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*A Pair Against Oppression: June Croll, Eugene Gordon, Communism and the Forging of
American Anti-Racism*

By

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Dedication

*I dedicate this thesis to Lydia Cardwell, who taught me the importance of poetry, and to danielle
rogers-candee, who taught me English*

Introduction

The twentieth century was long, and—despite its best efforts—so were the lives of June and Eugene Gordon. That they were a pairing of a Jewish woman and a Black man alone would have raised eyebrows, but to make matters worse, they were both Communists. Throughout their lives, the pair found themselves confronted by mass anti-semitic and racist violence, state surveillance and repression, and social and financial pressure, which oppressed them through identity and class. Though their personhood and partnership came under assault by legal regimes, backward social convention, and material deprivation, June and Eugene held onto each other and shared visions of a free humanity. These visions were at once profoundly universal and doggedly particularistic. Their intersecting and sometimes diverging paths towards freedom carried them through the life-world of the Communist party, the material and cultural battlefields of the twentieth century, and to one another.

The pair's participation in the labor movement, the Black liberation struggle, and the fight for Jewish freedom spans half a century. Raised in cultures of opposition, they never gave up the fight and took their place in the radical vanguard of civil society, the labor movement, and the literary world. They fought for justice on the battlefields of the Great War, in the pages of Harlem Renaissance publications, the picket lines of the Great Depression, and in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s.¹

June and Eugene Gordon's lives reveal a great deal about the successes and failures of the interconnected Black radical and European revolutionary traditions. Their experiences as

¹Gordon, Eugene Francis. Collection. Manuscripts and Special Collections. Sc Mg 117 Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York City; Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs Records. Collection. Manuscript Collection Number 583 American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

activists in the long civil rights movement, as members of oppressed groups, organic intellectuals, and communist cadres provide a unique window into a period of intense political struggle. This struggle brought about a transition in the world history of race, empire, and capitalism, from the era of white dominion to the era of multiracial liberalism.²

Neither Eugene nor June fundamentally changed the trajectories of the cultures of opposition or political organizations they operated within. However, the length and breadth of their engagement with these oppositional cultures and the Communist movement mark Eugene and June as representatives of a greater whole. They are the Communist everyman and everywoman, fleeting representatives of those who lurk in single sentences within more famous radicals' memoirs, in brief acknowledgments of their actions or arrest in newspapers, in FBI files, and in the corners of photographs. Through them, we develop a better understanding of the internal workings of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA); and, more importantly, the conjunctural and organic forces guiding the uneven transformation from the 19th-century world of white Dominion into the one we recognize today.

Eugene and June Gordon's experiences and actions across the first half of the twentieth century serve as a throughline from their respective turn-of-the-century cultures of opposition to the Civil Rights Movement. Their lives show how the accommodation struck by the interwar Left with the social democratic project to its right was not a total capitulation to the ruling classes. Rather, a more complex negotiation took place, and in particular, the Popular Front achieved a lasting victory by shepherding into being an anti-racist coalition that rendered African American citizenship a question of not *if* but *when*.

² Stuart Hall's analysis of the interrelation of race and class and his understanding of societies structured in dominance has dovetailed nicely with Michael Denning's more historically specific analysis in guiding my research. Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018) 172-218; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the 20th Century* (New York: Verso Books, 2010)

June and Eugene participated in an anti-racist transformation, a global phenomenon with global consequences. Shepherded by the Popular Front, anti-racism exploded into the mainstream during WWII. This explosion was the culmination of forty years of struggle, through which turn-of-the-century cultures of opposition, isolated and immiserated by capital, race, and empire, articulated themselves into a counter-hegemonic bloc capable of changing the world. However, the focus here is on the United States, where Black Communists and Socialists spearheaded a radically egalitarian internationally-minded anti-racist movement.³ This movement, which included Jewish anti-fascists, fellow travelers, and radical liberals brought the global struggle against fascism home and took anti-racism into the mainstream.⁴ It argued that only through granting what the ruling classes steadfastly refused to grant in the aftermath of the First World War (namely, independence for the colonies and legal racial equality) could the Nazi menace be defeated.

While unsuccessful at bringing about a transition to Socialism, this anti-racist coalition was instrumental in a different sort of revolutionary change, the integration of anti-racism into the labor movement through the CIO, and into the sensibilities of Northern progressives through the cultural front, and American popular mythology. These successes made a reactionary backlash similar in scale to that seen in the aftermath of the Great War impossible. The stage was set for a later extension of liberal and imperial citizenship to African Americans, with all its contradictions.

Separate turn of the century cultures of opposition, namely, Black resistance to Jim Crow in New Orleans and working-class Jewish rebellion against the Czar in Odessa, defined Eugene

³ Robert Zecker. *The Road to Peace and Freedom: The International Workers Order and the struggle for Economic Justice and Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018) 97-135

⁴Penny Von Eschen. *Race Against Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 22-43

and June's early lives. Having survived a Pogrom and a Race Massacre, each arrived in the Northeastern United States. There Harlem's New Negro Movement and the Lower East Side's working-class Jewish radicalism defined Eugene and June's adolescence and young adulthood. The pair met as these cultures of opposition articulated themselves through the Communist party and into the first politically influential anti-racist coalition in US history.

The articulation of this coalition required an extensive process. During the 1920s, the Communist party grew its organizational capacity and expanded its commitment to anti-racism while African American intellectuals searched desperately for a political solution to their subjugation. In the early 1930s, the Communist party won over many intellectuals, including Eugene Gordon, through multiple displays of material and ideological commitment to anti-racism. Through the mid-to-late 1930s and WWII this anti-racism was brought first into left-wing civil society and then into popular consciousness.

During this period, referred to as the Popular Front, the CPUSA reached the height of its influence. While the Comintern retreated from anti-racism and anti-imperialism during this same period, the CPUSA did not capitulate to the dominant reactionary understanding of race. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the CPUSA became more than a vehicle for Soviet foreign policy interests and Marxism-Leninism. The party's radical rejection of the color line transformed it into an incubator for anti-racism. This anti-racism and its tactics moved from the party into the mainstream during WWII creating a political coalition that would direct the civil rights movement a decade later.⁵

Eugene and June Gordon did not personally forge this anti-racist coalition but were indicative of the traditions that produced it. As members of the New Negro and Jewish industrial

⁵ Mark Solomon *The Cry was Unity, Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) 258-284; Robin Kelly *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press 1990) 113

feminist movements, Eugene and June carried with them the hopes and contradictions of their peoples as they emerged from the legacy of the long nineteenth century. The Communist Party brought them and their traditions together, and while they did not live to see the end of capitalism, they did live to see the end of Jim Crow. This thesis will explore some of the reasons why.

The World of white Dominion and its Cultures of Opposition

June Croll and Eugene Gordon grew up in a world of bayonets and bigotry. In the years before their birth, militaristic and chauvinist empires, financed by captains of industry and justified by racial supremacism, consolidated control of the planet.⁶ The triple burden of racial terror, the disruptive effects of the new world market, and colonial occupation created a world in which the vast majority of humanity faced historically unique economic, social, and political subjugation.⁷ This period (1890-1905) was dominated by tyrants big and small, from the Russian emperor to the colonial official to the Southern white store owner.

For the ruling hegemonic blocs of late 19th century Europe and its settler colonies racial supremacism was an obsession driving everything from geopolitical analysis to economic policy. Those reactionary classes brought into existence through the direct coercion of labor—German junkers and Southern planters alike—did not find it difficult to reproduce their power or ideologies in this period's supposedly bourgeois-dominated societies.⁸ The world's old masters asserted their control over the most brutal and coercive institutions of the emerging modern states, from the officer corps to the police.⁹

⁶ William Langer *The Diplomacy of Imperialism 1890-1902* (New York: Alfred A Knopf 1967) 67

⁷ Mike Davis *Late Victorian Holocausts* (New York: Verso 2001) 6-11

⁸ Arno Mayer. *The persistence of the Old Regime* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1981) 97

⁹ Mayer 142, 326

Most of the world's population lived lives dominated by primitive accumulation, expropriation, and terror.¹⁰ The sheer scale of the unfolding atrocities necessitated new ideologies to justify them. One such ideology was white dominion. Initially articulated by W.E.B Du Bois and recently explored in more depth in Ella Myers's "Beyond the Psychological Wage: Du Bois on white Dominion," white dominion: "is best understood as a pervasive, taken-for-granted interpretive schema that invites a stance of presumptive ownership toward the 'darker world'—its people, land, and resources."¹¹

