

# RUSSIA AND BLACK AMERICA

Lecture Six

A Working-Class Black Man Speaks to History

Tuesday, April 2

Robert Robinson  
(1906-1994)



Joseph Stalin  
(1878-1953)

Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, *Stalin in Front of the Mirror* (1982-83)



A single death is a tragedy; a million death a statistic

Joseph Stalin (attributed)

# The horrors of the Russian twentieth century

World War I

The revolution and the civil war (1918-20)

The Povolzhye famine (1921-22)

Collectivization, dekulakization, and the Holodomor (1929-33)

The Great Terror (1936-39)

World War II

Wartime deportations

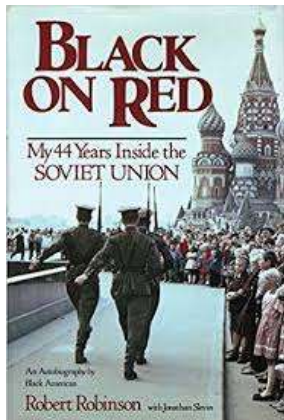
The Gulag (1918-1956)

## Forced labor in the gulag

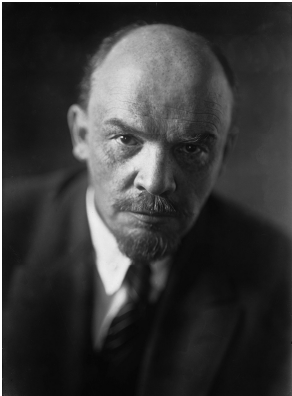


“/.../ Between 1917 and 1959, and without counting military casualties — terroristic exterminations, repressions, hunger, high mortality in the camps and the demographic shortfall resulting from a lowered birth rate cost us 66,700,000 lives (without the shortfall, 55,000,000).” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2

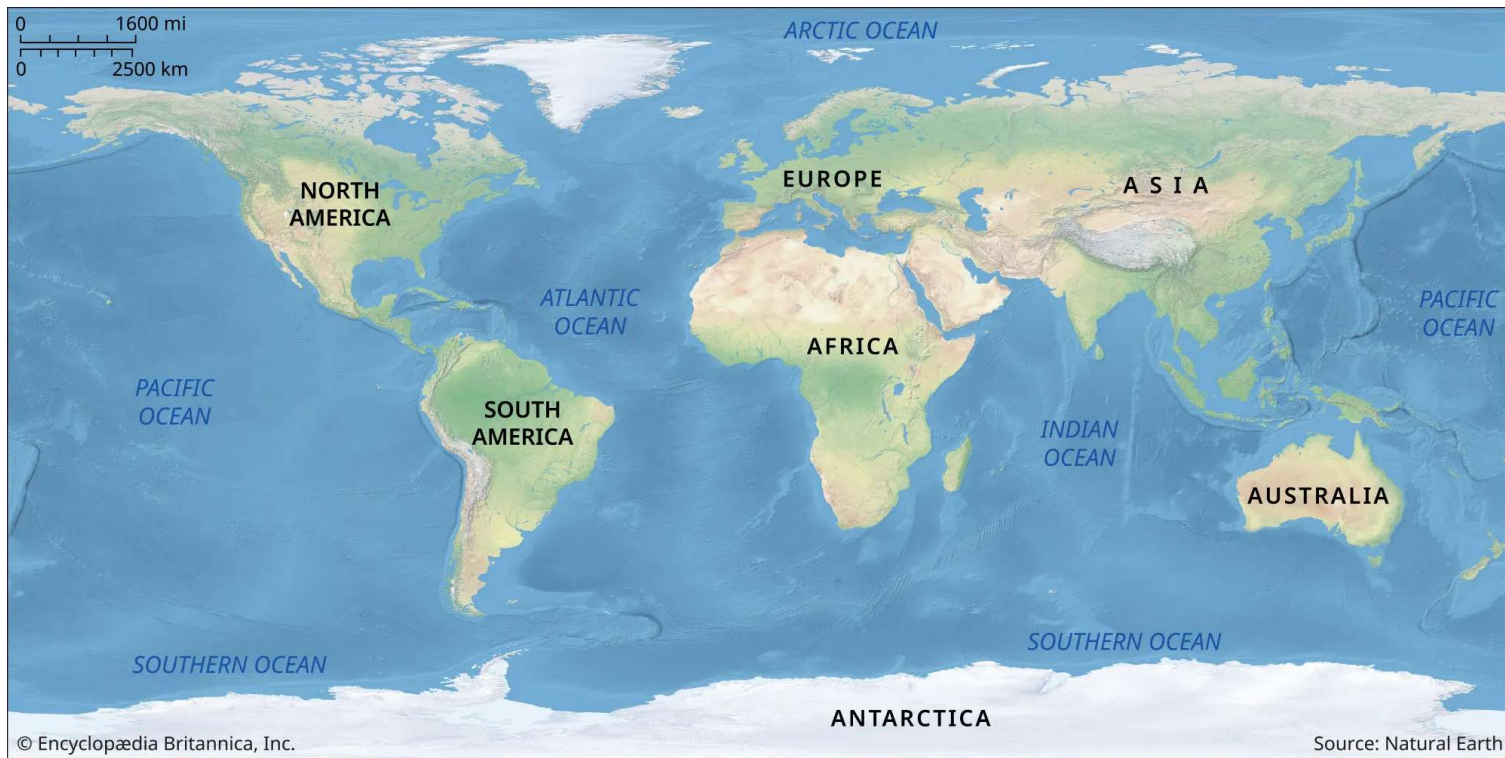
“I am not writing out of bitterness...” (p. 15). In fact, RR is an exemplary memoirist, being observant, open-minded, empathetic and, above all, curious about the people and places he encountered



