

Chapter 7

The Lenin School

Following my summer in the Crimea, I returned to Moscow in the fall of 1927 to attend the Lenin School. The school was located off the Arbot on what is now called Ambassadors' Row, a few blocks down the inner ring of boulevards from the KUTVA dormitories.

The Lenin School, which was set up by the Comintern, opened in Moscow in May 1926. The plans for the school, formally called the International Lenin Course, had been reported on the previous year by Bela Kun, then head of the Educational (Agitprop) Department of the Comintern. Accordingly, the school was to train sixty to seventy qualified students both in theoretical and practical subjects, which included observations of Soviet trade unions and collective farm work. It offered a full three year course and a short course of one year.

It was a school of great prestige and influence within the international communist movement. Its students, mainly party functionaries of district and section level and some secondary national leaders who could be spared for the period of study, were generally at a higher level of political development than the students at KUTVA.¹

I was the first Black to be assigned to the school. Others followed later; including H.V. Phillips in 1928, Leonard Patterson in the thirties, and Nzula – a Zulu intellectual and national secretary of the South African Communist Party.

The American students who entered the Lenin School in the fall 1927 were an impressive lot. They included prominent Party leaders from the national and district level. Outstanding in the group was Charles Krumbein, a member of the Central Committee of the Party and formerly in charge of trade union work in Chicago and district organizer for Chicago. A steamfitter by trade and a charter member of the Party, he was one of a group of young trade unionists who made up the Chicago Party leadership in the twenties. They were the best representatives of the radical tradition of that city's labor movement.

Modesty and honesty were hallmarks of Charlie's character, and he was a man of exceptional organizational and administrative ability. He was a founder of the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL) and played a key role in the Chicago Federation of Labor.

We developed a close and lasting friendship, and I learned a lot from him about Party history and the background of the revolutionary movement in the United States.

Margaret Cowl, Charlie's wife, was a capable Party leader and organizer. She had worked in the TUEL and was recognized [particularly for her leadership in the struggle for unity of Pennsylvania's anthracite coal miners in 1927. Later she was to head up the Party's Women's Commission and play an active role in the movement for a Woman's Charter, a broad united front movement launched in 1936 which asserted the rights of women to full equality in all spheres of activity. Margaret also energetically mobilized support for the struggles of women wage workers in the needle trades, textile, electrical and other industries.

Joseph Zack had emigrated to the U.S. from Eastern Europe shortly after the First World War. Active in the first communist organization in New York, he had been section organizer of Yorktown and served on the Party's Trade Union Commission. Zack was one of Foster's leading trade union cadres in New York and had also been one of the first New York Party members assigned to work among Blacks. He was a bitter enemy of Lovestone, but was also critical of Foster. In 1932, he was expelled from the Party for refusing to abide by democratic centralism and by the forties had become an informant for the Dies Committee on Un-American Propaganda Activities.

Morris Childs, a Chicagoan, was a leader in trade union and Party work. He became Illinois D.O. in the thirties at the same time that I was chairman of the Cook County Committee and secretary of the Southside region. While at the Lenin School he served as the representative of the American students to the School Bureau.

Rudy Baker, a Yugoslav comrade who later became D.O. in Pittsburgh and in Detroit, and Lena Davis (Sherer), a good friend of mine who was organizational secretary for New York in the thirties, were also at the school. All of these students were members of the Foster group. As far as I can recall, the sole Lovestone supporter in our class was Gus Sklar of Chicago, a leader in the Russian Federation.

Poor Gus was alone in the midst of Fosterites, and it must have been an unhappy experience for him. When Lovestone was expelled from the Party in 1929, Gus remained in the Soviet Union and never returned to the U.S. He served as an officer in the Red Army and

was killed in the defense of Moscow during the Second World War.

The American students at the Lenin School were all experienced leaders of the U.S. Party. One might ask why so many were spared from U.S. work at a time when the Party's position among the masses was so weak.

Actually, these students were victims of Lovestone's purge of the Party apparatus following his victory at the Fifth Party Convention in 1927. Part of Lovestone's strategy was to weaken his opposition on the home front by "exiling" some of its leaders to the Lenin School.

His plan backfired however. In Moscow, these "exiles," as they jokingly called themselves, were to become an effective lobby against Lovestone both in the Comintern and in the CPSU. The political winds were changing.

From the ashes of the defeated Trotskyist "left" rose an equally dangerous, organized and secret rightist opposition headed by none other than Lovestone's patron in the Comintern, Nikolai Bukharin. On the home front, this rightist opposition had its social base among the capitalists, the landlords and the kulaks (upper peasantry) and pushed a line that would have lopsidedly developed industry along consumer lines, to the detriment of the vast masses of Soviet people. Internationally, Bukharin greatly underestimated the war danger and the potentially revolutionary situation then developing on a world scale. At the same time, he greatly overestimated the strength and resiliency of imperialism.