White dominion supplanted and, in some places, supplemented the divine right of kings as the prime justification for this world of theft and murder. For Du Bois, this was an interpretive schema that had evolved recently as "—a nineteenth or twentieth-century matter."¹² Contemporary Socialists agreed, for, as the Austro-Marxist Otto Bauer noted, "World history has been rewritten as the drama of racial conflict."¹³ Though many Marxists saw the growing power of racial appeals as a threat, before the Bolshevik revolution, they largely failed to develop historically specific understandings of white dominion's different mechanisms and a holistic strategy to defeat it, as large sections of many parties affiliated with the second international were openly racist.¹⁴ Du Bois, too (despite coining the term white dominion) did not link his understanding of it to a broader class analysis until he published *Black Reconstruction* in the mid-1930s, where, as Myers puts it, he classified the specifically American expression of white dominion as: "a vestige of the chattel slavery system that helped found racial capitalism."¹⁵

¹⁰ Davis, 37

¹¹ Ella Myers, "Beyond the Psychological Wage: Du Bois on white Dominion" *Political Theory* Vol 47 No.1 (2019) 8

¹² William Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk" August 1910 in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1920), 15

¹³ Otto Bauer, "On British Imperialism" January 1907 in *Discovering Imperialism: Social Democracy to World War One* Ed. Richard B Day and Daniel Gaido (London: Brill Press 2012), 315

¹⁴ Charles R Holms, "Black Radicals and Marxist Internationalism: From the IWMA to the Fourth International, 1864-1948" PhD Diss. (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2014) 59-60

¹⁵ Meyer, 9

No mental schema existed at the turn of the century which could coherently link differing regional manifestations of white dominion and racialized capitalist imperialism. These ranged from Brazil's 'whitening' policy to the Congo Free State's Genocidal Brutality.¹⁶ Local social formations modulated the scope and scale of repression, which manifested in everything from daily assaults on personal dignity to mob violence and outright genocide. However, resistance naturally followed wherever capitalist expropriation and its handmaiden white dominion imposed themselves. This resistance began as separate cultures of opposition, each composing and defending itself differently depending on the local conditions.

Eugene and June were part of two such cultures. Eugene grew up suffused in the American Black radical tradition, which was constantly composing and altering itself in response to the long afterlife of chattel slavery and the new realities of mass society. Meanwhile, June grew up in a culture of opposition defined by an explicitly class-conscious Jewish Immigrant Radicalism. This radicalism found its roots in a broader European revolutionary tradition. It was consistently adapting itself in response to its migration from semi-peripheral Eastern Europe to the heartland of American industry. In the following decades, the Communist party would articulate these two struggles into a coalition that could stand up to white dominion and work to build a world free from it. However, for that to happen, June and Eugene, and their cultures of opposition, needed to survive.

¹⁶ Felipe Diaz, "Racial Articulation and Labor in 19th century Brazil," *Comparative Sociology*, 13 (2014) 473; Rachel Blau DuPlessis. "'HOO, HOO, HOO': Some Episodes in the Construction of Modern whiteness." *American Literature* 67, no. 4 (1995): 877

Southern Boyhood Nightmares

The world of bullets and billy clubs that Eugene Gordon and June Croll were born into was already sowing the seeds of its destruction. Cosmopolitan imperial centers at the nodes of world trade allowed for a pluralism that could not help but begin to generate opposition to race and empire.¹⁷ Political exiles and radicals built community and strategy far away from their homelands and rebuilt the European revolutionary tradition.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the dispossessed, bereft of formal leadership and organization, built up cultures of opposition and survived in whatever ways they could.

Eugene Gordon grew up in a uniquely African American culture of opposition that was rapidly adapting to a world of wage labor and industrialization. Eugene's father, Elijah Gordon of Pulaski County Georgia, had first sought freedom through emigration with his family and had spent most of his formative years in Liberia. In 1871 a three-year-old Elijah Gordon traveled to Liberia with his grandmother, grandfather, and two of his aunts and uncles.¹⁹ For a decade, he lived there, braving fever, heat, and constant conflict between the Amero-Liberians and the natives. By 1881 everyone else who left Hawkinsville with Elijah was dead, and his wealthy father, George Gordon, then still in the United States, paid his fifty-dollar ticket out of Liberia. When interviewed upon his return to the United States by the *Hawkinsville Public Ledger*, Elijah showed his deep skepticism of emigration as a political tactic. Rejecting the label of Liberia as a "Land of Promise," Elijah noted ruefully that: "he does not think the country is improving any, as

¹⁷Michel Gobel *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third-World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 9

¹⁸ Faith Hillis *Utopia's Discontents: Russian Emigres and the Quest for Freedom 1830s-1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021) 97

¹⁹ Unknown Author, "Negro's Land of Promise," *Public ledger*: (Memphis, Tenn.), 15 June 1881. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033673/1881-06-15/ed-1/seq-4/>> 4

the main efforts of the immigrants, after they have seen the country, are devoted to plans or means to obtain money to return to the United States.”²⁰

Upon his return to the United States, Elijah disappears from the historical record for six years, until his marriage to Lilla Burk in Oviedo, Florida, and the birth of his son Eugene in 1891.²¹ Though the exact reasons for his move to Oviedo are impossible to establish, the town was pregnant with the possibilities and contradictions of the era. In the final quarter of the 19th century, Florida served as a beacon to formerly-enslaved African Americans. Florida, no less than Nebraska or Oklahoma, was a frontier territory. It was mostly considered a cultural and economic wasteland before the Civil War, but afterward, it inspired dreams of profit and dreams of freedom in former abolitionists and investors alike.²²

Where cotton picked by enslaved persons had represented the Old South, oranges and peaches harvested by free labor represented the new. Tens of thousands of formerly enslaved African Americans were drawn out of the deep South to Florida, fleeing debt peonage and sharecropping, many instead attempting to secure wage work picking oranges.²³ A passenger traveling past Oviedo in the 1890s noted its “miles and miles of orange groves.”²⁴ Elijah and Lilla married in 1888, only two years after the opening of Oviedo’s first railroad.²⁵ The railroads brought prosperity and likely Elijah to Oviedo but also brought white dominion in a new industrial form. Russian aristocrats, Confederate veterans, and Yankee investors pieced Florida

²⁰ Unknown, “Negro’s Land of Promise”

²¹ “United States Census, 1900,” database with images, *FamilySearch* E F Gordon, 8th Precinct New Orleans city Ward 11, Orleans, Louisiana, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 114, sheet 10A, family 228, NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1972.); FHL microfilm 1,240,574.

²² Shana Klein, “Oranges from Harriet Beecher Stowe- Mandarin FL” *Southern Cultures* (vol. 23, no. 3: Fall 2017)

²³ Julian Chamblis “The Great Florida Migration” (Lecture, Rawlins College, 2014) Digitized as part of the *Decade of Decision: 1890s* Collection History Engine 3.0

²⁴ Jim Robinson, “Hodgepodge of Pioneer Railroads helped Roll Central Florida on a Path to Boom,” *Orlando Sentinel* December 5th 1993

²⁵ “Florida, County Marriages, 1830-1957,” database with images, *FamilySearch* Elijah Gordon and Lilla Burk, 04 Jul 1888; citing Marriage, , Orange, Florida, United States, Florida State Archives and various county clerks of courts; FHL microfilm 983,864.

together with railroads, but none intended to share the proceeds with those who laid the track or picked the oranges.²⁶

Whatever freedom Elijah found Oviedo was short-lived. It is impossible to know what specific injustice or setback caused him to make the same decision so many other African American families did to move to a major city. In the 1890s, a series of cold snaps destroyed orange crops near Oviedo; a convict leasing scheme began to push out paid Black workers from the railroad, while the local whites grew increasingly violent. Central Florida newspapers were calling for genocide, with the *Bartow Courier-Informant* stating only two years after Eugene's birth: "One race or the other must leave and the whites are going to remain."²⁷ In 1900 Florida had the highest per-capita lynchings in the United States, which it maintained for 25 years. Elijah Gordon, his wife Lilla, and his seven-year-old son Eugene moved to New Orleans.²⁸

The family moved to South Rampart Street, the "Harlem of New Orleans."²⁹ It was a bustling cosmopolitan district, deeply tied into the rapidly-globalizing world system. The absence of the same exploitative agricultural property relations as the rural South granted African Americans a small amount of freedom.³⁰ Freedom that Elijah Gordon used to open up a modest shop selling ice, coal, and wood.³¹ However, this move and his newfound wealth did not guarantee safety for Elijah's family, as Eugene made apparent 35 years later in the Communist journal *International Literature* with an article titled "Southern Boyhood Nightmares."

²⁶Dudley S Johnson. "Henry Bradley Plant and Florida." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1966): 118–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30147739>.

²⁷ Paul Ortiz *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Resistance and white Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 71

²⁸ "United States Census, 1900," Household of E F Gordon, 8th Precinct New Orleans city Ward 11, Orleans, Louisiana, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 114, sheet 10A, family 228, NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1972.); FHL microfilm 1,240,574.