One degree of totalitarian separation



RR's life's itinerary.  
Jamaica — Cuba — USA — USSR — Uganda — USA





“There were 700 toolmakers in my department, 699 whites and one black” (p. 26)

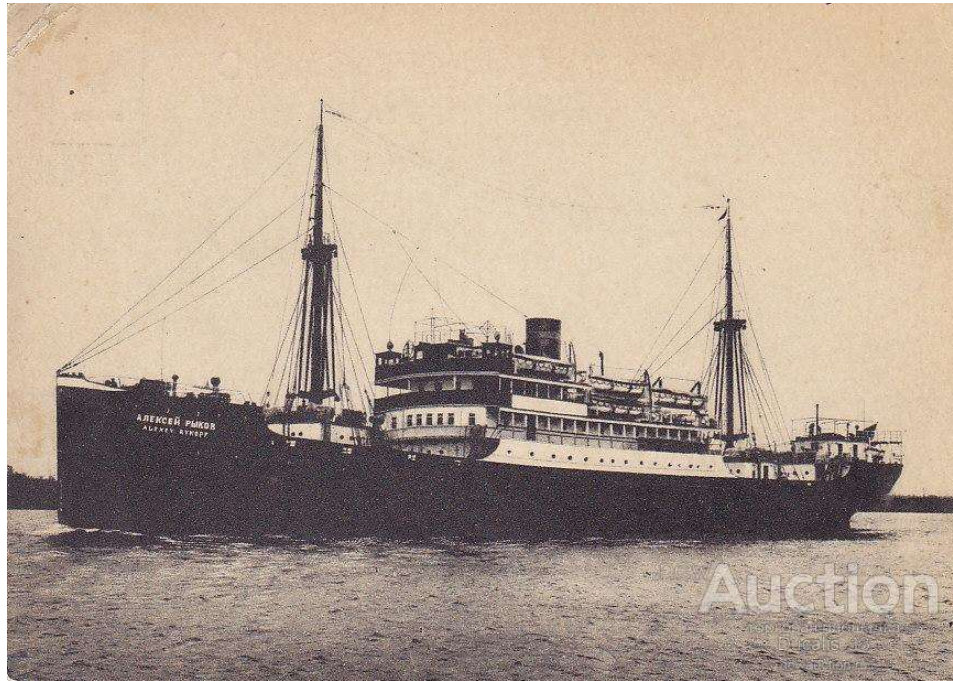


RR's decision to work in the Soviet Union was entirely non-ideological



“He asked me if I wanted to go to Russia...” (p. 28).

