

RUSSIA AND BLACK AMERICA

Lecture Four

**“TWO OLD WOMEN LEANED OVER MY CRIB,
DIFFERENT-SKINNED YET SOMEHOW ALIKE...”**

March 19, 2024

Roundtable organized by the Russian, East European and Eurasian Center for
Thursday, March 21.
I am one of the speakers

**Human Rights
and Dissent**
in Putin's Russia

A Current
Affairs
Roundtable

Thursday
March 21

319 Gregory Hall
3:30 - 5:00 PM

Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
SPRINGFIELD

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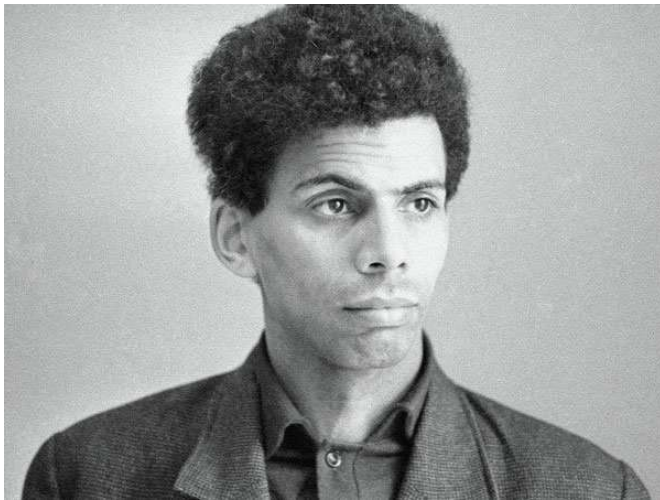
This event is supported in part by grant funding from the U.S. Department of Education Title VI National Resource Centers Program. The content of this event does not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

The musical comedy *Circus* (1936) enjoys the status of a Soviet classic

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVAN0A6OWE4>



Jim Patterson, poet and Black Russian. Like Frederick Bruce Thomas, he was not only a witness to history, he was a participant



James Lloydovich Patterson was born on July 17, 1933 in Moscow. As a published poet in a country where poetry was taken very seriously, he enjoyed considerable popularity in the 1960s and 1970s



Jim Patterson's father, Lloyd Walton Patterson, came to the Soviet Union in 1932 as a member of a theatrical troupe led by the poet and novelist Langston Hughes. Patterson stayed in Soviet Russia and eventually got a job as a newsreader on Soviet radio broadcasts beamed to the United States. He married a Ukrainian woman, Vera Aralova, a set designer at the Mosfilm studio. James had two younger brothers, Lloyd Jr., who was killed in a car accident in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in 1960, and Tom, who became a TV cameraman. Lloyd died of unknown causes in 1942. Below: Lloyd Walton Patterson holding Jim around the time when the latter became a child film star



Vera Aralova, Jim's mother



At age 3, Jim Patterson starred in the musical comedy *Circus (Tsirk)*



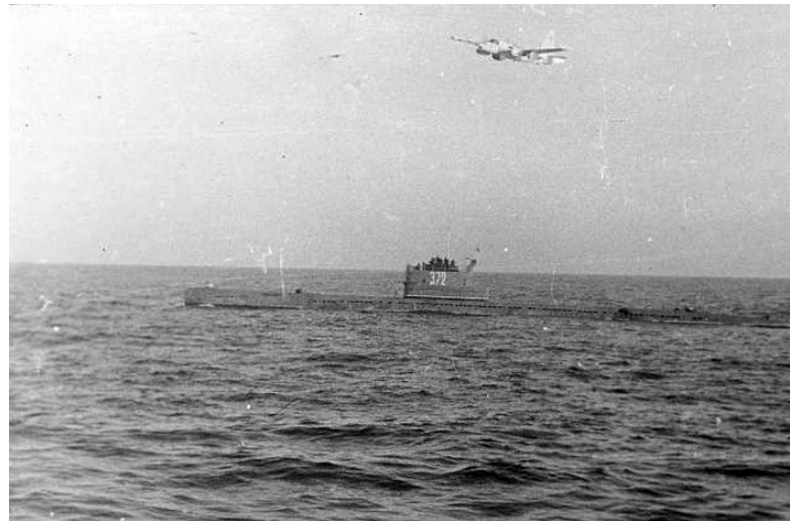
One of Patterson's poems recalls a scene from *Circus*

I don't remember myself
I don't remember the details
I don't remember if I had much acting talent,
but I remember how two other-skinned old women
lovingly sang over my cradle,
both somehow alike and unlike

