

The NEGRO PEOPLE and the SOVIET UNION

by Paul Robeson



The Negro People and the Soviet Union

I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to join more than half the people of the world in celebrating a great anniversary. Yes, with fully half of humanity – and even this is an underestimation. For it would be a mistake to assume that this 32nd anniversary of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is an occasion of joy and pride and thanksgiving only for the eight hundred million people who live in the Soviet Union and the People's Democracies of Eastern Europe and China.

True, these eight hundred million, as *direct* beneficiaries of the establishment of the Soviet Union and of its policies of struggle for peace and democracy, are rejoicing because of the new economic security and political liberty, the new promise of a fuller and richer life for all, which they enjoy because they live in the Soviet land or in countries of the People's Democracies. The feelings of all these people must be very like those of the President of the Chinese People's Republic, Mao Tse-tung.

"If the Soviet Union did not exist," Mao wrote, "if there had been no victory in the anti-fascist second World War, if... Japanese imperialism had not been defeated, if the various new democracies of Europe had not come into being, if there were no rising struggle of the masses of the people in the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and other capitalist countries against the reactionary cliques ruling over them, if this sum-total of factors did not exist, then the pressure of the international-reactionary forces upon us would surely be far greater than at present. Could we have been victorious under such circumstances? Certainly not."

That is the way Mao explains how much the liberation of China is indebted to the decisive influence of the Soviet Union in international affairs. And so with the Romanians and Bulgarians, the Hungarians and Albanians, the Czechs and the Polish people. It is because of this sum-total of factors that they today are the masters of their own lands – a sum-total which means that the world balance of power has shifted in favor of the forces of peace and democracy. And this portentous transformation, which has occurred within three decades, stems mainly from the mighty impact of the events of November 7, 1917.

I traveled recently in Western Europe and Scandinavia, and I know from what I saw and heard in those countries, that there, too, the peoples are able to struggle against the total colonization of their countries by Wall Street principally because of this new balance of power. And if the Viet Nameese and the Indonesians, if the Burmese and Malay people, indeed, if the people of long-suffering India have advanced to a higher stage of struggle for their independence, it is because of this sum-total of factors and the decisive influence of the Soviet Union.

We of the Council on African Affairs know well, also, that the people of Africa and the West Indies understand who are their real friends in the council of nations. Yes, the Nigerians who only yesterday were told by Creech-Jones of the British Empire that their demand for full self-rule could not be granted because they were not ready – these Nigerians know very well that the peoples in the Asian republics of the Soviet Union less than three decades ago stood on the same cultural and political level as they; yet, in a single generation these so-called “backward” peoples have been able to take their place as free, independent peoples with their own industries and their own culture.

Yes, all Africa remembers that it was Litvinov who stood alone beside Haile Selassie in Geneva, when Mussolini's sons flew with the blessings of the Pope to drop bombs on Ethiopian women and children. Africa remembers that it was the Soviet Union which fought the attempt of Smuts to annex Southwest Africa to the slave reservations of the Union of South Africa. Africa knows it was the Soviet Union who demanded at San Francisco that the Charter of the United Nations contain a guarantee of self-government for the peoples of so-called “trust” territories. And is it not the struggle of the Soviet Union today which prevents the former Italian colonies from being slave-warrens and military bases for Britain and the United States?

Certainly, the changed balance of power in the world today favors the liberation struggles of the African and West Indian peoples. And if the people of Tanganyika and Kenya are not content with the benevolent schemes for turning their land into mass peanut plantations; if the Africans of Rhodesia rebel against the theft of their copper and the exploitation of their labor; if the Bantus and the slave-pens of the Union of South Africa grow more defiant of the pass laws and the forced-labor system; if the peoples of the Congo

refuse to mine the uranium for the atom bombs made in Jim-Crow factories in the United States; if all these peoples demand an end to floggings, an end to the farce of "trusteeship" in the former Italian colonies and all other colonies, an end to colonial exploitation schemes hidden beneath humanitarian pretenses; and if the people of the West Indies press for some move leading to independence – to federation in the interests of the West Indian people and not of absentee landlords – as in Truman's "Point Four" program – if, in a word, the peoples of Africa and the West Indies now shout their demands for self-determination to the entire world, is it not because they have a mighty friend and champion who by example and repeated challenge has proved this friendship?