Image below is of the *Aleksei Rykov*, on which Robinson arrived in Leningrad “on a gorgeous day in spring 1930” (p. 37)



“A stately hotel” (p. 37). The Grand Hotel Europa, St. Petersburg, as it is today



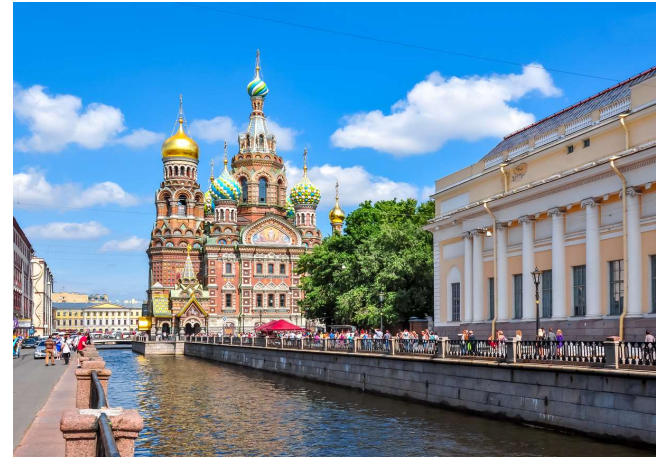
## Defamiliarization, or making it strange

A way of depicting familiar objects, personalities, or situations in a manner that makes them appear bizarre or unusual. Much used by SF writers

There are two kinds of defamiliarization: via paraphrase, or by means of simile.

See the description of high (or low) tea at the Novikovs (Robinson's interpreter and his family), pp. 50-51

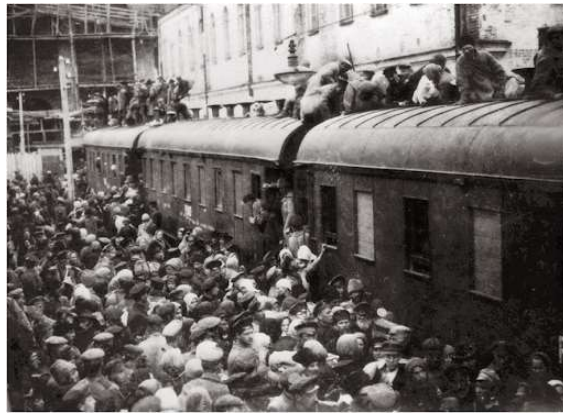
Leningrad = St. Petersburg



Leningrad in 1930. Robinson was impressed by this city of canals and stone but noted the poverty of the inhabitants



## Train station scene during the Stalin period





“In Soviet Russia everyone is equal. Because of our glorious Communist system no one is required to give up their seat” (p. 44). The coarsening of everyday behaviors and interactions was a feature of the Soviet period and is characteristic of post-Soviet Russia as well