The Lenin School students helped to legitimize the anti-Lovestone struggle in the U.S. Party by linking it up with the fight against the right deviation, then only in its incipient stage. The Lenin School was to become a strong point in the fight against this danger.

There were several other American students who had entered the Lenin School the year before. This group included Clarence Hathaway, Tom Bell, Max Salzman and Carl Reeves (the son of I Mother Bloor).² Of this group, Hathaway had the most imposing credentials. A machinist from Minneapolis and one of the leading people in the Trade Union Education League, Hathaway proved to be a valuable asset in the Party's trade union work.

He was a fine organizer and speaker, particularly effective in debates, and combined these talents with a good grasp of Marxist-Leninist theory. Clearly destined for top leadership in the Party, he

later served as D.O. of the New York District, became an editor of the *Daily Worker* and a member of the Political Bureau. Tom Bell, Hathaway's close friend, remained in the Soviet Union, married a Russian woman and died sometime before World War II.

William Kruse of Chicago was the principal Lovestonite in the school. For a brief period he filled in as acting rep from the Party to the Comintern in the absence of a permanent Party rep. Later, he was D.O. in Chicago under Lovestone's leadership and was expelled from the Party with Lovestone in 1929.

The students were organized at the school by language groups, as we had been at KUTVA. In this case, the languages were English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian and, later, Chinese. The whole school was a collective, comprising students, teachers, administrators and employees. The leading body was the Party Bureau, which included delegates from the various groups, including the employees. All students transferred membership from their home party to the CPSU, and were directly subject to its discipline. Party meetings were held about once a month.

Our rector was a handsome, energetic woman named Kursanova. She was a leading communist educator and was married to the old Bolshevik propagandist and CC member, E. Yaroslavsky. She was about forty at the time and had an impressive background, including civil war experiences as a machine-gunner in a detachment of Siberian partisans. Kursanova had also been a delegate to the Bolshevik Conference in April 1917 which adopted Lenin's famous April Theses.³

In addition to the Americans, others in the English-speaking section included British, Irish, Australians, a New Zealander, two Chinese, two Japanese and two Canadians – Leslie Morris and Stewart Smith. The British group included Springhall, Tanner, Black (a Welshman), Margaret Pollitt and George Brown. My special friend among the British was Springhall, known to all as "Springy," with whom I roomed at the Lenin School.

Springy was a British naval veteran of the First World War. He had come from a poor family and his parents had chosen him for a naval career. This latter act, it seemed, was a common practice among British lower class families with several sons. At the age of twelve, therefore, he had been "given" to His Majesty's Navy to be trained as a sailor. He served through the First World War and after the Armistice was involved in a mutiny or near-mutiny among

members of the fleet who protested being sent to Leningrad to intervene against the Bolshevik Revolution. At the time, Springy was about twenty-one years old. As a result of the mutiny, he was cashiered from the Navy. Apparently, the admiralty was deterred from taking any harsher measures against the mutineers because of the widespread sympathy their action had evoked among British workers.

Springy was popular with everybody, particularly among the women on the technical staff. After leaving the Lenin School, he returned to England where he rose rapidly in Party leadership. He also fought in Spain as a member of the Fifteenth International Brigade and was wounded at Jarama.

At the beginning of World War II, he served as organizational secretary of the British Party. During the early stages of the war, Springy was charged by the Churchill government with subversive activity among the armed forces. This was during the period prior to the German invasion of the Soviet Union, when the war was still an imperialist war and we communists opposed it.

There was no defense against the charge of subversion in wartime England, and Springy was sentenced to seven years in prison. After his release, he went to China, where he did editorial work on English language publications until his death from cancer in 1953. Springy died in a Moscow hospital, where he had been sent by his Chinese comrades to make sure that everything possible could be done to save him. His ashes were returned to China and interred with a memorial stone in the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery outside Peking.

Springy introduced me to the gifted English writer, historian and Marxist scholar, Ralph Fox. A promising young theoretician, Fox was then researching material for one of his books at the Marx-Engels Institute. He died at the age of thirty-seven, fighting the fascists on the Cordova Front during the Spanish Civil War. By the end of his brief life span, he had already published a tremendous body of work.⁴

I got a lot out of my friendship with Fox. Profiting greatly from his wide-ranging knowledge, I often consulted him on theoretical and political questions which arose during my stay at the school.

Springy and I were frequent visitors at the apartment of Fox and his wife Midge. It was there that I first met Karl Radek. A Polish expatriate, he had been an active leader in the Polish Social Demo-

cratic Party and a member of the Zimmerwald Left (those internationalists who broke off from the Second International in 1915 and were instrumental in founding the Third International). In 1915-16, Radek – along with Rosa Luxemburg – publicly disagreed with Lenin on the question of self-determination of subject nations.⁵ Radek later changed his position and fully united with the Bolshevik point of view in 1917.

