and to travel – free to pursue any work that we choose."

Soon after their arrival, the Americans met with representatives of Meshrabpom. The Soviets took a look at the film's cast and wondered if there had been a mistake. First of all, these visitors did not seem like a group of rough-handed sharecroppers or stevedores, the kind of worker-comrades the Russians expected. And second, the Russians did not believe all of their actors, who varied in skin color, were Black.

"Russians, as do most Europeans I think, think Negro means literally black, and our group has been the subject of much discussion on this point," Thompson wrote to her mother. "We have had to argue at great lengths to tell them that we are all Negroes, and to try to explain just what being a Negro means in the United States." One Russian complained, "We needed genuine Negroes and they sent us a bunch of mixed bloods." Other misconceptions would soon arise.

Langston Hughes alone was earning his salary during the group's initial weeks in the USSR. Brought along as a writer to assist in the fashioning of an English-



language screenplay, he met with Meshrabpom staffers at the company's studios in a former czarist-era nightclub at the edge of Moscow.

A Russian screenwriter had created an eventful story of racial prejudice and labor unrest amidst the steel mills of Birmingham, Alabama, without ever having visited America. The outlandishness of the screenplay startled Hughes, he reported years later, leaving him dismayed. "I was crying because the writer meant well, but knew so little about his subject and the result was a pathetic hodgepodge of good intentions and faulty facts," Hughes recalled.

Not wanting to alarm his friends, Hughes kept quiet about the absurdity of the screenplay. But he laid out its faults to the Meshrabpom executives. The flawed scenes were numerous: a party at which a wealthy white man offers to dance with his Black servant, events involving rich Black owners of radio stations, and the rescue of striking Black steelworkers by white workers who rush to Alabama from the North. He explained that the story amounted to a fantasy and was broken beyond revision. When Hughes refused to attempt a rewrite, the Meshrabpom officials agreed to produce a new screenplay – retaining, however, the musical numbers from the first script.

Unaware of Hughes's script concerns, the group was eager to meet the man hired to direct the film, a red-faced German documentarian named Karl Junghans. He knew little Russian or English and had to speak with his cast through an interpreter. He was ignorant about Black Americans, the American South, steelworkers, and labor unions, but was enthusiastic to create a great film.

While awaiting the resolution of the script problem, Junghans found a white American to cast in the important role of labor organizer among the story's Black steelworkers. He signed on John Bovingdon, a 43-year-old former economics professor and classical dancer who happened to be in the USSR. But the other cast members doubted Bovingdon was a good choice and thought the person playing the union organizer "at least should look a little like a worker, and not walk like a dancer," Hughes noted.

Though the script was still in limbo, Meschrapom wanted the cast to assemble for a rehearsal of the film's planned musical numbers. Junghans seemed to believe that musicality and knowledge of traditional Negro spirituals was automatic in any group of Black Americans, but with the exception of Garner and a few others, the 22 visitors were disastrous as singers. "Langston couldn't even carry a tune," Thompson remembered.

When the director ran the cast through traditional songs like "All God's Chillun Got Shoes" and "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," the "discordant sounds that arose from that first rehearsal in Moscow failed to fool even a European," Hughes wrote. Garner soothed Junghans' anxiety by launching into a recital of well-sung traditional songs.

After that rehearsal, the movie project ground to a halt. On August 3, the Soviets sent the restless Americans for a break to the Black Sea and Odessa with its tempting beaches. The journalist Henry Lee Moon, who had remained in Moscow to receive some medical care, soon rejoined the group in an agitated state. Moon gathered together the cast, waited for a dramatic silence, and announced to them: "Comrades, we've been screwed!"

Unknown to the group, a white American was working behind the scenes to sabotage their efforts. Colonel Hugh Cooper, a civil engineer with expertise in supervising large construction projects around the world, was in the USSR as a technical advisor for the building of a massive hydroelectric power station across the Dnieper River in what is now Ukraine.



Полк. Купер — глава американской консультации на Днепрострое и А. В. Винтер  
наблюдают за ходом работ

Фото-кинолабор. Днепростроя

American Hugh Cooper, left, surveyed work on the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station in the Ukraine in 1932, around the time he scuttled the production of "Black and White." Photo by Dniprogess/Dniprostroy/Creative Commons

The Soviet government would award him the Order of the Red Banner of Labor for his efforts but Cooper was intent on influencing Russia in another way. When he learned of the presence of the group of Black Americans and their purpose, he rushed to Moscow to convince Joseph Stalin to cancel the film. Stalin was away, so Cooper, who disapproved of the movie's racial theme, met with Soviet Premier Vyacheslav Molotov and threatened to stop work on the power station. The film was abandoned within 24 hours.