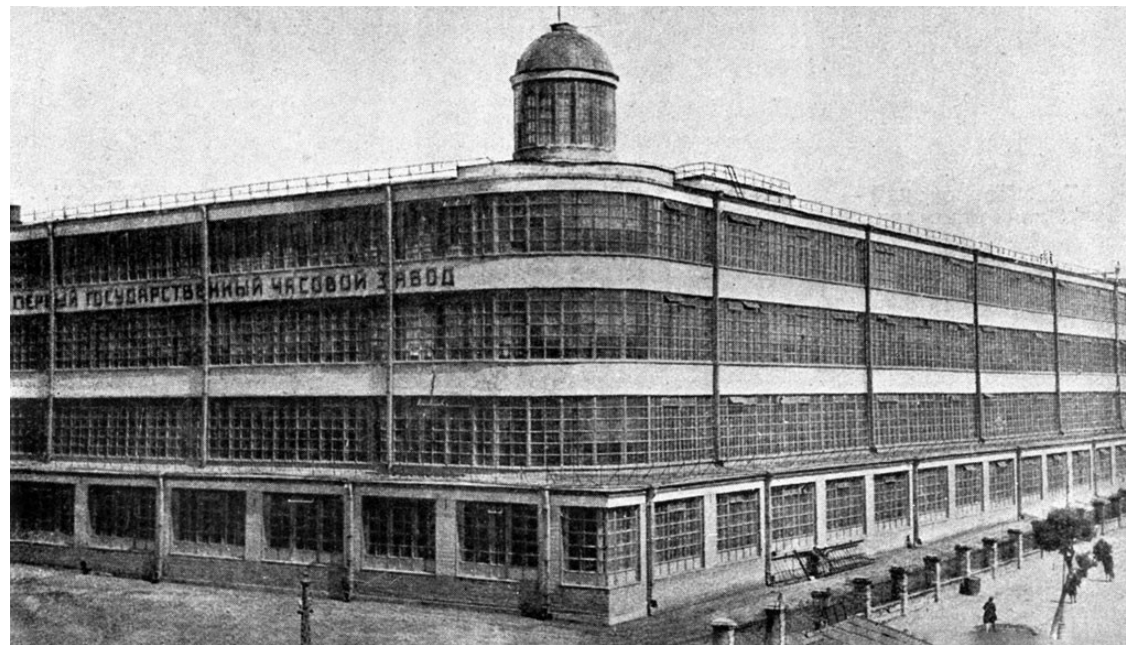
From L: The Stalingrad tractor plant (1930), where RR was initially employed, Dneproges (Dnieper hydroelectric dam, 1932), and the Magnitogorsk iron and steel works (1933). These Soviet showpiece industrial sites were built with American design and engineering expertise



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Foto: O. Ang, 1. 1942 Sommer



Moscow's First Watch Sergei Kirov Factory (1930), built with American know-how, which Robinson visited upon his arrival in the Soviet capital (p. 49)



“It had been such a splendid afternoon, one of several occasions I had enjoyed thus far in Russia when I was free from other people’s hatred” (p. 61). Until RR encountered a group of Americans in a Stalingrad cafeteria



145. Сачков В.  
Друга я никогда не забуду, если с ним подружился в Москве! 1964

RR's references his strong Christian faith as well as the mysteries of Russian womanhood as the reasons why he never married during his 44 years in the Soviet Union (pp. 402-403)



**ENIGMATIC  
RUSSIAN SOUL**

**ÉNIGMATIQUE  
ÂME RUSSE**

IN RUSSIAN WITH **SUBTITLES**  
EN RUSSE AVEC **SOUS-TITRES**

*gymna*  
...

||.

## “For the time being, he is still thinking in English”



Роберт Робинсон

— Квалификейшен!  
Роберт Робинсон плохо говорит по-русски. Он с грудом находит нужные слова. Он думает пока еще по-английски.

— Квалификейшен! Квалифика-

— Я инструментальщик!

— Ты негр! И можешь получить, если хочешь, работу грузчика, — было мне ответом.

Прекрасный специалист разгружал вагоны, подметал цеха и был даже швейцаром в аптеке.

— Никому же нужна была моя квалификация. Америка страна не для черных. Но я все же учился по вечерам, — рассказывает Робинсон, — ведь, все, что делаешь, надо делать отлично и всегда можно чему-нибудь научиться.

Когда Робинсону удавалось на время устраиваться на завод, над ним издевались отсталые грушпы белых рабочих. То к его станку неожиданно присоединяли электрические провода, то мазали его грязью.

Два года Робинсон служил у Форда — и за два года не дал ни одной бракованной детали и ни разу не говорил ни с одним из белых рабочих.

Робинсону представилась возможность поехать работать в Советский Союз.

— Почему бы и нет! Мне не везло на Ямайке, не везло на Кубе, не везло и в Соединенных Штатах. Может быть повезет в Советском Союзе, — рассказывает теперь Робинсон.

— Я не ошибся. В СССР умеют ценить людей, знающих свое дело. Я не зря учился по вечерам.

Робинсон вспоминает одну лет-

рошо, — отвечает Робинсон, — меня выбрали в члены Московского Совета. Я теперь один из хозяев нашего замечательного города. Но я не умею еще управлять. Каждый фраз, когда я бываю на заседаниях

сейчас русским языком, и поступить в будущем году тут.