Radek was part of the group that returned with Lenin to Russia via Germany in the famous “sealed coach.”⁶ He was a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee and Politburo. At the time that I met him in 1928, Radek was still under a shadow politically. He had been a leading member of the Trotsky-Zinoviev opposition and was expelled from the CPSU along with the other leaders of the bloc at the Sixteenth Congress of the CPSU in December 1927. Exiled to the Urals, he publicly repudiated his earlier position and was readmitted to the Party a few months later in 1928. He was assigned as editor of *Izvestia* and later became the chief foreign affairs commentator in the leading Soviet papers. He was also a member of the Soviet delegation to the Comintern.

Radek, as I remember him, was a little man, appearing to be somewhat of a dandy in his English tweed jacket, plus-fours and cane. But to me, the most striking thing about him was his beard. It stretched from ear to ear, under his chin and cheeks, giving him a simian look.

His English, though accented, was fluent. When we first met, he immediately engaged me in a conversation about conditions of Blacks in the United States, which branched off into questions of Black literature, writers and the Harlem Renaissance. To my amazement, it was clear that he knew more about the latter subject than I did. I was embarrassed when he asked my opinion about certain Black writers with whom he was familiar but whom I had never even read. I found out later that Claude McKay had been a sort of a protégé of Radek’s during the poet’s stay in the Soviet Union.

In 1937, along with several others in the Trotskyite “Left Opposition,” Radek was convicted of treason, of acting as an “agency” of German and Italian fascism and giving assistance to those who might invade the Soviet Union. He was sent to prison where he died in the forties.⁷

Springy introduced me to many other young Britons in Moscow: such men as William Rust, who later became editor of the

British Worker, Walter Tapsell, editor of the *Young Worker*; and George Brown. Both Brown and Tapsell were in my brigade in the Spanish Civil War and were killed in battle. Brown was killed at Brunete while I was there.

Our English-speaking section at the Lenin School included five young Irishmen, all members of the Irish Workers League, a communist-oriented group organized by Big Jim Larkin in 1923. It seems that the Irish Communist Party, founded in 1921 by Young Roderick Connolly (son of James Connolly), had collapsed.⁸ I was told that its failure was due to a lack of Marxist-Leninist theory and the inability of its members to relate their views on socialism to the specific conditions in Ireland. But there was certainly no lack of revolutionary enthusiasm and motivation among the young people I met at the Lenin School, some of whom had been members of the Irish Communist Party. The group had been sent to the Lenin School as a step towards rebuilding the Irish Party.

All five were protégés of the famous Irish revolutionary, Big Jim Larkin – most definitely a man of action and organization, not of theory. A tall, bulky man with a huge, hawk-like nose and bushy eyebrows, Larkin was one of the most colorful figures of the Irish labor movement. From his base among Dublin dockworkers, his activities as a labor leader had ranged over three continents – from the British Isles, to Argentina, to the U.S. – and at the time that I met him, spanned more than three decades. He had been a founding member of the U.S. Party and was a member of both the Executive Committees of the Communist International and the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU or the Profintern). He was often in Moscow, where I saw him frequently.

The Irish students came from the background of the 1916 Easter Rebellion and the revolutionary movement reflected in the lives of men like Larkin and James Connolly. Among them were Sean Murray and James Larkin, Jr. (Big Jim's son).⁹ All of them had been active in the post-war independence and labor struggles. I was closest to Murray, the oldest of the group, who was a roommate of mine.

This was my first encounter with Irish revolutionaries and their experiences excited me. As members of oppressed nations, we had a lot in common. I was impressed by their idealism and revolutionary ardor and their implacable hatred of Britain's imperialist rulers, as well as for their own traitors. But what impressed me most about

them was their sense of national pride – not of the chauvinistic variety, but that of revolutionaries aware of the international importance of their independence struggle and the role of Irish workers.

Then too, they were a much older nation. Their fight against Britain had at that time been going on for 750 years. They were fond of quoting the observations of Marx and Engels on the Irish movement, such as Marx's letter to Engels in which he said "English reaction in England had its roots in the subjugation of Ireland."¹⁰ Another favorite was: "No nation can be free if it oppresses other nations."¹¹

But most of all, they liked to point out Lenin's defense of the Easter Uprising in his reply to Karl Radek, who had called the rebellion a putsch and discounted the significance of the struggle of small nations in the epoch of imperialism. Lenin admonished Radek, stating that "a struggle capable of going to the lengths of insurrection and street fighting, of breaking down the iron discipline of the army and martial law," on the doorstep of the imperialist metropolis itself, would be a blow against imperialism more significant than that in a remote colony.¹²

I was shortly to find these observations applicable to the liberation movement of U.S. Blacks. As a result of my association with the Irish, I became deeply interested in the Irish question, seeing in it a number of parallels to U.S. Blacks. In retrospect, I am certain that this interest heightened my receptivity to the idea of a Black nation in the United States.