A US consular official revealed that Cooper “had been particularly agitated over the reception and kindly treatment which American Negroes have had in Russia.”

In Odessa, Moon showed the group a newspaper that reported the cancellation of the movie. He believed Meshrabpom and the Soviets had sold out the Black Americans in exchange for a promise from the US to give diplomatic recognition to the USSR. In a contentious meeting with the Americans, a representative of Meshrabpom contradicted Moon’s claims and denied any political reasons for the postponement. Problems with the screenplay necessitated a postponement of production, he said.

This assertion was not true. A white American wanted to stop a direct assault on racism within his country’s borders. The troupe returned to Moscow, debating their course of action, and decided to plead for the continuance of the film project at a meeting of the Comintern. “Several old Bolsheviks” (as Hughes called them) told the group that Meshrabpom had acted incompetently and would be investigated, but the movie was off for now.

Thompson was certain that three members of the group – Moon, Lewis, and Poston – would be “writing and trying their best to make it appear that they and all of the black people in the world have been betrayed.” True to her prediction, the three sent an angry letter to Stalin and issued public statements blasting the Soviets. They called the project’s abandonment “a base compromise, comparable to an ignoble concession to race prejudice,” and likened it to the kind of racist behavior the communists often ascribed to “the Christian Church, the Second Socialist International and other social-fascist organizations.”

Having cancelled the movie, the Soviets paid off the Americans in full and offered them a choice of paid passage home or a complimentary tour of the USSR’s Asian republics. Thompson, Hughes, Miller, and others opted for the tour, while the members of the group angriest at the Soviets chose to leave for the US.

Regardless of the film’s fate, Thompson was glad to have traveled to the USSR. “We will have had four months in the Soviet Union, opportunities to travel all over



Louise Thompson, seen here in Berlin decades after the “Black and White” trip, was involved with Black progressive politics and anti-communism in the US for the rest of her life. Photo from the German Federal Archive.

the country, the best of food, the best of hotel accommodations, and have been paid our entire round trip fare – and we haven’t worked a damned day,” she wrote. “It’s the most amazing thing that ever happened to me in my whole life.” She might have remained longer in the country, but she received news that her mother’s health had worsened, and she went home in November 1932. Her mother died the following February.

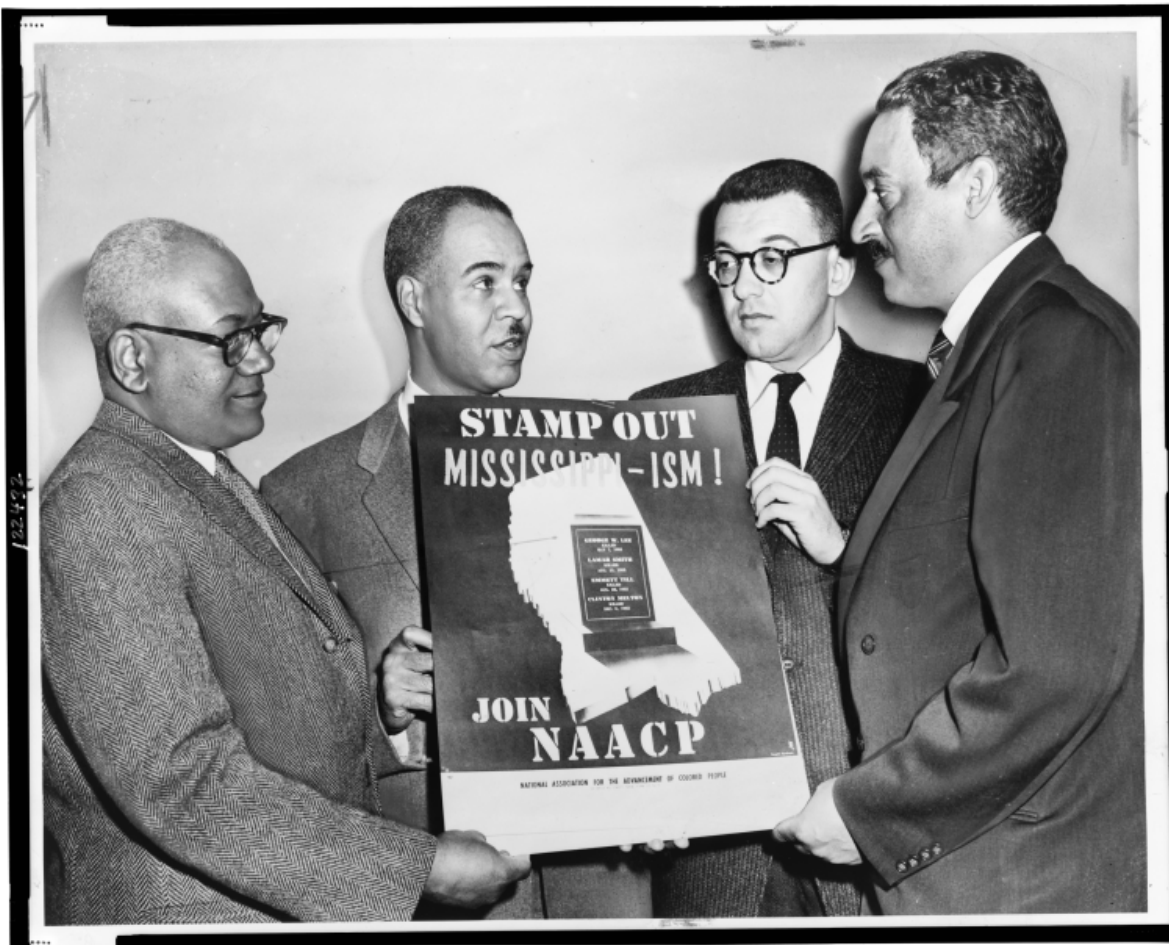
Nine months later, the United States extended diplomatic recognition to the USSR, giving the Soviets access to American loans and equipment crucial to Russia’s ambitious plans for industrialization. The USSR agreed to end all propaganda critical of the policies and social order of the US.