Негр с острова Ямайка будет советским ром-механиком.

## СТРОИТЕЛЬ ПОРТО

Он не был мечтателем, этот крепкий коренастый человек, на тридцать пятом году своей жизни ставший начальником советского острова, президентом маленькой большевистской республики, заброшенной далеко за полярный круг.

Он не был ни мореплавателем, прокладывающим новые пути в неизведанных просторах, ни путешественником, открывателем новых земель, ни полярным исследователем, работником науки, плененным экзотикой ледяного безмолвия и посвятившим свою жизнь разгадыванию тайн «седей Арктики».

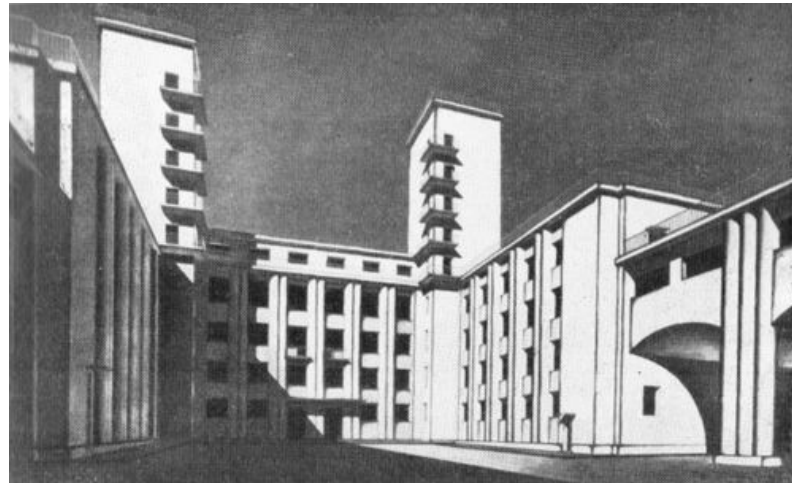
Инженер, производственник, строитель — новый тип полярника — он видел свое назначение на советской земле в том, чтобы «строить», «обстраивать», «осваивать» эту землю..



The 1928 Shakhty show trial was a harbinger of things to come. See Chapter 7: The First Purges

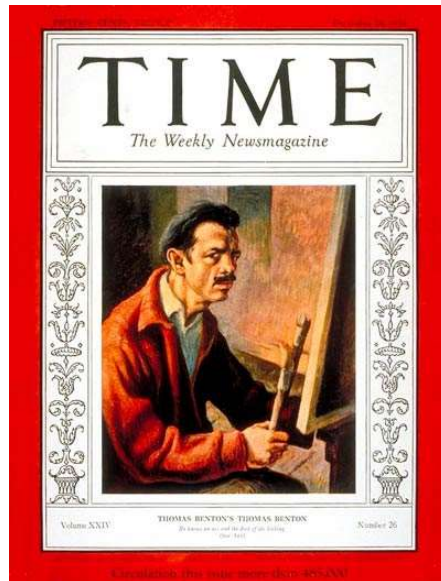


Chapter 8: RR is elected to the Moscow Soviet in 1934. His four-year appointment was not renewed after he affirmed his Christian faith (p. 405)