²⁹ Federal Writers Project (New Orleans, La.) *New Orleans City Guide* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938), p. 331

³⁰ Willam Hair. *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1976) 70

³¹ Eugene Gordon. "Southern Boyhood Nightmares" *International Literature* no. 1(7) April 1934 50

In “Southern Boyhood Nightmares,” Gordon recounts three white terror incidents from childhood that informed his opinions on race. The most important of these incidents occurred in New Orleans in July 1900, when a Black man named Robert Charles launched a courageous, violent, and frankly suicidal outburst against the white power structure that had reduced his humanity every day of his adult life. Robert Charles was born in 1865, and throughout his life, he and his people had moved from slavery to citizenship to becoming subjects under a permanent state of exception. While resisting an unlawful arrest, Charles shot two white police officers.³² white militias, armed fanatics, and the New Orleans police began hunting Charles, and they eventually found his hiding place a few blocks away from Gordon's childhood home. He did not go quietly, and while Gordon’s later recollection that he “killed more than twenty of his attackers” may have been an exaggeration, Charles killed at least five more policemen before they burnt the building down around him.³³

White retribution was swift, and at least twenty African Americans were killed by rampaging mobs. Gordon remembered clearly what a white youth and an enthusiastic participant in the race pogrom said to his compatriots as they passed him on the street: “We don’t want to hurt those gray old devils, what we’re after are those smart young N*ggers that tell a white man to go to hell.”³⁴ Robert Charles’ one-man uprising was terrifying to the white power structure in New Orleans not because it was a new form of resistance but because it harkened back to an older, more radical form of Black self-defense. Formal, legalistic challenges to segregation in the post-reconstruction period had either failed or actively worsened the situation for African Americans.³⁵ The mass movements of the Fusionists, Independents, and Populists had been

³² Hair, 121

³³ Hair, 171

³⁴ Gordon, 51

³⁵ Take for instance the failure of the *Comite de Citoyens*, an early civil rights group that bankrolled the legal challenges that ironically led to the Supreme Court’s codification of segregation in *Plessy v Ferguson*.

defused, destroyed, or co-opted before they could create a broad front between poor whites and African Americans. Thus the dominant form of opposition to the reigning racial regime had necessarily been limited to self-improvement, internal migration, engagement with a parallel Black economy. These were all individualist strategies, as much as Robert Charles' one-man rebellion was individualist. However, Charles' brazen uprising asked a question that many, white and Black, felt only a collective revolt could answer.

The New Orleans elite were terrified by the prospect of re-emergent unity between Northern Liberals and Southern African Americans. When Ms. Jewett of Boston, an activist with the anti-Lynching league, held a rally and fundraiser on behalf of the victims of the massacre, New Orleans' high society became so apoplectic that they published her address in the paper and placed a bounty on her head.³⁶ New Orleans' white elite feared a Black uprising, but white dominion so monopolized their thinking as a class that they could not help but see Robert Charles as an exceptional example of an otherwise cowardly race.

New Orleans' white elite remembered the abolitionist movement and saw the real threat coming from Northern civil society. Henry Hearsay of the New Orleans *Daily States*, the most prolific advocate of white supremacy in the city, declared that if: "The wild and heroic stories of his [Robert Charles's] bloody triumphs are continued, some Yankee scoundrel will write his life and depict him as a Negro Coeur de Lion... to inflame the ambitions of others of his kind."³⁷ To forestall this possibility, Hearsay penned an article titled: "The Negro Problem and Its Final Solution." The article made a simple threat, if African Americans listened to Northern agitators and reformers, they would face a "race war, and race war means extermination."³⁸ Hearsay continued by arguing that while there would regrettably be some white casualties in this

³⁶ Hair, 193-194

³⁷ Hair, 196

³⁸ Hair, 91

genocide: “the Negro problem of Louisiana at least will be solved.”³⁹ Hearsay gave only one alternative to genocide, his “humane” solution was that “the Negro must be ruled with an iron hand.”⁴⁰ The only future for race relations Hearsay and many other Southerners could imagine was total subjugation or extermination.

Even supposed ‘Liberals’ in New Orleans shared this implicit belief, and although they were not in the habit of using the word “N*gger” twenty-eight times in one publication as Hearsay once did, the logic of white dominion permeated their understanding of the world.⁴¹ Writer Joseph Leveque lamented in the relatively-liberal *Harlequin* magazine about the “wall between humanity in this part of the globe” but knew that racial antagonism was “Part of the Law of Nature.”⁴²

Reflecting on the riot, Gordon realized that this logic had also infected him, though through a much more traumatic mechanism. Shortly after the Robert Charles race pogrom, Elijah Gordon chose to move his growing family back to Hawkinsville.⁴³ “Southern Boyhood Nightmares” includes Eugene’s recollections of two other near-death experiences with white racists in Georgia: when Gordon was twelve, he was nearly killed by a lynch mob. That same year, he saw the charred remains of his family’s preacher, whom a mob had burnt at the stake for shooting a white man in self-defense.⁴⁴ Throughout “Southern Boyhood Nightmares” Eugene discusses his mother’s hatred and distrust of white people.

A white man's smile of friendship, she insisted, was like Judas ' kiss. My mother taught me that no white man was to be considered seriously as a friend: he was not to be trusted. They were all potential lynchers and abusers of Black womanhood. If they appeared at any time to be friendly, it was because they had “an ax to grind.” They were disloyal ; they would desert one in a crisis, especially

³⁹ Hair, 92

⁴⁰ Hair, 91

⁴¹ Hair, 91

⁴² Hair, 90

⁴³ Boyhood Nightmares, 51

⁴⁴ Boyhood Nightmares, 49

if one happened to be a Negro . They never performed a charitable act for, nor spoke a kindly word to, a Negro, out of the pristine goodness of their hearts. They were Blackguards, rascals, cutthroats, rapists, and murderers.⁴⁵

Gordon, however, spends the first half of “Southern Boyhood Nightmares” pushing back against this idea. He had white playmates as a child, and his teachers taught him that Jesus was a Jew and Jews were white. However, little by little, his childish universalism was crushed by the realities of the world. His grandfather, fearing for his safety, said he would “skin him alive” if Eugene kept playing with a white girl from a neighboring family. Upon telling her that they could not spend more time together she responded with “Coward! My mother told me that all N*ggers are cowards!” This shocked Gordon and “revealed by a flash of lightning the towering and impenetrable wall of hatred that stood between her people and mine.”⁴⁶

Eugene’s childhood chronical ends with Eugene’s mother giving credit to a white man who had attempted to hide the aforementioned Black preacher from a lynch mob, but by that point, it was too late: “When I was old enough to judge for myself, this fear [of whites] had given place to hatred. Hatred was intensified by what I saw white men do.”⁴⁷ This hatred was the result of trauma, not dominion. Gordon would later see race for what it was: “many years later, while going to school in the North, that my mind was able finally to evolve out of, shake itself free of, the grotesque ‘race’ psychology in which the environment of my youth had clothed it.”⁴⁸ Later in his life, Gordon saw race as grotesque, artificial, and imposed from above. Both Gordon and Leveque had noticed a “wall” between the races, but only Eugene identified that the wall had been built from hatred and only he would help to smash it down.

The battering ram that Gordon used later in his life to smash down this wall of hatred is

⁴⁵ Boyhood Nightmares, 49

⁴⁶ Boyhood Nightmares, 53

⁴⁷ Boyhood Nightmares, 58

⁴⁸ Boyhood Nightmares, 58

made very clear at the end of “Southern Boyhood Nightmares.” His childhood trauma now had a purpose: “memories as to aid me in bringing the historical background of that section [African Americans] to the class conscious workers who are making such nightmares impossible.”⁴⁹

Something had changed between Eugene’s boyhood nightmares and adult reflections. He had found a worldview through which he could process his trauma, a universalism that was not naive, and the first ingredient in an antidote to the world of white dominion, Communism.

Throughout Southern “Boyhood Nightmares” Gordon points to hidden and suppressed unities, from his fear for his “yellow playfellows”⁵⁰ in the face of racial terror to the “covert praise”⁵¹ some poor whites had for Robert Charles.⁵² The idea of praise for Charles among certain whites might seem optimistic to modern eyes, but those whom Gordon noted to be white in the 1930s were not yet in 1900, and it was a similar mob to the one that attacked Gordon’s neighborhood that murdered 11 Italian Americans in New Orleans in 1891.⁵³ Underpayment and mistreatment were the common lot (felt in different degrees) by all of working-class New Orleans and the workers of the world. Elijah Gordon knew this; despite owning a small shop, Elijah had to find work as a longshoreman occasionally.⁵⁴ Eugene Gordon said he was born in Florida but grew up in New Orleans, so his father might have participated in the city’s 1892 general strike. This general strike, centering on the city’s dockworkers, was organized by a “triple alliance” of the teamsters, scalesmen, and packers. The strike won a ten-hour day for New Orleans’s workers after resisting racist appeals meant to divide the predominately Black

⁴⁹ Boyhood Nightmares, 58

⁵⁰ Boyhood Nightmares, 4

⁵¹ Boyhood Nightmares, 51

⁵² Boyhood Nightmares, 60

⁵³ Hair, 149-150

⁵⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation. File: Eugene Ferdinand Gordon 1891-1956

teamsters from the scalesmen and packers.⁵⁵ While the triple alliance eventually tore apart, a universalist coalition against capital, empire, and race was not a pipe dream.