TEACHERS AND CLASSES

The teaching method at the school was a combination of lectures and discussions. About once a week the instructor would give a lecture to the entire English-speaking group, all twenty-five or thirty of us. Readings would be assigned, and when material was not available in English, it would be translated especially for us. I had one advantage in this regard because by this time I could read Russian fluently. Following the lecture, the instructor would delineate a number of sub-topics. Several days later, we would all get together again and one person from each group would report on its work. The instructors were often available for consultation during the time the groups were discussing and researching their topics.

There were no grades given, nor were there any examinations. At the end of the term we would have evaluation sessions, where

everyone met and discussed each other's work, including that of the teachers. It was a process of comradely criticism and self-criticism.

I found the classes exciting and challenging and the students on the whole sharp and on a high political level. I was under pressure to keep up. The English in general seemed to be a notch above most of us in political economy. This, I believe, was due to the existence of a large number of Labour Party schools which were spread throughout Britain.

Our instructor for Marxist political economy was Alexandrov, an economist for the Gosplan, the state planning agency. In our class, he was often challenged on some aspect of Marxian economics. He would often have sharp exchanges with one of the British students, I believe it was Black, over differences in interpretations of Marxian economics.

Black was a perfect foil for Alexandrov, who seemed to enjoy these tilts and invited the whole class to participate. Summing up the discussion, Alexandrov would brand Black's position as "undialectical, mechanistic, and rooted in vulgar economism and Fabianism." Black was stubborn, however, and prodded by Alexandrov, kept up his critical attitude for the whole first term. It was only during the evaluations at the end of the term that Black conceded that some of his positions had been in error.

Perhaps the most prominent among my teachers was Ladislaus Rudas, a noted Hungarian Marxist philosopher and scholar. Like many Hungarian intellectuals, he spoke several languages fluently. He had been a leader of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet and had come to Moscow along with Bela Kun and the other Hungarian refugees. He taught historical and dialectical materialism and his class was one of the most interesting. It presented history, my favorite subject, but with a different content: a Marxist-Leninist interpretation, portraying not just the role of individuals but of classes.

We had lengthy discussions on the French Revolution; the petty bourgeois dictatorship under Robespierre and the Jacobins; Saint Just and the extreme left, the Thermidor and Napoleon – "the man on the white horse." The English Revolution and Cromwell, the Levellers, the Long Parliament. The Dutch revolution and Prince Egmont. We had extended discussions on the American revolutions – the War of Independence, the Civil War and Reconstruction.

These discussions brought out our lack of knowledge of our own U.S. history; there was a complete absence of materials which

presented U.S. history from a Marxist standpoint. All I can remember is the so-called Marxist analysis in the works of James ONeal (*The Workers in American History*) and A.M. Simons's *Social Forces in American History*.

The former I never read, but the work by Simons stands out in my memory for its gratuitous slur on U.S. Blacks. Simons claimed that the Black man did not revolt against slavery during the Civil War: "His inaction in time of crisis, his failure to play any part in the struggle that broke his shackles, told the world that he was not of those who to free themselves would strike a blow."¹³

I had read about the slave revolts of Gabriel, Nat Turner, and John Brown's heroic raid on Harper's Ferry with his band of whites, free Blacks and escaped slaves. I knew of the role of Black soldiers in the Civil War who had to overcome the opposition of the Union Army in order to fight. Simons's book skipped over all of this.

I had come across Charles and Mary Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization*. The Beards were economic determinists who had characterized the Civil War as the Second American Revolution. The idea seemed novel at the time, all of which points up how widespread had been the distortion of the period by U.S. bourgeois historians.

My sub-group, which included Springy and the Irishman Sean Murray, had chosen the Civil War and the Reconstruction period as our subject, with myself as the reporter. Our group had long discussions, after which we consulted Rudas, who by that time had evidently done some homework of his own on the matter. He called our attention to the writings of Marx and Engels, their correspondence on the Civil War, and Marx's series of articles in the *New York Herald Tribune*.¹⁴ After the discussions, I submitted a paper to the class, which evoked considerable discussion. On the whole it was well-received by my fellow classmates and commended by Rudas.