Patterson was educated at the Riga Nakhimov Naval School, a Soviet analogue of an US military academy



In 1955 he graduated from the Higher Naval Submarine Academy as a lieutenant and was posted to S-96, a submarine in the Black Sea Fleet. Jim's naval career proved to be a short one. Owing to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's military reforms, which entailed a drastic reduction in Soviet naval forces, Patterson, now a lieutenant senior grade, was retired to the reserves. His early poems often contained naval themes



In 1964 Patterson enrolled in the Gorky Literary Institute to study creative writing, receiving his BA in 1969. Even before that, in 1967, he became a member of the Writer's Union, thereby gaining entry into the country's cultural elite. Below: the Central Writer's Club in Moscow, where Patterson enjoyed entertaining his friends



Moscow's Taras Shevchenko Embankment, a prestigious address where Patterson lived with his mother and brother Tom until he emigrated to the United States



As a published poet, Patterson presented a romantic image. He toured all over the Soviet Union and appeared on TV. According to Anatoly Filatov, another Soviet writer, he was treated like “a major film star” (<https://www.proza.ru/2008/05/24/66>). Jim’s last book of poems, *Nighttime Dragonflies*, came out in 1993. Pushkin and Africa are two of Patterson’s themes, as is his sense of being a Black Russian in a country where there was no one else like him



Patterson's former wife Irina Tolokonnikova. Stills from a 2013 Russian TV program about the Pattersons



According to Filatov, Jim was always under the strong influence of his mother. When in 1993 President Yeltsin ordered the storming of Russia's rebellious Soviet-era parliament, she decided to leave Russia for the United States with her son. Tom Patterson, however, stayed in Moscow and still lives there



In 1996 Patterson emigrated together with his mother to the United States and settled in Washington, DC



“I always say I can’t get better without sour cream” (Carl Schreck, “Jim Patterson: Black Soviet Icon’s Lonely American Sojourn”). Sour cream or *smetana* is a Russian staple



The fall of the Soviet Union and its empire was a traumatic experience for millions of families, and the traumas have continued to this very day



Grigory Aleksandrov (1903-1983), film director and winner of two Stalin Prizes (1941, 1950). He is remembered for his musical comedies such as *Circus*, which remain popular in Russia. Aleksandrov is shown here is with his wife Lyubov Orlova, also a Stalin Prize laureate, whom Aleksandrov groomed to be a Soviet Marlene Dietrich



Marlene Dietrich vs. Lyubov Orlova. The image on the left shows Dietrich in the musical comedy *Blue Angel* (1930). In *Circus*, Orlova (on right) plays Marion Dixon, an American artiste: the name is a playful nod to Dietrich. The German star was a committed anti-Nazi and left Germany after Hitler came to power



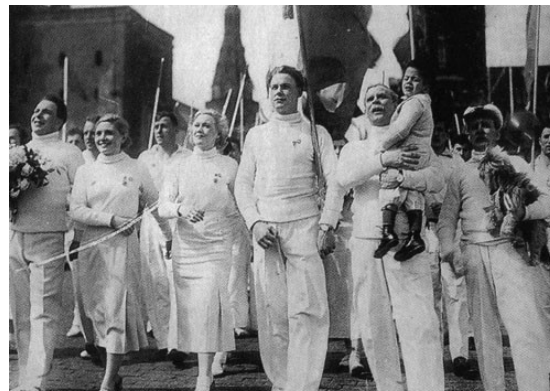
Aleksandrov enjoyed a long career as a film director, but he is chiefly remembered for a trio of musical comedies, all of them starring Orlova, which were released in 1934-38 and became a surreal soundtrack to Stalin's Great Terror. The image below shows the Butovo shooting range near Moscow, where more than 20,000 people were murdered during this period



This poster for *Circus* (*Tsirk*; 1936) stresses the theme of racial justice



Circus presents the cuddly side of the significant myth of communism...