Even before Elijah's son Eugene found a place in this coalition he was not a passive victim. By the time Eugene Gordon was twelve in 1903, he was a voracious reader, a fan of Alexander Dumas and Walter Scott.⁵⁶ However, the world he lived in did not give him the luxury of reading without writing. When Eugene Gordon was fifteen years old he began the profession that would follow him for the rest of his life. He penned an article for the *Atlanta Independent* describing the lynching of his family preacher, which they printed, he remembered proudly: "exactly as I wrote it."⁵⁷ Years later, in 1937, Eugene Gordon would describe the "Negro Press as a Mirror of Negro Life."⁵⁸ His life proved that, and despite a diversion through Howard University and then the trenches, he would follow the Black literary culture of the Harlem Renaissance all the way to the Communist Party. Meanwhile, similar traumas, experienced an ocean away, put his future wife, Mary Cohen, on a road that led to the exact same place.

Hyman and the Black Hundreds

Mary Cohen was born between 1901 and 1902 in Odessa, then part of the Russian Empire, to Hyman and Bessie Cohen.⁵⁹ Throughout her life, Mary Cohen had three other names,

⁵⁵ Rosenberg, 34

⁵⁶ Autobiographical Recollections (Late 1960s-Early 70s) Sc MG 117 Box 1, Folder 2, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

⁵⁷ Autobiographical Recollections, Eugene Gordon Papers

⁵⁸ "The Negro's Newspapers"(1937) Sc MG 117 Box 6, Folder 17, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

⁵⁹ Determining this fact was an immensely difficult task. In her 1925 marriage record with Carl Reeve Sonia Croll lists her parents as Hyman and Bessie Cohen. Narrowing down which Cohens crossed the atlantic took substantial work, as did determining her original name. In crossing over the border from Canada in 1924 Sonia Croll lists one Bessie Cohen as her point of contact in Montreal. That, combined with a letter she wrote to Eugene in 1937 when he was in the Soviet Union ending with the name 'Mary' led me to look at the Canadian census records from 1911, where I found one Hyman Cohen, Bessie Cohen and their daughter Mary Cohen, who had arrived in 1907 from Russia.

innumerable aliases, and a seemingly infinite capacity to evade the state's eyes. Unfortunately, it is through the eyes of the state that historians most easily see the past, so our view of her is inherently limited.

Despite being known across Russia for its relatively liberal sensibilities, Odessa was not immune to the wave of ethnonationalism and prejudice which was cresting at the turn of the century. While Mary and Eugene grew up in the world of white dominion, and the African and Jewish diasporas both faced repressive legal and social regimes, their differing contexts are vital. African-descended peoples were some of the many victims of the primitive accumulation that set off European industrialization, while the Jews were the original *other* of European civilization.⁶⁰ These different contexts resulted in differing systems of control maintained by varying levels of violence.

Still, while the anti-semitic regime in Russia differed from the racist regime that Eugene Gordon was intimately familiar with in the American South, the results for those on the bottom bore comparison. In both Odessa and New Orleans, to be a member of the subaltern group meant the daily loss of dignity, the constant threat of legal theft of property, and the danger of physical violence from right-wing paramilitaries and the agents of the state. While there were Jewish merchants, professors, and railway owners during the nineteenth century in Russia, their precarious position meant that none were exempt from the constant threat of state-sponsored anti-semitic violence.⁶¹

Russian Jews did not face chattel slavery but lived under the most viciously anti-semitic regime in Europe. In addition to the limitations placed on Jewish freedom of movement by the

⁶⁰ Cedric Robinson *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Durham, University of North Carolina Press, 1983) 121

⁶¹ I. M. Aronson, "The Prospects for the Emancipation of Russian Jewry during the 1880s." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 55, no. 3 (1977): 355

Pale of Settlement, the Czar required Jewish communal organizations to send four out of every thousand Jews to military academies starting at the age of twelve, followed by forced conversion and twenty-five years of service in the army. Russian Jews were not allowed to own land outside their villages, serve as officers or government appointees, or leave the Pale of Settlement.⁶²

The end of slavery and the beginning of Reconstruction in the United States coincided with the end of serfdom in Russia and the subsequent brief liberalization of Russian imperial policy towards Jews. However, similarly to the Southern United States, the situation had been deteriorating consistently since the 1870s.⁶³ By Mary Cohen's birth, the Czar had banned Jews from owning large amounts of agricultural land, even in the shtetls, their traditional villages.⁶⁴ The emperor ensured there was no more room for the Jews in the empire. The czarist minister Konstantin Pobedonostsev made the imperial government's position very clear in 1888 when he stated of the Jews: "One third will die off, one third will leave the country and one-third will completely dissolve into the surrounding population."⁶⁵

Russian imperial policy towards Jews generated significant unintended consequences. While the Czarist government intended their policies to lead to a mass exodus of Jews, they also led Jews who had been driven out of rural areas to move en-mass to the empire's major industrial centers. One of these centers was Odessa, the largest city in the Pale of Settlement. Ironically many Jews found a place of partial refuge in an area of particular significance to the Russian national-imperial project. Odessa was in the middle of Novorossiia, or New Russia, an area

⁶²Heinz-Dietrich Lowe. *The Tsars and the Jews: Reform, Reaction and Anti-Semitism in Imperial Russia*. (Chur, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993) 66

⁶³ Aronson, 348

⁶⁴ Hans Rogger. "Government, Jews, Peasants, and Land in Post-Emancipation Russia: Two Specters: Peasant Violence and Jewish Exploitation." *Cahiers Du Monde Russe et Soviétique* 17, no. 2/3 (1976): 177; Antony Polonsky. "The Position of the Jews in the Tsarist Empire, 1881–1905." Chapter. In *The Jews in Poland and Russia: Volume II: 1881 to 1914* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010) 3-39

⁶⁵ Michael Aronson. "The Attitudes of Russian Officials in the 1880s Toward Jewish Assimilation and Emigration." *Slavic Review* 34, no. 1 (1975): 1

whose modernization occupied much of the time and resources of successive Russian governments from Catherine the Great to Nicholas II.

Odessa was one of many centers of global trade emerging at the turn of the century. These centers, although located in increasingly ethnonationalist empires, provided a cosmopolitan haven for growing cultures of opposition.⁶⁶ By 1901, Odessa's Jewish middle class, though threatened by anti-semitism, had consolidated a niche in that city (unlike the briefly extant Reconstruction-era African American middle class of New Orleans).⁶⁷ Simultaneously, Odessa's newly-emergent Jewish petit-bourgeoisie began to muscle out the largely Greek-speaking merchants charged with managing the city's import-export business.⁶⁸

However, nothing indicates that Hyman Cohen belonged to either of these groups. He listed his occupation as a carpenter working in a workshop in a 1911 Canadian census, and the vast majority of Jewish people in Odessa were proletarians of one form or another.⁶⁹ Jewish proletarians worked in the city's workshops and small factories, and most were only one or two generations separated from their rural sheitels. Recently proletarianized Russian Jews, subjected to economic and racial/religious oppression, flocked to form and join revolutionary organizations. This growing resistance did not go unnoticed by the Czar or the Okhrana. In order to oppress Jews living in rural areas, it had been sufficient to promulgate anti-Jewish laws and let the peasantry do the rest. However, by the turn of the century, international condemnation of the Czar's treatment of Jews, the concentration of Jews in urban areas, and the growing strength of Russian civil society necessitated more coordination and plausible deniability.

⁶⁶ Patrica Herlihy. *Odessa, A History 1794-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) vii

⁶⁷ Herlihy, 213

⁶⁸ Herlihy, 298

⁶⁹ Robert Weinburg. *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa: Blood on the Steps*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 49

Over the last quarter of the nineteenth century and during the first decades of the twentieth, pogroms morphed from a largely rural phenomenon similar to the semi-regular “traditional, uncoordinated, and terrifying outbursts of Russian rural violence known as buntst” into orgies of urban violence.⁷⁰ These escalating violent outbreaks were products of the ongoing crisis of legitimacy gripping Russia’s political and economic institutions. This crisis reached its first culmination in the revolution of 1905.