No, despite all the censorship and repression, the word has gotten around.

The Soviet Union is the friend of the African and West Indian peoples. And no imperialist wolf disguised as a benevolent watchdog, and not Tito disguised as a revolutionary, can convince them that Moscow oppresses the small nations. Africa knows the Soviet Union is the defender and champion of the rights of all nations – large and small – to control their own destinies.

The Soviet Socialist program of ethnic and national democracy is precisely the opposite of the Nazi, fascist, South African and Dixiecrat programs of racial superiority. One of Africa's foremost leaders, Gabriel D'Arboussier, Vice-President of the African Democratic Union in France's African colonies below the Sahara, leader of an organization millions strong – representing 20,000,000 Africans, has said this:

"All the anger of the reactionaries directed against the Soviet Union is also directed in other forms against the colonial peoples. The latter have learned, thanks to these reactionaries, that there is a natural alliance between the country of socialism and the oppressed people the world over."

But I have a deeply personal reason for speaking here tonight. And it is more than the fact that as an artist I know what Soviet culture means for the young artists of today, what great horizons of imagination and creativeness are being pushed back in the Soviet land. And it is more than the fact that I have many dear friends in the Soviet Union whom I met and grew to know during my visits there. I think the real reason I love the Soviet Union and why I can speak so personally about it is because I am a Negro and an American.

Let me explain.

In America today the Negro people are the core of the struggle against war and fascism. Three hundred years of oppression and terror have brought my people to the forefront in this struggle.

There is no democracy for the masses of my people. The achievements of a few are no answer – in fact this is being used in reverse – to cover up the injustices to our millions. The millions of Negroes who are denied the right to vote are mountainous testimony.

Unemployment is a constant specter. Thirty-one percent of the heads of Negro families in America earn less than \$500 per year. An additional 44 percent earn between \$500 and \$1000 annually. This 75 percent of my people earn less than one-third of what is necessary to support a family of four.

We are the last hired and the first fired.

Seven-tenths of our farm people are landless, with cotton planted right up to their very doorstep. The overwhelming mass live in houses where the sky, the earth and the trees may be seen without going outside.

Five thousand Negroes have been lynched. Not one lyncher has been brought to justice. Not one lyncher has been made to pay for this horrible crime.

Maceo Snipes, a World War II veteran, went to vote in Taylor County, Alabama. One hour later he was killed on the doorstep of his home, within sight of his wife and children. His murderers walked away saying, "We told you not to vote." But the widow of Maceo Snipes told her children, "When you grow up, you'll vote too."

Ninety Negroes have been lynched since President Truman began occupying the White House with promises of civil rights. The most horrible of the blood-lettings took place in Greenville, South Carolina, where 28 men stood in an American courtroom and admitted killing Willie Earl. Several owned to tying him up. Several others to pouring gasoline over his body. Still others to firing sixty shells into him from six feet away. Even others admitted setting matches to the gasoline, making a flaming pyre.

They were all freed by the jury. And the federal government never intervened. The reason is clear. Tom Clark was the Attorney-General then, the same Attorney-General who later prosecuted any number of liberal thinkers and resorted to the worst kind of persecution and the most despicable use of our courts in indicting the 12 leaders of the Communist Party.

The Negro people know that they can expect no answer from American imperialism. American imperialism cannot relinquish its Jim-Crow terror while it pursues its Marshall Plans and Atlantic Pacts and its drive toward war.

But there is another side to this miserable picture. A hopeful side. It is the rising militancy of the Negro people's struggle for land, equality and freedom. In meetings that I have had throughout the country with tens of thousands, this rising militancy has shown itself under a new leadership, a leadership made up of Negro trade unionists, veterans, working women and youth, ministers of our churches, fraternal leaders and others. This rising militancy has emerged as the core of unity with many groups, with the Jewish people, with trade unions and the foreign born.

On my southern tour for Henry Wallace, I recall our stops in Memphis, Tennessee, where the fighting organization of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers joined hands with my people to guarantee that progressive thought and action could find a channel for expression.

In Winston-Salem, North Carolina, I saw the tobacco workers. I saw progressives and liberals like Larkin Marshall in Georgia, Mrs. Andrew Simkins of South Carolina, and Velma Hopkins – all fighters who are leading a valiant struggle for liberation.