Perhaps our most interesting and stimulating course was on Leninism and the history of the CPSU, taught by the historian I. Mintz. A former Red Army officer, he was at the time assigned to work on a history of the CPSU. Mintz was a young Ukrainian Jew, a soft-spoken and mild-mannered little man. He had a way of illustrating his subject through his own personal experiences during the Revolution and the Civil War in the Ukraine. His appearance contrasted sharply with his role and bloody experiences in the battle for the Ukraine. His was a thrilling story, involving a meteoric rise

from leader of partisans to commander of a Red Army brigade. They had fought against a whole array of anti-Soviet and interventionist forces: the White Guardist Deniken; the Cossack Hepmans, Kornilov and Kaledin; Makhno's anarchists (who were sometimes with and sometimes against the Red Army); General Petlura and sundry gangs of marauders and pogromists; and the remnants of the German garrisons in the Ukraine.

In connection with our studies of the Bolshevik agrarian policy during the Civil War, Mintz told us of his involvement in the settling of the question of land redistribution in a Ukrainian district. This district had been reconquered by his Red Army unit from Denikin in the early winter of 1920. He gave us a general rundown of the agrarian situation at the time, the class forces in the countryside, their shifting alignment during the course of the Revolution, and the evolution of Bolshevik agrarian policy.

Kerensky's provisional government had done nothing to solve the agrarian problem, to relieve the land hunger of the masses of peasantry. Though Kerensky's program had promised confiscation of the big estates, once in power, the government reneged on even that level of reform.

The Bolsheviks exhorted the peasants to await the decision of the Constituent Assembly. Thus, at the time of the outbreak of the Revolution, the vast majority of the cultivatable land was still concentrated in the estates of the big landlords. The peasantry, constituting four-fifths of the population of the old Czarist Empire, was composed of three different strata. The well-to-do peasant not only owned enough land to support himself in good fashion, but also often hired labor to work his land. This group comprised only about four to five percent of the total. The poor peasant was without sufficient land to support himself and his family and often hired himself out as a laborer to the landlord or to a well-to-do peasant. The landless peasant subsisted entirely from the sale of his labor to the landlord or well-to-do peasant.

Under the slogan "Land, Bread and Peace," the Bolsheviks combined the seizure of power in the cities with the land revolution underway in the countryside. Allied with the Social Revolutionaries (SRs), the traditional party of the peasantry, the land was taken over in two phases. The first phase, nationalization and confiscation, was incorporated in the Land Decree of the All Russian Congress of Soviets, November 8, 1917. This stamped the seal of governmental

endorsement on the land seizures and called for their extension.

In September 1917, Lenin declared Bolshevik support for the land program of the SRs, while pointing out that only a proletarian revolution could put even this program into practice.¹⁵ The SR program called for equal distribution of land among the peasants while the Bolsheviks favored collective, and eventually state-owned farms. But since the SR program represented the understanding of the majority of peasants, Lenin's policy was to resolve this difference by "teaching the masses, and in turn *learning from the masses*, the practical expedient measures for bringing about such a transition."¹⁶

The day after seizing power, the Bolsheviks put this policy into practice with their November 8, 1917, Decree on Land which made the SR program into law.¹⁷ Within three weeks, the SRs' left wing – representing the poorer peasants – had split from the rest of the party and entered a coalition government with the Bolsheviks. In the following years, Lenin held to the basic position he stated when presenting the November 8 decree:

As a democratic government, we cannot ignore the decision of the masses of the people, even though we may disagree with it. In the fire of experience, applying the decree in practice, and carrying it out locally, the peasants will themselves realize where the truth lies... We must be guided by experience; we must allow complete freedom to the creative faculties of the masses.¹⁸

It was against this background that Mintz related some of his experiences in the Ukraine. He told us that the Party in the Ukraine had not fully grasped the lessons of the agrarian revolution in Great Russia. He spoke of one occasion when his outfit had attempted to arbitrarily carry out the collectivization of all the big estates in territory occupied by their division of the Red Army; their efforts met with the stiff resistance of the local peasants, even though the peasants supported Soviet power.

The peasants insisted on the redistribution of all the estates, breaking them up among the individual peasant families, rather than taking over the large estates collectively. This occurred during the fall months of 1919, on the eve of Denikin's final defeat, when Soviet power in the form of an "independent Ukrainian Republic" was about to be established.

It was a time when Lenin, in order to allay anti-Russian distrust

and suspicion among the Ukrainian peasantry, had insisted that certain concessions be made. Both Russian and Ukrainian were to be used on an equal footing, and attempts to push back the Ukrainian language to a secondary status were to be denounced. Lenin demanded that all officials in the new republic be able to speak Ukrainian and called for the distribution of large farms among the peasants. State farms were to be created “in strictly limited numbers and of limited size and in each case in conformity with the instruments of the surrounding peasantry.”¹⁹

Despite this, Mintz said, many of us Ukrainian Bolsheviks tended to downplay the nationality element in our own country. “In my own case, I had long since ceased to consider myself a Jew.” Most of them were what was called at that time “abstract internationalists”; super-internationalists who, in the name of internationalism, renounced the national element in the struggle of the Ukrainian masses.