The historical bloc buttressing the Russian imperial government was significantly less durable than the bloc supporting the American state. The American bourgeoisie-planter alliance successfully secured control over a sphere of influence in Latin America during the first ten years of the 20th century.⁷¹ In comparison, the Russian autocracy was on the decline. The dominant Russian ideology of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality was unwilling to collaborate with the bourgeoisie or to entrust civil society and thus unable to bring its immense forces to bear. In 1905, Russia was beaten decisively by the rapidly modernizing Japanese state.⁷²

This defeat precipitated nationwide general strikes and the creation of a broad alliance between all anti-autocratic forces (including everyone from the Bolsheviks to the Jewish Labor Bund to the Liberal Kadets). Open mutiny in certain sections of the armed forces compelled the Czar to make a series of concessions enumerated in the October manifesto. This manifesto transformed Russia into a semi-constitutional monarchy but did not grant legal equality to Russia’s Jews. Still, on October 18th, when news of the October manifesto and its reforms reached the city: “A joyous crowd appeared in the streets, people greeted each other as if it was a holiday,” dogs ran through the streets with portraits of the czar tied to their tails, people shouted

⁷⁰ Charters Wynn *Workers, Strikes, and Pogroms: The Donbas Dnieper Bend 1870-1905* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992) 103

⁷¹ Daniel Immerwahr. *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (Picador, Straus, and Giroux, 2019) 75

⁷² See: Denis Warner *The Tide at Sunrise* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press, 1974)

slogans such as “down with autocracy,” and red curtains hung from balconies in celebration. Jews believed that this was the beginning of their political emancipation.⁷³

They were wrong, and on the morning of October 19th, the police were conspicuously absent from the streets, as the garrison’s commander had ordered them to remain home, supposedly to protect them from Jewish snipers.⁷⁴ However, it was not the revolutionaries planning violence that day: one policeman was reported to have said in a later inquest: “if Jews want freedom - well, we’ll kill two or three thousand. Then they’ll know what freedom is.”⁷⁵ As day broke, large mobs of Russians were gathering across the city, organized by a proto-fascist pro-monarchist organization known as the Black Hundreds. Black Hundreds members began distributing portraits of the czar and imperial flags while plainclothes police officers handed out alcohol and guns.

Meanwhile, more Black Hundreds and policemen went door to door, falsely informing Russians that “the Jews were slaughtering Russian families.”⁷⁶ According to official reports, the first outbreak of violence occurred when the marchers (who were armed and shouting “death to the yids”) were fired upon by Jewish self-defense forces, killing a young boy carrying an icon.⁷⁷ Given the level of police coordination with the pogromists, multiple conflicting eyewitness reports, (some of which testify to the right-wingers opening fire first) and the fact that the death of a small Christian child carrying an icon seems almost written to justify a pogrom, this account is difficult to believe. Whatever the inciting incident, that morning: “as if by a given signal,

⁷³ Robert Weinburg. *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 249

⁷⁴Weinburg. *Pogroms*, 262

⁷⁵ Robert Weinburg. “Workers, Pogroms, and the 1905 Revolution in Odessa.” *The Russian Review* 46, no. 1 (1987): 66

⁷⁶ Weinburg. *Pogroms*, 269

⁷⁷ Weinburg. *Pogroms*, 270

numerous violent pogroms erupted in the Pale: at Kishinev, Kiev, Kherson, Akkerman, Rostov-on-Don, and above all, Odessa.”⁷⁸

The estimates of those killed in the Pogrom range from 300 to one thousand, and many thousands more were wounded.⁷⁹ The Russian government made no attempts to stop the massacre. In fact, on multiple occasions, Pogromists greeted the arrival of soldiers and policemen with cheers before continuing their bloody business unimpeded.⁸⁰ Even worse, according to Robert Weinberg, policemen: “discharged their weapons into the air and told rioters that the shots had come from apartments inhabited by Jews.”⁸¹ Policemen also directed pogromists to Jewish-owned stores and opened fire on any Jews who attempted to defend themselves. When representatives of the Jewish community amid the pogrom went to the tsarist governor Dmitry Neidhart to beg him to send soldiers to end the killing, he responded: “You wanted freedom. Well, now you're getting ‘Jewish freedom.’”⁸² The killing only ended on October 21st when after three days, the commander of the Odessa military district made clear that his soldiers would begin to open fire on pogromists in addition to the Jewish self-defense forces they were already suppressing.

The bravery of those self-defense forces and their revolutionary allies saved many lives. After the brutal Kishinev pogrom of 1904, there was a massive increase in the number of Jewish self-defense groups. Formed as disparate organizations by right-wing and left-wing Zionists and anti-Zionist Jewish radicals, they united in the National Committee of Jewish Self Defense. In the years leading up to 1905, this committee had called for the organization of nationwide networks of Jewish-self defense organizations. Collaborating with Socialist paramilitaries and

⁷⁸ Herlihy, 299

⁷⁹ Weinberg. *The Pogrom of 1905 in Odessa*, 264

⁸⁰ Weinberg. *The Pogrom of 1905 in Odessa*, 264

⁸¹ Weinberg. *The Pogrom of 1905 in Odessa*, 264

⁸² Weinberg. *The Pogrom of 1905 in Odessa*, 271

militiamen, these groups armed themselves and defended their neighborhoods as best they could.⁸³

In Odessa alone, 132 armed resistance fighters fell, four of whom were women, and many were non-Jewish.⁸⁴ Militia members organized by the Jewish Labor Bund, the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and the Young Socialist Zionists fought house-to-house and room-to-room battles against pogromists and their police allies. Despite the odds, these self-defense organizations were successful in some places at defending Jewish homes, neighborhoods, and lives.⁸⁵ A nationwide eruption of violent resistance met the pogromists. Self-defense organizations went into action in thirty cities across Russia with varying degrees of success.⁸⁶ They were most successful in Ekaterinoslav, where Christian factory workers rushed to the aid of the city's Jews when they came under attack by pogromists. Organized by the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, (RSDLP) both Bolshevik and Menshevik, these militants engaged in pitched gun battles with the pogromists alongside their allies in the Jewish self-defense organizations, driving them out of the city's Jewish neighborhoods.⁸⁷

Many Russian workers were willing to risk their lives for their Jewish comrades, and more importantly, those workers had formed organizations through which their brave choice had a chance of success. The same could not be said for many white workers in the American South. There, conditions for organizing against racist oppression were significantly worse than in Russia. Russian Jews had managed to organize an army of people like Robert Charles—armed militants ready to resist—and found white allies to fight alongside them. However, it was not just

⁸³ Weinberg *The Pogrom of 1905 in Odessa*, 256

⁸⁴ Jewish Virtual Library, A Project of the AICE *Holocaust Resistance, Historical Instances of Jewish Self-Defense* <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-self-defense>

⁸⁵ Herlihy, 306

⁸⁶ Jewish Virtual Library, *Holocaust Resistance*

⁸⁷ Gerald Suth. "Ekaterinoslav City in 1905: Workers, Jews, and Violence." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 64 (2003): 139–66.

the strength of the Russian Socialists movement or the weakness of the czarist regime which allowed for these comparisons.

Armed “self-help” was a common tactic employed by African Americans during the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of the ‘redemption’ of the South.⁸⁸ Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, whenever presented with the opportunity to combine forces with poor white farmers, as in the Populist and Fusionist movements, Black workers usually took the chance.⁸⁹ However, such chances were rare and fleeting; unlike in Russia, the ruling classes successfully drove a wedge between the dominant group of proletarians and the subaltern group.

