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Lenin and Black Power

Christian Høgsbjerg

After Lenin's death in 1924, one of the more remarkable tributes he received was from the Jamaican Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey, leader of the mass black organisation, the Universal Negro Improvement Association. The UNIA, with its 700 branches in the United States alone, demanded 'Africa for the Africans' at a time when almost all of that continent was under European colonial domination, and so could be said to be the world's biggest ever Black Power movement, even though 'Black Power' as a slogan would not be coined until the 1960s by Stokely Carmichael. On 27 January 1924, Garvey felt moved to honour Lenin in a speech in New York:

One of Russia's greatest men, one of the world's greatest characters, and probably the greatest man in the world between 1917 and 1924, when he breathed his last and took his flight from this world [...] We as Negroes mourn for Lenin because Russia promised great hope not only for Negroes but to the weaker people of the world.¹

In other words, Lenin was truly himself a "tribune of the people [...] able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects."² As such, he had a special appreciation of the racism suffered by black Americans in the Jim Crow United States, as well as their rich tradition of resistance and revolt. As Matthieu Renault has noted in a recent essay:

Lenin learned of racial oppression in the United States at a young age. His favourite childhood book was none other than Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [...] In 1913, he wrote an article titled, 'Russians and Negroes' in which he emphasises that "the emancipation of the American slaves took place in a less 'reformatory' manner than that of the Russian slaves' and that "the Russians still show *many more* traces of slavery than the Negroes." However ... the "position of the Negroes in America," "unworthy of a civilised country," are proofs that "capitalism *cannot* give either *complete* emancipation or even complete equality." And in conclusion, he writes: "Shame on America for the plight of the Negroes!"³

Consequently, after the revolution, Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks, such as Trotsky, would champion the cause of black liberation.⁴ We get a glimpse of the inspirational and transformational nature of the Russian Revolution on the African diaspora and the Black Atlantic from the following story relating to Emma Harris, a black American woman born in

¹ Hill (ed.) 1987, 549, 551.

² Lenin, 1969, 97.

³ Renault, 2021, 88.

⁴ For more on Trotsky and race see Høgsbjerg, 2009.

Georgia in 1871. Harris had decided to stay after touring Russia in the early 1900s, establishing her reputation as a singer and actress and becoming Russia's first black film star. Later Harris adapted to the revolution of 1917, serving with the Soviet Red Cross during the Russian Civil War and staying in the Soviet Union for twenty years until she returned to the United States in 1933 shortly before her death in 1940.⁵

In March 1918, Harris attended a huge rally in Red Square in Moscow that was addressed by Lenin. According to the journalist Theodore Postan,

Lenin was explaining the meaning of the Bolshevik cause when he spied a smiling, middle-aged Negro woman in the forefront of the huge gathering. Extending his right hand in a characteristic gesture, he spoke directly to her: "The ideal of Communism," he said, "is to open the road for all the downtrodden races of the world. For you, comrade, especially, as we regard your race the most downtrodden in the world. We want you to feel when you come to Russia that you are a human being. The Red Army is ready to give its life at any time for all downtrodden races." Her neighbours hoisted Emma Harris to their shoulders and bore her triumphantly through the cheering throng...⁶

One year later, in March 1919, Lenin and the Bolsheviks attempted to put the theory of 'world revolution' into practice by forming the Third (Communist) International. Lenin played a leading role in ensuring national liberation movements in the colonies were seen as of central strategic importance. In July 1919, the US-based Jamaican black socialist Wilfred A. Domingo, writing in *The Messenger*, a Black revolutionary socialist magazine, now declared that "Socialism" was "the Negro's Hope." Domingo— fittingly — also paid tribute to Lenin as a tribune of the oppressed:

The foremost exponents of Socialism ... are characterised by the broadness of their vision towards all oppressed humanity. It was the Socialist Vandeveldt of Belgium, who protested against the Congo atrocities practised upon Negroes; it was the late Keir Hardie and Philip Snowden of England, who condemned British rule in Egypt ... today it is the revolutionary Socialist, Lenin, who analysed the infamous League of Nations and exposed its true character; it is he as leader of the Communist Congress at Moscow, who sent out the proclamation: "Slaves of the colonies in Africa and Asia! The hour of the proletarian dictatorship will be the hour of your release!"⁷

Tragically, with the failure of the Russian Revolution to spread to the West, the 'proletarian dictatorship' ultimately spiralled into counter-revolution amid the rise of a bureaucratic state-capitalist dictatorship under Stalin. Nonetheless many Black activists still drew inspiration from the Soviet experience throughout the twentieth century, while Lenin's linking of the class struggle against exploitation to the wider struggle against oppression retains its relevance in the age of Black Lives Matter. As a result of what Lenin and the Bolsheviks managed to achieve, October 1917 will remain a resource of hope for those fighting racism and

⁵ On Harris, see Tchijevsky, 2023.

⁶ Theodore Postan, quoted in Featherstone and Høgsbjerg, 2021, 7.

⁷ W.A. Domingo, quoted in Bergin (ed.) 2016, 30.

imperialism. The final word here might go to Nina Simone: “We never talked about men or clothes. It was always Marx, Lenin, and revolution – real girls’ talk.”⁸

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⁸ Taylor-Stone, 2021.