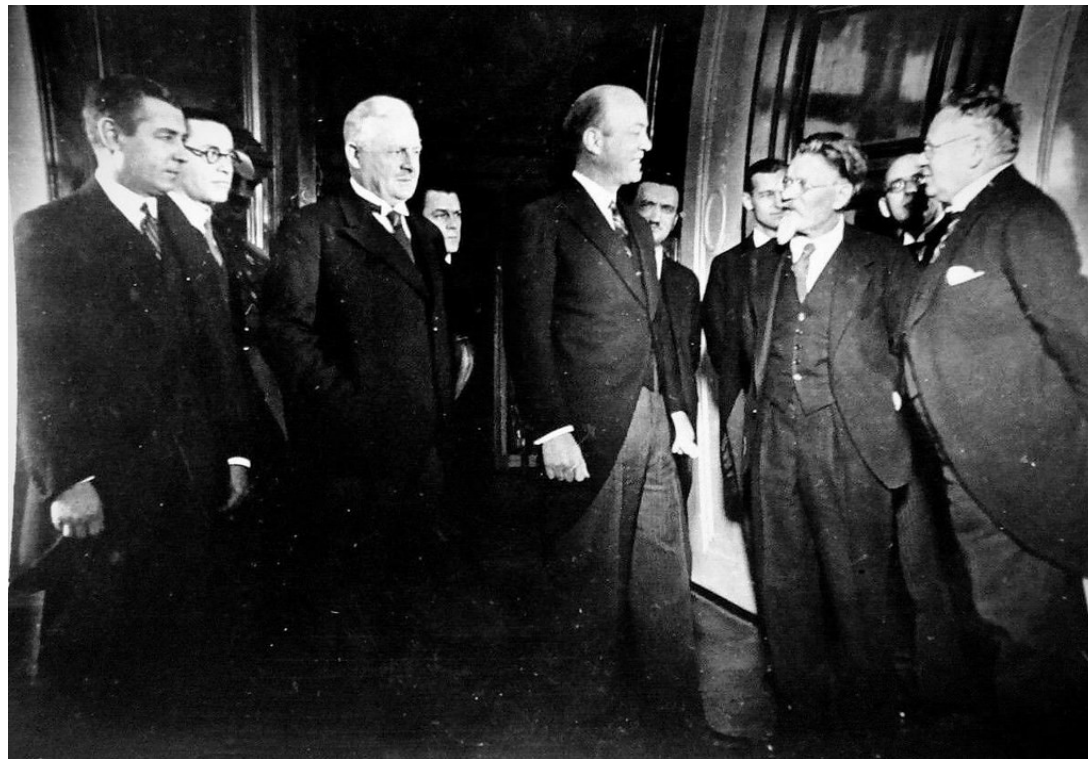




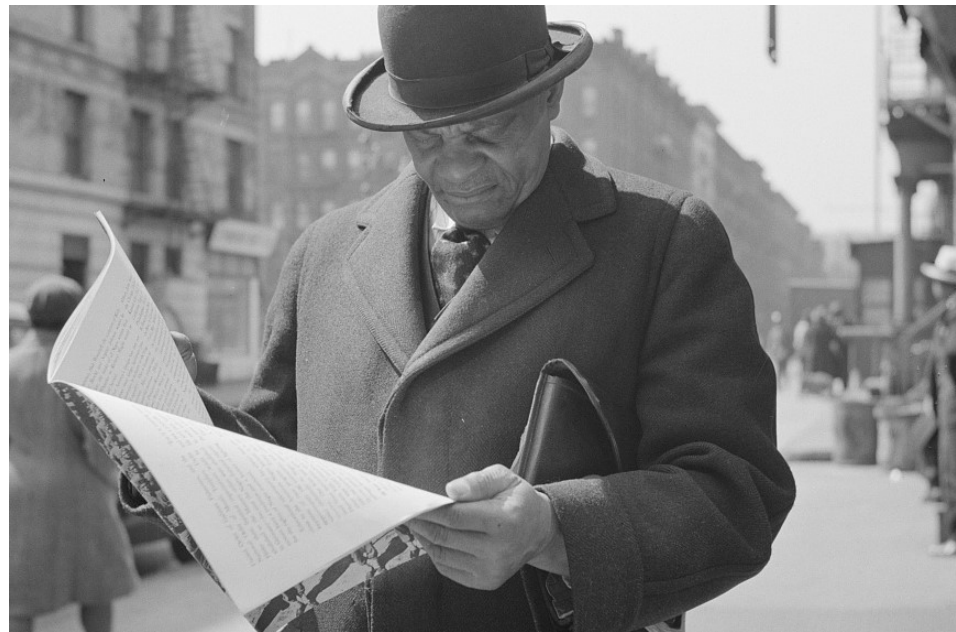
The December 24, 1934 issue of *Time* magazine which reported RR's elevation to the Moscow Soviet using a selection of racist terms (see pp. 107-08)



US ambassador William Bullitt (at center), one of the most colorful public figures of the period, meeting with Mikhail Kalinin (to his left), the Soviet Union's titular head of state. RR's meeting with Ambassador Bullitt was sabotaged by...