A prime example of this was in New Orleans, where a nascent pan-racial coalition was torn apart despite the success of the 1892 integrated strike. The previous strike had successfully gained a ten-hour day and overtime but did not result in the formal recognition of the unions. The original deal between Black and white workers in 1892 had been to divide hiring evenly. However, the panic of 1893 and consistent pressure from the racist press playing on the preexisting racism of many white dockworkers and describing the integrated unions as dens of miscegenation made the compromise untenable. white dockworkers expelled African Americans from their AFL-affiliated unions, and African Americans (encouraged by Booker T. Washington’s advice to abandon labor as a front for racial struggle) began working non-union. The resulting race to the bottom culminated in 1895 with the murder of six Black dockworkers by white unionists.⁹⁰

The violence visited on African Americans in the South was often more untrammelled than the violence visited on Jews in Russia. This higher level of violence was partly because the

⁸⁸ Ortiz, 10

⁸⁹ Robin D.G. Kelly *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1-10

⁹⁰ Daniel Rosenberg. *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism, 1892-1923*. (United States: State University of New York Press, 1988), 37

Southern oligarchy was more willing and able to privatize the suppression of African Americans. Where in Russia, generally, pogroms were initiated with the tacit or open support of state security forces, white Americans did not feel the same need to wait for permission from their ruling classes to engage in mass anti-Black violence. For instance, on the first day of the pogrom in Odessa, the Black Hundreds burned down a Jewish home across from police headquarters to “test the waters” before continuing their rampage.⁹¹ On the other hand, as Paul Ortiz puts it: “Jim Crow gave white men a monopoly on violence usually reserved for officers of the state.”⁹²

Still, the comparative ability of his people to engage in gun battles with the agents of an often-genocidal state provided little comfort to Hyman Cohen. He made the decision many Russian Jews made and left Russia, arriving in Montreal sometime in 1907.⁹³ He would die within a few years, leaving his wife Bessie, his son Jakob, and his daughter Mary Cohen to illegally cross the border and move to New York City. Mary, the future Sonia Croll, June Croll, and June Gordon would begin working in the city's textile mills by age twelve and participate in a walkout within her first year.⁹⁴

Double-headed oppression based on class and identity crushed Hymen Cohen and Elijah Gordon. They both lived through periods of great possibility and hope and great disappointment and fear. Hyman Cohen was in Odessa until 1907 and easily could have, alongside thousands of other Jewish workers, cheered the arrival of the battleship Potemkin with its red flags flying. He also would have known the terror of the 1905 Pogrom. Elijah Gordon knew the failures of

⁹¹ Herlihy, 301

⁹² Ortiz, 62

⁹³ "Recensement du Canada de 1911," database, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QVBC-9W5Z> : 16 March 2018), Hyman Cohen, 1911; citing Census, Montréal St. Laurent Sub-Districts 1-4, Quebec, Canada, Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario; FHL microfilm 2,418,561.

⁹⁴ A Dramatic Skit on the Life and the Contributions of Our Unforgettable Leader June Gordon (1977) Manuscript Collection Number 583, Box 1, Folder 5, Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs Records. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati OH

emigration and the successes of interracial organizing but also knew how quickly white workers could turn on Black ones. He had faced a pogrom of his own. Elijah's son and Hyman's daughter, Eugene Gordon and Mary Cohen, were drawn together by the cultures of opposition they inherited from their parents and their communities. However, for now, a fatherless June would have to make her way in New York City's needle trades as a child laborer, while Eugene Gordon went first to Howard University in Washington D.C. and then to the front.

From Howard to the Papers through the Trenches

In 1912 a twenty-one-year-old Eugene Ferdinand Gordon entered his senior year at Howard University, studying English and journalism.⁹⁵ At Howard, Gordon joined a cadre of Black social climbers and radicals, a milieu with the intellectual and social resources to demand more lofty goals for the Black freedom struggle. In 1915, Gordon met and then married his first wife, Edythe Mae Chapman, a Washington D.C. native and student at the famous M-Street School, where she studied under such luminaries as African American historian Carter G. Woodson.⁹⁶

As Gordon later recalled, he: "was never scholastically or financially prepared to stay at Howard."⁹⁷ This explanation is difficult to believe. Gordon was almost universally recognized throughout his life as incredibly intelligent, while there is no indication that his "well-to-do" grandfather, who had supported his education up to this point, either purposefully withdrew this support or could no longer afford to support him. A likely explanation is that Gordon had just

⁹⁵ Catalog of the Officers and Students of Howard University (1911-1912) Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University Digital Collections, 235

⁹⁶ Cynthia Davis and Verner D. Mitchell. "EUGENE GORDON, DOROTHY WEST, AND THE SATURDAY EVENING QUILL CLUB." *CLA Journal* 52, no. 4 2009 396

⁹⁷ "Autobiographical Recollections" Eugene Gordon Papers.

gotten married, and a war where Black citizenship and manhood were on the line had just broken out. Gordon was headstrong as an adult, constantly barraging editors with demands to explain their changes to his writing. It would not be surprising if he felt hemmed in by traditional academia.

Less than a year after his marriage in 1917, Gordon attempted to become an officer at Fort Des Moines, but competition between African American candidates was fierce, and he failed to make the cut. He returned, dejected, to Washington D.C., where he was drafted. However, his training at Des Moines proved useful, and he was sent on to officer training school and later commissioned as a second lieutenant in the 92nd Infantry Division, First Battalion.⁹⁸ Even though the American government had done nothing to stop the racial terror inflicted on his community while growing up, Gordon's joining military would not have seemed strange at the time. He was not alone in wanting to join the military; African American officer candidates had to "beg their way in" to Fort Des Moines.⁹⁹

Military service and masculinity were nearly synonymous at the time. Young men across the globe felt the social pressures facing Eugene to enlist. However, additional pressure came from Black intellectual and social leaders, who conceived of Black participation in the war as a way to retain masculinity stolen by a racist system and to prove the race worthy of citizenship.¹⁰⁰ At the outbreak of the war, Black intellectuals like Du Bois attempted to tie participation to the tradition of Black military excellence and patriotism. Referencing Crispus Attucks and Black military service in the Civil War, Du Bois argued that through military service African

⁹⁸ "Military Record" (1917) Sc MG 117 Box 1, Folder 4, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

⁹⁹ Lts W.N. Colson, A.B. Nutt "The Failure of the 92nd Division" *The Messenger* September 1919, 22

¹⁰⁰ James Menell. "African Americans and the Selective Service Act of 1917." *The Journal of Negro History* 84, no. 3 (1999): 275

Americans could prove that: “this country belongs to us even more than to those who lynch, disfranchise, and segregate.”¹⁰¹

Gordon’s unit, the 92nd Division—the so-called “Buffalo Soldiers”—was deeply integrated into the emerging Black institutions of the period and progressive civil society. They were sent overseas after being seen off at the Union League Club of New York City, where Theodore Roosevelt was made the regiment’s honorary president after giving an address to the men. While deployed in Europe, the principal of the Tuskegee Institute, the president of Morehouse College, and Du Bois visited the regiment.¹⁰² By all accounts, African American soldiers during the WWI, and Gordon’s unit, in particular, proved themselves worthy of praise: the entire battalion was granted the Croix de Guerre for gallantry during the Meuse-Argonne offensive.¹⁰³

However, Du Bois’ plan failed, and valor on the battlefield did not translate into rights at home. While the official postwar histories played up the 92nd Division’s wartime triumphs their opponents on the other side of no-man’s-land and a growing Black radical movement drew attention to the realities of African American military service. white Southern officers who supposedly understood Black people better than Northerners commanded most Black units. African Americans were limited to serving in the infantry or the rear echelons, where they were used as either cannon-fodder or menial labor.¹⁰⁴ African Americans, now armed and organized, fought back. In August of 1917, Houston police beat and arrested one Black officer from the 42nd infantry regiment without cause and opened fire on another. When rumors of an approaching white mob began to circulate in the 42nd’s camp, 150 armed African American

¹⁰¹ Chad Willams. “World War I in the Historical Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois.” *Modern American History* 1, no. 1 (2018): 8

¹⁰² E.J Scott *The American Negro in the World War* (Washington DC: Department of War, 1919) Chapter XIII <https://net.lib.byu.edu/estu/wwi/comment/scott/SCh13.htm> Digitized by Brigham Young University.

¹⁰³ Scott, Chapter XII

¹⁰⁴ Lts Colson, Nutt. 23

soldiers mutinied and marched on Houston, opening fire on any police in their way. This mutiny fell apart after they accidentally killed an officer, which led to the execution without trial of 13 African American soldiers.¹⁰⁵

Du Bois, at this point doubling down on his previous position on the War, argued that if tried and found guilty, these soldiers deserved their punishments, disagreeing more with the process that condemned them to death rather than their condemnation. His accommodation to the War culminated in his statement in a July 1918 edition of *The Crisis* arguing that: “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy”¹⁰⁶ The folly of unconditionally fighting for Democracy while being denied it was not lost on the German propaganda corps which tailored leaflets to African American troops that drew attention to the hypocrisy that their leaders, both military and intellectual, were unwilling to recognize.