...unlike Aleksandr Rodchenko's aggressive representations



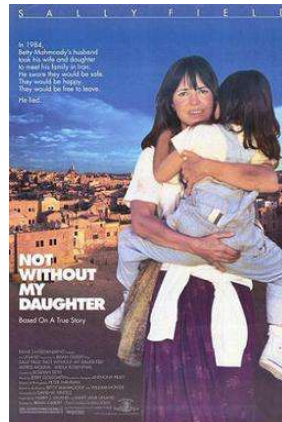
Marion Dixon, known as The Human Bombshell, is a famous circus performer. We soon learn that the “sensational scandal” involves Marion, a White woman, having a Black baby. Note the sinister shadow of a man in a hat half-obscuring the page



Marion and her baby fleeing a racist mob. The image represents a common storytelling topos, or plot element



...as in this 1991 movie starring Sally Fields



The scenes of the mob chasing Marion are cleverly composed and serve to increase the dramatic tension



Handsome, outgoing Ivan Martynov is a dead shot and an all-round hero. As it turns out, many years ago, when Ivan was a revolutionary sailor, he and Marion fell in love, only to be separated by the vagaries of history



Marion Dixon, now managed by Franz von Kneishitz, the German impresario she met on the train, about to perform her “Journey to the Moon” number. Note the Charlie Chaplin lookalike at the bottom of the screen: if Marlene Dietrich was unknown to Soviet audiences, the Little Tramp was as famous in the USSR as he was in the West



In the 1930s the Soviet Union launched several high-altitude balloons into the stratosphere for scientific and propaganda purposes. Ivan's circus number, "Flight into the Stratosphere," celebrates these accomplishments



Speaking heavily accented English, Kneishitz abuses and blackmails Marion over her “dangerous” secret



The two lovers reconnect as the malevolent German spies on them from through the window. Notice the sinister shadow on the ceiling, which resembles...



...a Nazi eagle



Seen — symbolically — from Ivan and Marion’s room in the Moskva hotel, as the two of them perform the patriotic song “Wide is My Country” (written especially for the movie), is Moscow’s Red Square and the Kremlin. This was the Soviet Union’s national space, as it is now Russia’s. Note the imperial double-headed eagles on the towers, which had not yet been replaced by red stars



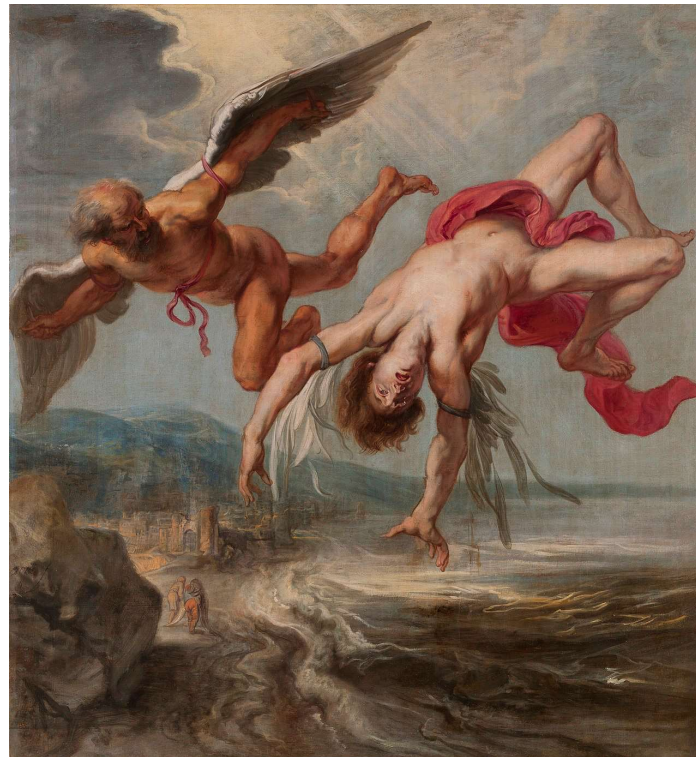
The Moskva Hotel, now the Four Seasons, has a rich and tragic history



The first performance of Ivan's new number, watched by an anxious Marion and a sneering German, ends in disaster. The figure of Ivan lying semiconscious in the middle of the arena is meant to recall a fallen angel



Topos! *The Flight of Icarus* by Jacob Peter Gowy (1637)



Marion's love for Ivan is stronger than the German's plots and threats



...and so Kneischitz sneeringly threatens to reveal Marion's secret



The German attempts to bribe Marion with designer clothes and fires when her little boy, Jimmy, wanders into the room wearing a peaked Red Army helmet



The German goes off on a racist rant



Years later Jim Patterson will write a poem about two “other-skinned women” who sang him to sleep



Okhotny Ryad was one of the first Metro stations constructed (1935)



An instance of othering. "Oh dear, your face is so black. I got you really dirty"



The movie moves to its conclusion, which features a climactic **set piece**, a big production number centered round the “Flight into the Stratosphere”



Compare these two scenes from *Footlight Parade* (1933) and *Circus* (1936)



Meanwhile, as the set piece unfolds, Kneishitz continues his evil doings, heedless of a poster (at the top left of the screen) hailing “the unity and fraternity of working people of all nationalities”



...and reveals to the audience that the little boy is Marion's son: "She was the mistress of a Negro!"