Nevertheless the Black and White trip deeply influenced the Black and White cast and propelled many to notable achievements. “When

he came back, that’s how he really got into civil rights work, because he saw in the rest of the world everyone had equal and civil rights,” recalled Edward Miller, Loren Miller’s son. The elder Miller earned his law degree, worked on US Supreme Court cases that outlawed restrictive covenants in housing and school segregation, and served as a California Superior Court judge.

Thompson went on to marry William Patterson, a CPUSA organizer, and was a lifelong activist for civil rights and social causes. She was also the last surviving member of the Black and White cast, dying in 1999 at the age of 97.

Langston Hughes continued traveling around the Soviet Union for almost a year before returning to the US. He translated the work of the Russian writer Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose poem “Black and White” had provided the title of the movie.



Henry Lee Moon (far left) went on to work in the leadership of the NAACP, alongside the likes of Thurgood Marshall (far right). Photo from the New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection/Library of Congress

recent years, some scholars have questioned Hughes' description of the screenplay draft that Meschrapom let him read in 1932. A Black and White script, written by Georgii Eduardovich Grebner and archived in Russia, includes none of the flaws that Hughes said made him vacillate between laughing and crying. Nor does an English version of the script, possibly translated from a draft by Karl Junghans and housed in the archives of Emory University.

Junghans went back to Germany, performed an ideological somersault, and made documentaries for the Nazis. He moved to Hollywood, found no work there, and became a gardener for Berthold Brecht and other fellow émigrés in California. When he returned again to Germany, his reputation recovered and he won a lifetime achievement award from the German motion picture academy.



As for the other cast members, Henry Lee Moon and Ted Poston continued their careers in journalism. Dorothy West became a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance literary movement.

Ultimately several members of the troupe – Wayland Rudd, Homer Smith, and Lloyd Patterson – decided to remain permanently in the USSR. Smith served as the only Black reporter on the Eastern Front during World War II and returned to the US in 1962. Rudd died in the USSR in 1952 after a distinguished theatrical career and Lloyd Patterson appeared in Soviet films before dying during the German bombing of Moscow in 1942.

Montero, the baby of the troupe, reflected on the importance of the experience shortly before his death in 1998 at the age of 87. He said the saga of the ultimately fruitless trip to the USSR and the failed filming of *Black and White* would have served as the basis of a movie he'd love to watch.

He later wrote of the adventure that no "master of cloak and dagger and international intrigue tales could conjure up a plot so close to the real world."

*Edited by **Peter Bailey-Wells**, designed by **Anagha Srikanth**, funded by **Sunday Long Read members**.*



One of the Harlem Renaissance's longest-living writers, Dorothy West's literary career spanned nearly 60 years. She died in 1998. Photo by Judith Sedwick/Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America/Creative Commons

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