*“The Lying English-American Press told you that the Germans ought to be wiped out for the sake of Democracy. Do you have the same rights as white people in America, the land of Freedom and Democracy? Or aren’t you rather treated over there as second-class citizens?”*¹⁰⁷

While the Germans only drew attention to this hypocrisy to demoralize African American soldiers, African American radicals back home were drawing attention to it for less selfish reasons. In 1916 two Black college students, A. Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen dropped out and joined the Socialist Party of America (SPA) instead of signing up for the war as Eugene Gordon did. A year later, they founded *The Messenger*, a Socialist magazine dealing with African American issues. Its official line, in marked contrast with Du Bois and most Black

¹⁰⁵ C. Calvin Smith . "On the Edge: The Houston Riot of 1917 Revisited." *Griot* 10, no. 1 (Spring, 1991) 97

¹⁰⁶ Williams “The Historical Imagination of Dubois” 10

¹⁰⁷ “To the Colored Soldiers of the US Army” *History Matters a US Survey Course on the Web* Accessed July 8th 2022

leadership of the time, was that: "No intelligent Negro is willing to lay down his life for the United States as it now exists. Intelligent Negroes have now reached the point where their support of the country is conditional."¹⁰⁸ This position was unacceptable during wartime. *The Messenger* was targeted alongside the Industrial Workers of the World, the Socialist Party, and other left-wing publications such as *The Masses* and *The Liberator*. *The Messenger's* offices were ransacked, and Randolph and Owen were arrested.

Randolph and Owen joined the Socialist Party more because of its vigorous opposition to the war than its commitment to anti-racism. The party was racially progressive for the period. It condemned Jim Crow, called for racial equality, opposed colonialism, and avoided the fate of many other Social Democratic parties of the period by opposing the Great War. However, the party leadership stubbornly maintained ignorant and counterproductive colorblindness. In a classic example of class reductionism, Eugene V. Debs, otherwise a leader on the issues of the day, said that the Socialist Party: "had nothing special to offer the Negro."¹⁰⁹ While Debs was a committed anti-racist and made this comment in the spirit of Socialist universalism, it is open to misinterpretation because of the Socialist Party failed in organizing mass opposition to Jim Crow, promoting Socialists of Color to significant postings in the party, and tackling racism within its ranks.

Many African Americans drawn to the radical Left during this period joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or later the Communist party. Before the Great War, Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists led the charge for organizing across color lines and against white dominion. As early as 1886, the Anarchist Lucy Parsons, later a founding member of the

¹⁰⁸Thomas Davis Brenda Brock. *Documents of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: ABC-CLIO, 2021) xvi.

¹⁰⁹ Holms, 70. The exact meaning of this statement by Debs is often argued, and many have stated that it is often taken out of context. Unfortunately, regardless of the theoretical merit of the rest of the piece. Debs's Socialist party largely failed to adequately address what it described as the 'race question' at least until the 1930s.

IWW, called for African Americans to arm themselves against lynch mobs.¹¹⁰

The Black Socialist Hubert Harrison was expelled from the Socialist Party in 1911 for condemning the AFL's rampant racism and praising the IWW.¹¹¹ That Harrison could be so easily expelled for tactical differences while Socialist higher-ups like Victor Berger could openly state that they believed Black people were an inferior race made it significantly easier for African American leading lights to dismiss the socialists.¹¹² Although briefly affiliated, Du Bois left the Socialist Party in 1912 and endorsed Wilson, a decision he would regret later.¹¹³

This was a problem with Socialist praxis rather than theory. Victor Berger openly admitted that his views were anti-Marxist and justified them using a pseudoscientific misreading of Darwin.¹¹⁴ The American Socialist Party, like every other Second International Social Democratic Party (except for the majority faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party), was fundamentally committed to electoralism. This commitment was made in a system where African Americans were not given access to the ballot box. Thus African Americans could not wield large amounts of institutional power within the American Socialist Party.¹¹⁵

Though the Socialist Party did not always practice the anti-racism it preached, the moderate labor movement was even worse. The Great Migration was met by large-scale riots of often-unionized white workers, who saw incoming African American workers as scabs. The leader of America's largest union federation at the time, Samuel Gompers, considered Black people "a threat to caucasian civilization."¹¹⁶ Segregated unions were significantly more common than integrated ones, and the organization that might have pushed the trade unions toward an

¹¹⁰ Holms, 71

¹¹¹ Holms, 92

¹¹² Sally M. Miller "For white Men Only: The Socialist Party of America and Issues of Gender, Ethnicity and Race." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 297

¹¹³ David Levering Lewis. *W.E.B DuBois, the Biography of a Race* (New York City: Henry Holt and Co, 1993) 278

¹¹⁴ Holms, 68

¹¹⁵ Holms, 71

¹¹⁶ Rosenberg, 12

egalitarianism based on class struggle (the Socialist Party) abrogated this responsibility.¹¹⁷ Not that it would have mattered by 1917 when wartime laws viciously repressed the Socialist Party and IWW. “100 Percent Americanism” was the new watchword, and wartime anti-German sentiment seamlessly blended into postwar anti-Bolshevik and anti-foreign sentiment.

Most of the liberatory social forces released by the Great War were quickly suppressed in its aftermath. The October Revolution, combined with the recent birth of a Northern Black proletariat which might embrace it and the return of African American veterans, threatened to produce a revolutionary situation. A widespread series of anti-Black race massacres broke out across the United States in the summer of 1919 that matched the ferocity of the October 1905 Russian Pogroms.¹¹⁸ As in Russia, security forces largely sided with the racial terrorists, and as in Russia, although outnumbered and without the same organization or allies as their Russian-Jewish counterparts, African Americans fought back. This “Red Summer” lasted from June to September of 1919. The violence resulted in hundreds of African Americans deaths across the country and the wounding of thousands more.¹¹⁹

Sensational stories of Black uprisings spearheaded by white radicals preaching racial equality spread across the country. The *Wall Street Journal* represented the opinion of the majority of white civil society and the capitalist class when it argued that: “Race riots seem to have for their genesis a Bolshevist, a Negro, and a gun.”¹²⁰ However, unlike Russian Jews, African Americans were mainly on their own. Formations of armed white socialists did not come to the defense of Black communities, and white civil society broadly endorsed the massacres. Even white Northern Liberals were deeply paternalistic towards the African Americans who,

¹¹⁷ Holms, 92

¹¹⁸ Cameron McWhirter. *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011) 13

¹¹⁹ McWhirter, 13

¹²⁰ McWhirter, 160.

they imagined, were loyal Republicans who accepted the reduction of their civil rights. Praising Booker T. Washington and dismissing everyone to his left with the same Bolshevik brush, the *New York Times* declared:

For all the scattered injustice and oppression the Negro still suffered, the majority of the Negro leaders still held in clear perspective the great benefits granted the Negro race by this country, the fact that their freedom was granted by the sacrifice of an immense number of white men's lives. That in no other country in the world where a large colored population lived in contact with the white race did the principle of the laws confirm equal recognition to the Black man. That is to be said, there was still active among the negro leaders a sense of appreciation... for [the white men] who as a result of the civil war had bestowed on the Black opportunities far in advance of any of those he had in any other part of the white man's world.¹²¹

It is challenging to find a more explicit articulation of white Dominion. white civil society largely blamed all Black resistance to their grossly inadequate leadership on interfering white bolsheviks.¹²² It was not Bolshevik agitators who had inflamed this new wave of resistance to white supremacy. Black radicals from the Garveyites to the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) endorsed armed self-defense; even Du Bois changed his tune during the Red Summer. Claude McKay captured this spirit of resistance in his poem "*If We Must Die*":

"Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
PRESSED to the wall, dying, but fighting back!"¹²³

The Jewish self-defense forces in Odessa, besieged by superior numbers and facing nearly certain death, would have understood such a sentiment.

The Messenger wrote a direct rebuttal to the New York Times article in its September 1919 issue. Written by several officers from the 92nd division, *The Messenger* painted a drastically different picture of its wartime conduct than the official history. Officers W.N. Colson

¹²¹ *New York Times*, "For action on the Race Riot Peril: Radical Propaganda among Negroes Growing" *New* October 5th 1919

¹²² *New York Times* "For action on the Race Riot Peril"

¹²³ Claude McKay "If we Must Die" *The Liberator* July 1919, 21

and A.B. Nut declared the division to be: “a tragic failure. It was a failure in organization, It was a failure in accomplishment, it was a failure in morale.”¹²⁴ Recounting the record of the division, *The Messenger* had nothing but scorn for chauvinist white officers who “played football with the unit because none of them wanted it” and the ever-present “mismanagement and exploitation by race-haters and southerners.”¹²⁵

The Messenger saved even more venom for so-called “slavish Negroes” singling out various Black officers and captains for their “savage brutality” and their willingness to “forget all principles and judgment in their efforts to curry favor with their superior white officers and to win promotions.”¹²⁶ According to the two Lieutenants, one Black Officer was even given his commission for singing plantation songs to white officers.¹²⁷ The article bemoaned these officers but praised others, including the “Credible conduct of such officers as Oscar C. Brown, Charles H. Barbour, James W. Jones, and Eugene Gordon.” Gordon had gained the attention, if only for a moment, of the Black Left. However, it would be another decade before he agreed with their conclusions, shared at the end of the article.