“This is a crime. She has no place in civilized society,” rants the racist as members of the audience, their appearance and clothing coded to represent every social group in Soviet society, rescue Jimmy from his clutches



In the movie's most sinister scene, members of the NKVD, or Soviet secret police, bar the German's way prior to putting him under arrest



Reunited with Ivan and admitted into the multinational family of the Soviet people, Marion celebrates by performing “Wide Is My Country,” the unofficial anthem of the Soviet Union



HBO's hit series *Chernobyl* (2019) reminded the world of the greatest nuclear disaster in history, which occurred on April 26, 1986



The Sarcophagus



Mikhail Gorbachev, the new Soviet leader, had been in office for just a year when the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded. The introduction of glasnost and perestroika, Gorbachev's signature policies, was in large measure due to the failures of the Soviet system as revealed by Chernobyl. Five years after Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union, it was gone



A controversy: Actress Karla Marie Sweet questioned the absence of non-white actors in the cast of the mini-series



karla marie sweet @karlamsweet

2 eps into [#chernobyl](#). it's good! just one thing though... i get all the characters might have been white IRL but they also would've spoken with ukrainian accents + these actors have accents from all over the UK. so, if throwing accuracy out the window in that case, why no PoC? 🤔

7:05 AM - 1 Jun 2019

47 Retweets 53 Likes



182

47

53

Her comments provoked a backlash. Some of the criticism was restrained, ...but there were also vicious attacks and even threats to Sweet's life, as she reported in an article for *The Guardian* on August 7, 2019



katherine
@kathcroissant

Replying to @karlamsweet

no offence, but have you seen ukraine/russia of 1986

101 6:18 AM - Jun 3, 2019

[See katherine's other Tweets](#)



Sanders
@Shadow1882

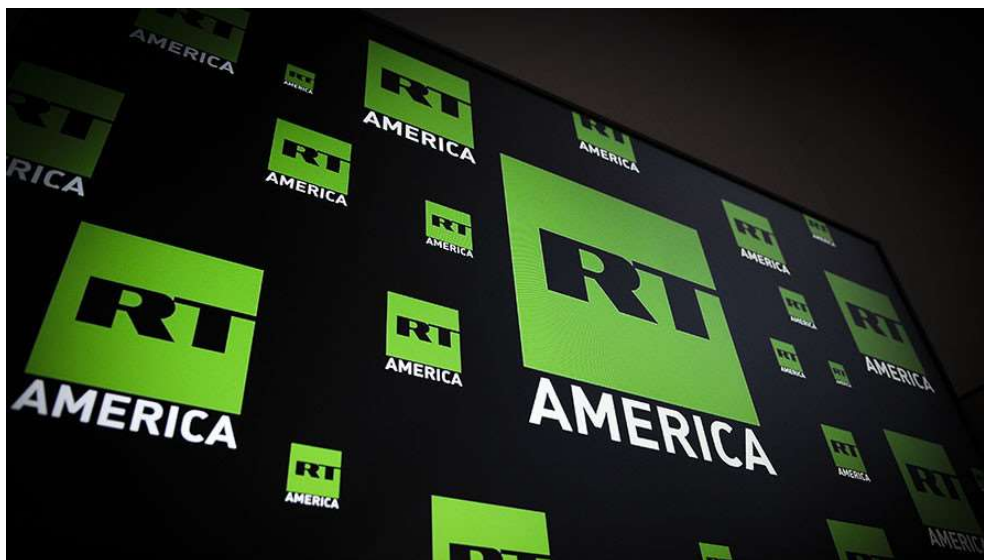
Replying to @karlamsweet

Sorry, but you need to learn history

346 4:15 AM - Jun 3, 2019

[See Sanders's other Tweets](#)

RT is a 24-hour news channel that functions as a propaganda arm of the Russian government. Initially, it gibed at Sweet's criticism, but later changed its tune



In her *Guardian* article, Sweet brought up Igor Khiryak

Three days after my first tweet, a Russia-based Twitter user pointed me in the direction of a website that had seen my comments and had dug up evidence of a black Chernobyl liquidator called Igor Hiryak, whose story was confirmed by a journalist in Moscow. Hiryak, it turned out, had laid down bridges to help people evacuate, as shown in photos of him in his army garb.

Igor Khiryak as a Red Army conscript



In his BBC interview, Khiryak comments : “That’s nonsense, some dark skinned person, possibly a foreigner, appearing at such a site in Soviet times!”