“But we were not alone in this deviation,” Mintz told us. “Although Lenin’s policy was eventually adopted by the Central Executive Committee, it was sharply opposed by leading Ukrainian Bolsheviks such as Rakovsky and Manuilsky. What it finally came down to, in the case of our army division, was that as a result of the opposition of the peasants in the area, we were forced to give up our plan for collectivization; we thus had to settle for having only one of the estates being set aside as a Soviet farm.”

The first part of each summer at the Lenin School was spent in practical work that related to our studies. In the course of my practical work program in the early summer of 1928, I had my first close-up observation of the peasant question in the USSR. I visited a peasant village in an agricultural district to talk with the people and make observations. Though hardly more than 100 *versts* (about 66 miles) from Moscow, it was truly in “darkest Russia,” a provincial place, isolated from the city. Few inhabitants had been as far away as Moscow.

After taking a train to the nearest station, I then had to take a *droshtky* another twenty *versts* to the county seat. Arriving in the morning, I was let down in the middle of the village square. I looked around to get my bearings, and in no time at all, a crowd had gathered to stare at me.

The crowd grew larger by the minute; it seemed as if the whole village had turned out in the square. I could overhear remarks:

“Who is he?”

“Why is he so Black?”

“What nice teeth!”

“Look, his palms are white!”

“He seems *sympatichno*,” remarked some.

Someone else who perhaps had done a little reading said, “Oh, he’s probably from Africa. There the sun is so hot that people who have lived there for thousands of years become black.” The crowd seemed to accept this explanation.

I stuck out my hand to a young man standing nearby. “*Zdravstvuyte*,” I said. “Could you direct me to the town committee?” He seemed to be surprised that I could speak Russian, but getting himself together, he directed me to a building across the square.

“Who are you? Where did you come from?” the young man asked.

“I’m an American Negro from the United States,” I replied.

Someone in the crowd remarked, “I told you he was of the Negro tribe.”

Someone else spoke up, “I thought all people in the United States were white.”

That gave me the chance to get off on my international propaganda spiel, and I jumped right in. “Oh no,” I replied. “There are twelve million Blacks in the U.S. – about one-tenth of the population.” I went on to tell them about Blacks in the South, and the modern-day remnants of the plantation system: sharecropping, Jim Crow and lynch terror.

Someone remarked, “Oh. Like it was with us under the old regime.” Many of the villagers nodded their heads in agreement with this.

Just then I noticed an old woman with a cane, slowly making her way through the crowd toward where I was. The young people gave way before her, in deference to her age. When she reached the center, I watched the changes in expression on her old wrinkled face as she gazed at me. First it registered amazement at such a sight; then comprehension when she had “cased” the whole situation.

Then she spit on the ground and slammed her cane down. “*Idite domoi!* Go home!” she told me. “Wash your face! You should be ashamed of yourself, trying to fool the people around here!” Waving her cane at me, she then turned scornfully away. In all her ninety-odd years, she had never before seen a Black man!

TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION

The first time I met Stalin was at a social gathering, a party in the Kremlin during the World Congress of the Friends of the Soviet Union. The congress coincided with the Tenth Anniversary celebrations in the fall of 1927. The congress sessions were held in the *Dom Soyusov* (House of the Trade Unions). It was the greatest international gathering I had ever witnessed. There were probably more than one thousand delegates, representing countries from six continents. The most impressive delegation was the huge one (about one hundred people) from China which was headed In Soong Ch'ing-ling, the young and beautiful widow of Sun Yat-sen. (Today she is vice-chairman of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China.)

I was surprised and delighted to meet my old friend Chi (Dum Ping), a former Chinese student at the University of Chicago with whom I had worked in the organization of the ill-fated Interracial Youth Forum on the Southside in 1924. He had since gone back to China and was now one of the translators for the Chinese delegation. It was Chi who introduced me to Madame Sun Yat-sen. She spoke English with an American accent, which was not surprising since she had been educated in the United States.

Among the other notables we were to meet were the young Cuban revolutionary, Antonio Mella, later murdered in Mexico City by Machado's assassins. He was a tall, wiry youth, who always had a guitar slung over his back. There was Henri Barbusse, a pale, wan man, a victim of tuberculosis. He was a great literary figure in France and wrote a biography of Stalin. There was the American novelist Theodore Dreiser, father of American realism, who was there with his secretary, Ruth Epperson Kennell, a young American woman.