...his friend Homer Smith, an African American journalist who lived in the Soviet Union between 1932 and 1946. For RR's meeting with Ambassador Bullitt see pp. 109-110



# RR loses his US citizenship

Form 302 - U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR NATIONALIZATION SERVICE No. 48322

**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**  
**PETITION FOR NATURALIZATION**

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR  
Immigration and Naturalization Service  
Federal Building-Columbus Street  
611 Washington Street  
New York, N. Y. File Number: 105-4304

George D. S. District Court  
New York, New York

Dear Sirs:

Official notice has been received in this office to the effect that the United States attorney for the Southern District of New York has been instructed by the Attorney General to conduct a suit to rescind the naturalization certificate of one Robert Nathaniel Robinson who was naturalized in your court on October 15, 1929 (Petition No. 4222).

Will you please be good enough to attach this letter or a copy thereof to the original record of the intervention of the person named, in order to cause subject the issuance of a duplicate certificate or any information in regard to the record unless and until this office is first advised otherwise? Will you be good enough to be kind to the writer, if it should become necessary to communicate with this office regarding the matter kindly refer to the file number of this letter.

Please advise when the request contained in this letter has been complied with.

Very truly yours,  
*Charles F. Miller*  
Charles F. Miller,  
Assistant District Director.

Subscribed and sworn to before me by the abovesaid petitioner and addressed to the office of the Clerk of said Court at New York, N. Y., this 3rd day of 1929. \_\_\_\_\_  
C. F. Miller

“Even with the intensity of my coursework, it was still difficult to avoid thinking about the possibility of being arrested” (pp. 129-130). Image below is of a propaganda poster hailing Nikolai Yezhov whose People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) carried out the Great Terror. Stalin eliminated Yezhov after he had served his purpose. And yet, for millions of Soviets — RR among them — life went on the midst of the detentions, disappearances, show trials, and executions



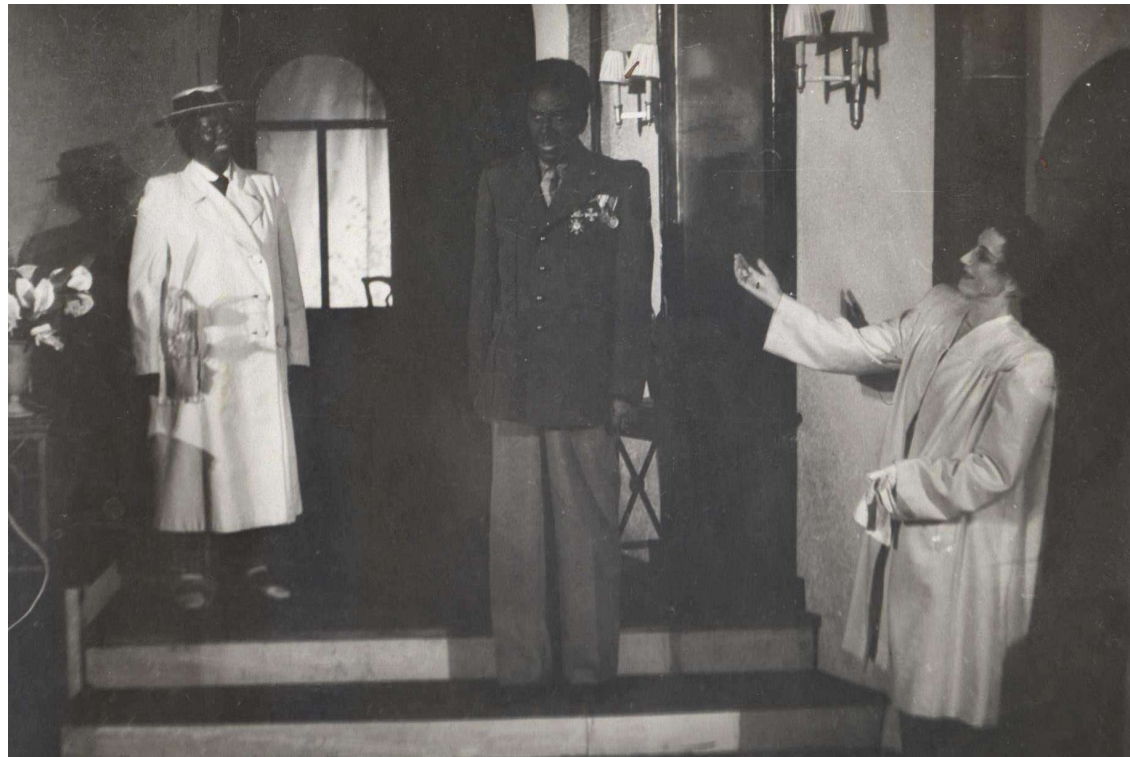
L to R: Moscow in the autumn of 1941, the November 7, 1941 parade in Kuybushev, Patriarch Sergey (on left) and future Patriarch Alexey I of the Russian Orthodox Church standing in front of a portrait of Stalin