It was during Peekskill that this unity was most sharply set forward. There, in Peekskill, trade unionists, Jewish people, foreign born, Negro and white, stood side by side, fighting off the fascist attack of gangs led by Dewey and Dulles, the real source of force and violence.

I see this rising fighting temper of the Negro people as one of the important reasons for the granting of bail for the "eleven," for the defeat of the Ober Bill in Maryland. Yes, it even forces Supreme Court Justice Jackson to proclaim the trial of Eugene Dennis as a "political" trial.

I have heard some honest and sincere people say to me, "Yes, Paul, we agree with you on everything you say about Jim Crow and persecution. We're with you one hundred percent on these things. But what has Russia ever done for us Negroes?" And in answering this question I feel that I go beyond my own personal feelings and put my finger on the very crux of what the Soviet Union means to me – a Negro and an American. For the answer is very simple and very clear: "Russia," I say, "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."

For where, indeed, would the Negro people's struggle for freedom be today, if world imperialism had not been critically wounded and its forces weakened throughout the world? Where would the fight to vote in the South be today if this new balance of power in the world did not exist?

And I know that the growing unity of these great sections of the American people with the Negro people, the growing power of their struggle to save America from fascism, the very principle of solidarity in the teeth of the enemy owes its endurance and its force in the last analysis to that sum-total of factors which have transformed the world, that sum-total in which the example and might of the Soviet Union is decisive.

To every Negro mother who has her sons to comfort her, to every young Negro girl who looks forward to marriage, to every Negro youth who enters upon the threshold of this struggle with confidence, I say: "Where would your son be, where would your sweetheart be, where would YOU be, but for Stalingrad?" For in speaking of Stalingrad, it was Roosevelt who in a letter to Stalin spoke of how civilization had been saved by the battle of Stalingrad. And it was the Soviet people and the children who said, "Carry back my love to the Negro people, to the American people for we want peace and honest cooperation."

No one need be or can allow himself to be afraid of declaring himself for real friendship with the Soviet Union Republics and the People's Democracies. Today the real patriots of every nation are exactly those who work for friendship with these great nations.

Must we go back over the last three decades to document this fact? Has not the history of every country shown that it was precisely those who sowed hatred against the Soviet Union who proved to be the real traitors to their country? Was it not those who advocated and worked for friendship with the Soviet Union who proved to be the genuine patriots?

To those who dare to question my patriotism, who have the unmitigated insolence to question my love for the true America and my right to be an American - to question me, whose fathers and

forefathers fertilized the very soil of this country with their toil and with their bodies, to such people I answer that those and *only* those who work for a policy of friendship with the Soviet Union are genuine American patriots. And all others who move toward a war that would destroy civilization, whether consciously or unconsciously, are betraying the interests of this country and the American people.

Finally, my friends, I want to say that I believe the great majority of the American people will come to realize their identity of interests with the people of the Soviet Union and the growing People's Democracies. In this era of change, normal trade relations and peaceful cooperation can be the only answer.

I am and always will be an anti-fascist and a fighter for the freedom and dignity of all men. We anti-fascists – the true lovers of American democracy – have a tremendous responsibility. We are not a small band – we are millions who believe in peace and friendship. If we mobilize with courage, the forces of world fascism can and will be defeated – in Europe, in Africa and in the United States.

Because of this, I am and always will be, a firm and true friend of the Soviet Union and of the beloved Soviet people.

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Paul Robeson is one of the foremost leaders of the Negro people and a concert artist of world renown. He has been chairman of the Council on African Affairs since the formation of that vital organization 12 years ago. In the summer of 1949 he returned from a four-month speaking and concert tour which took this beloved spokesman of the Negro people to eight countries of Europe, including the Soviet Union. While in Europe he participated as an honored guest in the celebration of the Pushkin centennial anniversary in Moscow, and in the World Peace Congress in Paris.

A world-wide storm of indignation greeted the storm-troop attacks upon him at Peekskill, N.Y.

The text of this pamphlet is an address delivered by Mr. Robeson at a banquet sponsored by the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, in New York, on November 10, 1949, on the occasion of the celebration of the 32nd anniversary of the Soviet Union.

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