A special friend of us Black students was Josiah Gumede, the elderly president of the African National Congress and a descendant of Zulu chiefs.²⁰ We took him in charge. Every morning we would call for him at his room at the National Hotel on Tverskaya (now Gorky Street) and escort him to the congress sessions. We also accompanied him on the rounds of parties held by the various delegations. He must have been about sixty at the time, but was big, strong and healthy and never seemed to tire.

The gala occasion for the whole congress was the Evening of National Culture. It consisted of an elaborate pageant of folk dances from the various Soviet republics and autonomous regions. The dancers were all in their traditional costumes, a striking array of color and diversity. On this occasion, our Soviet hosts went all out for their foreign guests.

The hall in the *Dom Soyusov* had been converted into a huge banquet room. We were seated before tables loaded with various kinds of liquor, including of course, the best vodka and zakuskas; appetizers of all kinds – cheeses, herrings, caviar, cold sturgeon and cold meats. Then came dinner, from soup to dessert.

The banquet finally ended. Most of us were in somewhat of a stupor from food and drink. Our group, which included our teacher Sik, was leaving the hall amidst the din of a thousand people talking and laughing. On our way out we stopped and chatted with numerous delegates.

Gumede was the chief attraction; he had given a stirring speech at a session of the congress a few days before. As I recall, we were nearing the door when we were stopped and greeted by the old Cossack cavalryman, Marshall Budenny. He was a short, powerful, bow-legged man, with a large ferocious black mustache. He was also in a merry mood.

“Tell the chief,” he said, grasping Gumede’s hand, “that we stand ready to come to his support anytime he needs us!”

“Thank you, thank you,” beamed Gumede.

At that moment, someone approached us, I believe it was Tival, Stalin’s secretary, and informed us that we were invited to a party in the Kremlin.

We walked the short distance across the square to the Kremlin. Once within the Kremlin walls, we were guided into one of the old palaces and then taken upstairs to a small hall. It was a long room with an arched ceiling reaching almost to the floors on the sides. It looked to me as though it could have been a throne room of one of the old czars.

There were perhaps fifty people in the room. In the center there was a large table loaded with the traditional zakuskas, fruits and drinks. It was sort of a buffet; chairs were not directly at the table but rather were along the walls on each side.

There in the center on one side was Stalin, with a number of people seated beside him. He rose, shook our hands, and after we

were introduced, welcomed us, “Be our guests.” He was a short, thick-set man, as I remember, dressed in a neat tan suit with a military collar and boots shined to glisten.

He motioned us to the vacant chairs on the other side of the room. On that side were a number of folk dancers and musicians, presumably participants in the earlier festivities. Somebody introduced Gumede as an African Zulu chief from the congress, and the dancers probably thought we were all from the same tribe. Gumede, however, was the center of attention, surrounded by the dancers, who insisted on being photographed with him.

They gathered around him – a couple sitting on his lap and others behind him with their arms around him. Stalin, observing all this from the other side of the room, seemed amused. Later on, Stalin got up, bid us all good-night and walked out. As I remember, it was quite a relaxed evening with no political discussion. We left shortly after Stalin departed and were driven home by a chauffeur from the Kremlin car pool.

Another version of this occasion was given, I believe by Sik, who insisted that Otto had danced with Stalin that evening. I don’t doubt Sik’s word, but I certainly don’t remember seeing it. Otto didn’t remember the incident either. But I do know that in Russia it was not uncommon for one man to dance with another on festive occasions. As I recall, the hall became more crowded, and I was attracted by a group of folk dancers who offered to help us students with our Russian.

Afterwards Sik kept reminding Otto, “Don’t you remember, Otto, you asked Stalin to dance, and you danced around the hall with him several times. That was a memorable occasion; how could you forget it?”

As for Gumede, he returned home a firm supporter of the Soviet Union. Everywhere he went, he gave glowing reports of his visit there. In January 1928, he told an ANC rally that “I have seen the new world to come, where it has already begun. I have been to the new Jerusalem.”²¹

One day in December, Otto called me and said he had just gotten a call to pick up a young Black woman, Maude White, who was to be a student at KUTVA. She was waiting at the station. He asked me if I’d like to go along and I readily agreed, looking forward with pleasure to meeting this woman – the first Black woman since Jane Golden to study in the Soviet Union.

We rented a *droszky* and proceeded to the station. It was a cold winter night, the temperature was somewhere around thirty-five below zero. When we got there, we saw the young Black woman. She was about nineteen, standing in the unheated station. She was a strikingly pretty, brown-skinned woman with huge dark eyes.

She had on a seal skin coat, silk stockings and pumps, and by the time we got there she was practically hysterical with the cold. “Get me out of here. Get me out of here,” she shouted. Otto and I looked at each other, both thinking the same thing – we’re going to have a rough time with this one.