Victory in World War II, to which RR contributed a good deal through his engineering expertise while at one point almost dying of starvation



*Deep Are the Roots* (1947). RR discusses this laughably inaccurate propaganda production in Chapter 20





Earth's first artificial satellite, Sputnik, was launched on October 4, 1957, inaugurating the Space Age. See pp. 290-291



At the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow RR met a young American guide, Bill Davis. Many years later Davis, now a diplomat with the United States Information Agency, would help him return to the United States (Chapter 34). When a skeptical official at the embassy in Kampala asked RR, “How is it that you are a Soviet?” the latter explained it was “a long story” which he would tell him “some other time” (pp. 411-413). In a sense, *Black on Red* was a fulfilment of that promise. RR finally regained his US citizenship on December 6, 1986, fulfilling his “dream of forty years” (p. 417)



Paul Robeson, a great artist, athlete, and civil rights leader who experienced much injustice in his lifetime, was himself guilty of unjust acts. One of them was his betrayal of Robert Robinson. L: Robeson attending a diplomatic reception at the Soviet embassy in Washington. R: testifying before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (1956), when he gave a magnificent presentation. RR first met Robeson in 1934 following a concert in Moscow (p. 312). Eslanda Robinson, the singer's wife, communicated his refusal to help RR at a meeting in the early 1950s (p. 317)



RR did not bear a grudge and invited Robeson to perform at his factory in 1961 (p. 317-318)



Langston Hughes visited the Soviet Union in 1932-33 when he met RR (pp. 320-321).  
RR's impressions of the poet and civil rights activist were entirely positive



Matiya Lubega, Uganda's one-time ambassador to the Soviet Union, who issued an invitation to RR to holiday in his country. He also introduced RR to President Idi Amin



RR's Soviet passport, on which he travelled to Kampala, the capital of Uganda



President Amin of Uganda, a murderous, charismatic dictator, did RR a very good turn (Chapter 33)



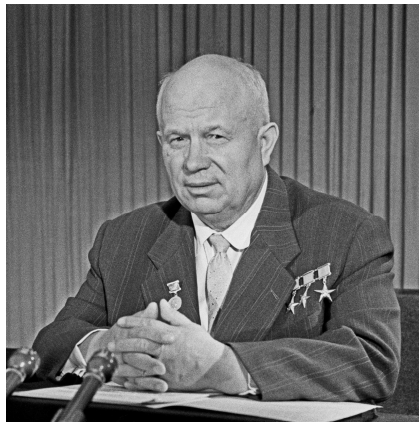


In Uganda RR met his future wife, Zylpha Mapp (1914-2001), an educational psychologist and an adherent of the Baha'i faith. She transcribed and edited his memoir. Photo on right shows Zylpha Mapp-Robinson with William B. Davis and Matiya Lubega at Robert Robinson's memorial service



▲ Following memorial service for Robert Robinson, (inset), William B. Davis (left), Mathias Lubega, chat with his widow Dr. Zylpha Mapp-Robinson. Jet Magazine 4 July 1994.

## Living under three communist Caesars



Robinson's BBC interview:  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/stories-47657670>