We couldn’t have been more wrong. Maude got right into the swing of things at school. She was a very popular student and stayed in Moscow for three years. We later learned that she had been a school teacher before coming to Moscow. On returning to the States, she became an outstanding Party cadre and a life-long friend of mine.

Notes:

1. (p. 198.) See J.T. Murphy, “The First Years of the Lenin School,” *Communist International*, September 30, 1927, pp. 267-69.
2. (p. 201.) Born in 1862 in Staten Island, New York, Ella Reeve Bloor (Mother Bloor) joined the Socialist Labor Party during the 1890s. She quickly became a leading activist and organizer, participating in the important labor struggles of the time, including the 1914 miners’ strike in Ludlow, Colorado. In 1921, she became a founding member of the Communist Party and continued her activity in the revolutionary movement until her death in the fifties. See Mother Bloor’s autobiography, *We Are Many* (New York: International Publishers, 1940).
3. (p. 202.) Lenin returned to Petrograd from exile on April 3, 1917. The next day he delivered his theses, “The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 24, pp. 19-26. These “April Theses” outlined a comprehensive program of transition from the bourgeois-democratic to the proletarian-socialist revolution, including nationalization of land and banks, workers’ control of industry and a Soviet republic. Lenin’s line of “No support for the Provisional Government” was resisted by many in the Party who had been calling for a policy of pressuring the Provisional Government. But at the Petrograd City Conference of Bolsheviks, two weeks later, Lenin’s theses won the day. The all-Russian Conference of Bolsheviks, over the opposition of Kamenev and Rykov, also adopted the line of the April Theses and

put forward the slogan, “All Power to the Soviets.”

4. (p. 203.) The following are some of the most outstanding of Fox's works: *The Class Struggle in Britain in the Epoch of Imperialism* (London: M. Lawrence, 1932); *Genghis Khan* (London: John Lane, 1936); *Lenin: A Biography* (London: V. Gollancz, 1933); *Marx, Engels and Lenin on the Irish Revolution* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1944); *The Novel and the People* (New York: International Publishers, 1937).

5. (p. 203.) See “The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 21, pp. 407-14, and “The Irish Rebellion of 1916,” vol. 22, pp. 353-58.

6. (p. 204.) The German government allowed Lenin and other Russian exiles to pass through Germany on their way back to Russia in the spring of 1917. They were required to travel in a “sealed coach,” cut off from all direct contact with the outside.

7. (p. 204.) By the late thirties, the Moscow Trials had exposed the existence of the “Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites.” This bloc was actually a gang, which, from within the CPSU(B) and organized into illegal, terroristic cells, sought to overthrow the dictatorship of the proletariat in the Soviet Union. Its membership included followers of Trotsky’s “ultra-left” theory of permanent revolution, as well as the followers of Bukharin’s right opportunist line. In the final analysis, it was proven that this bloc actually conspired with agents of German and Italian fascism, as well as with agents of other imperialist powers, to open the doors for a foreign invasion of the Soviet Union. This plot was smashed by the Soviets and the bloc’s members were either executed or sent to prison for life. During my stay in the Soviet Union (which ended a good five years before this conspiracy was fully exposed), I was acquainted with a number of people who were later proven to be members of the bloc. Most were not major figures, but played a minor role in the conspiracy. Regretfully, my good friend, Nasanov, was among them. See Michael Sayers and Albert E. Kahn, *The Great Conspiracy* (London: Red Star Press, 1975).

8. (p. 205.) James Connolly (1868-1916) was a great Irish labor leader, socialist and a revolutionary nationalist who was executed by the British after playing a leading part in the unsuccessful Easter uprising against colonial rule. He lived in the U.S. from 1903-10, and was a founding member of the IWW. Connolly was active in many mass labor and political struggles in this country, including the fight against the sectarianism of the SLP and Daniel DeLeon’s leadership of it.

9. (p. 205.) Murray later became general secretary of the Irish Party.
10. (p. 206.) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Correspondence 1846-1895* (New York: International Publishers, 1936), p. 281.
11. (p. 206.) Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 21, pp. 104, 293.
12. (p. 206.) *Ibid.*, p. 357.
13. (p. 208.) A.M. Simons, *Social Forces in American History* (NEW York: Macmillan, 1911), p. 274.
14. (p. 209.) Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Civil War in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1937).
15. (p. 210.) *Ibid.*, vol. 25, pp. 274-82.
16. (p. 210.) *Ibid.*, vol. 24, p. 169.
17. (p. 210.) *Ibid.*, vol. 26, p. 258.
18. (p. 211.) *Ibid.*, vol. 26, p. 258.
19. (p. 211.) *Ibid.*, vol. 30, p. 165.
20. (p. 214.) The African National Congress (ANC) was formed in 1912 to oppose the color bar in South Africa.
21. (p. 217.) H. J. and R. E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 402.