“They fought for alleged democracy. They reap murder and rapine. The call is clear. The economic system holds the Negro down. It fosters race prejudice and repression. The cause must be removed. Remove it by force of arms exerted in *self-defense* [sic] Remove it by force of economic strength and organization! Until the Negro race as a part of the labor class in the United States is doomed to failure. It will surely follow the Funebrial path of the 92nd division”¹²⁸

Gordon followed that path from Flanders back to Washington, where he ran directly into the Red Summer. The local outbreak of white violence had begun when a Black man named Charles Rails was released from custody due to lack of evidence after being accused of

¹²⁴ Lts Colson, Nutt. 22

¹²⁵ Lts Colson, Nutt. 23

¹²⁶ Lts Colson, Nutt, 24

¹²⁷ Lts Colson, Nutt. 24

¹²⁸ Lts Colson, Nutt. 25

assaulting a white woman. A white mob attacked Rails and his wife on the street. Upon reaching home, their neighbors opened fire on the white mob.¹²⁹ Washington's whites responded by initiating a massacre which only escalated when the *Washington Post* called for the mobilization of servicemen to lead "a 'clean-up' that will cause the events of the last two evenings to pale into insignificance." The African American community of the city knew what that meant, and "By that evening, the city's Black community had—by the estimate of the then-head of Washington's Black teacher's union—spent \$14,000 on guns and ammunition, buying arms in both Washington and Baltimore."¹³⁰

Rumors abound that Howard University ROTC was organizing a defense (had he been in the city Gordon would have been involved), and Black veterans built barricades in the street and distributed service rifles. Only the intervention of federal troops quelled the rioting.¹³¹ By that point, Eugene Gordon, having survived his time on the battlefields of Flanders, had made his way back to the United States. Finding Washington, D.C. as oppressive as he did, he decamped to Boston (that city from which Ms. Jewett and the Anti-Lynching League had criticized the Robert Charles Race Pogrom so many years earlier) with his wife.

Gordon, still wearing his officer uniform, went to every newspaper in the city, and after much cajoling, secured a position with the *Boston Post* as the first African American managing editor at a white newspaper.¹³² In the following years, Gordon began his writing career in earnest. He found security and success in Boston and joined the city's small but influential Black middle class. His and Edythe's friends: "included lawyers, physicians, surgeons, artists, civil servants, newspapermen, bankers, officers in the National Guard, and teachers."¹³³ They were even

¹²⁹ Micheal Shaffer "Lost Riot" *Washington City Paper*, April 3rd 1998

¹³⁰ Shaffer "Lost Riot"

¹³¹ Shaffer "Lost Riot"

¹³² "Autobiographical Recollections" Eugene Gordon Papers.

¹³³ Davis and Mitchell, 394

prosperous enough to employ a laundress.

Although Gordon was never among the top rungs of Harlem Renaissance authors, he did have some success as a writer. He won first prize in *Opportunity Magazine's* prestigious short story competition in 1927 with his story "Game."¹³⁴ The story mocked the Middle Classes' habitual marital infidelity, petty social backbiting, and constant desire to keep up appearances.¹³⁵ However, he did not prescribe solutions; he was merely skewering what he considered a fact of life.

Gordon expressed his feelings towards his work in his intro for the first issue of *The Saturday Morning Quill Club*, a Club/Magazine that he founded with his wife and several other Boston authors: "They [the quill's authors] have not published it [the Quill] because they think any of it 'wonderful,' or 'remarkable,' or 'extraordinary,' or 'unusual,' or even 'promising.' They have published it because, being human, they are possessed of the very human traits of vanity and egotism."¹³⁶ As Abby Johnson put it, "they [the club's members, Gordon included] did not want to start a revolution."¹³⁷

In a limited and fundamentally compromised way, Booker T. Washington's plan for racial uplift had worked, or at least it had for the elect like Gordon. He went to Howard, went to War, got a good job in a Northern city and a relatively comfortable life. However, the Gordons were not free, and neither was the African American middle class. Those they were leaving behind constantly lurked in the backs of their minds, and Eugene, in particular, could not forget lessons

¹³⁴ Black Sociologist Charles Johnson created this contest to "encourage the reading of literature both by Negro authors... to foster a market for Negro writers and for literature by and about Negroes... and to bring these writers into contact with the general world of letters.. To stimulate and foster a type of writing by Negroes which shakes itself free of deliberate propaganda and protest" See: David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was In Vogue* (Penguin: New York, 1997), 97

¹³⁵ "Game" (1927) Sc MG 117 Box 3, Folder 8, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

¹³⁶ Abby Arthur Johnson. *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century*. (United States: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979) 91

¹³⁷ Johnson *Propaganda and Aesthetics* 91

of his childhood and the war.

Racism was still an ever-present reality (Eugene Gordon remembered distinctly being infuriated after being mistaken for a porter by a white man in an elevator), and Gordon remembered that most African Americans had not gotten out.¹³⁸ A much more typical experience for the average African American during the 1920s was that of Fannie Lou Hamer, the future civil rights activist. While Gordon was writing *Game*, Hamer was thirteen years old, picking three hundred pounds of cotton daily.¹³⁹ It would not be long before Gordon realized, as Hamer later said, that: “nobody’s free until everybody’s free.”¹⁴⁰ However, his future wife already had, as she was a child laborer at twelve and a Communist at twenty-two.

Mary and the Mills, Sonia and the Soviets

Between 1913 and 1914, a 12-year-old Mary began her career as a child laborer, starting a ten-year stint in New York’s needle trades.¹⁴¹ There she encountered a longstanding Jewish industrial culture of opposition and radical Yiddish Socialism. Since the 1880s, Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews had been building a revolutionary culture in New York City. This milieu produced Alexander Bittelman and Emma Goldman. Ex-bundists, anarchists, and socialists carried to America traditions of resistance from the Old Country, traditions which they used to confront the systems of domination they encountered in their new home.

The Lower East Side, where Mary Cohen grew up, was a center for counter-hegemonic institutions. These institutions ranged from community mutual-aid organizations such as the

¹³⁸ Henry Louis Gates Jr. *Harlem Renaissance Lives from the African American National Biography* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2009) 225

¹³⁹ Kay Mills. *A Place Called Mississippi: Collected Narratives* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 1997) 225

¹⁴⁰ Fannie Lou Hamer. *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*. Ed. Davis Houck, Meagan Parker Brooks (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2011) xxi

¹⁴¹ In Tribute to June Croll Gordon (1967) Manuscript Collection Number 583, Box 1, Folder 5, Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women’s Clubs Records. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati OH

Landsmanshaft to industrial unions like the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), to organizations explicitly devoted to class war, like the Socialist Party and the Jewish Labor Bund.¹⁴² Class struggle within the Jewish community, previously suppressed by the czar's open anti-semitism, was able to manifest on the Lower East Side. Wealthier German Jews who had arrived earlier often acted paternalistically towards their newly-arrived Eastern European cousins. While they provided relief services for the new migrants, they also worked them to the bone. Tensions manifested in intra-Jewish labor struggles that pitted German-Jewish capitalists against Russian-Jewish workers.¹⁴³

Mary was in her first strike action within a year of arriving in the city and was rapidly radicalized by this milieu. There was extensive infighting between the rank-and-file and the leadership in several Jewish unions, especially in the garment and textile industries. The ILGWU once even sent strikebreakers against Jewish workers who continued a wildcat strike after the Union had reached an agreement with management.¹⁴⁴

The uniquely militant culture in which Mary was raised guided her towards radical politics. This was an environment where butchers and landlords raising prices or rents were met with bricks through their windows and as Hadassa Kosak puts it: "a hostile policeman on guard was sufficient to provoke."¹⁴⁵ Mary would have been very familiar with class war. Although no record remains of when she first joined the Communist Party, she returns to the historical record performing her duties for it.

The same year Eugene Gordon wrote "Game" one Sonia Croll became a target of J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover unsurprisingly opposed the European revolutionary and Black radical

¹⁴² Hadassa Kosak. *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers in New York City 1881-1905* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000),163

¹⁴³Kosak, 147

¹⁴⁴Kosak, 163

¹⁴⁵Kosak, 147

traditions before he even secured control of the Bureau of Investigation (BOI). He blamed the DC race riots on alleged assaults on white women and generally shared the same beliefs as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, blaming Black resistance on Bolshevik infiltration.¹⁴⁶ He spied on Marcus Garvey, hired informants in Harlem, and harassed the leadership of any Black organization to the left of Booker T. Washington. The title of a report to him from the BOI office in London, “On Sonia Croll, a Jewess” indicates that his opinion of Jews was not much higher than that of African Americans.

In “On Sonia Croll a Jewess” the head of the BOI’s Eastern European branch paints a picture of the then-28 Sonia and catches the reader up on her actions over the previous years. He had received word from an informant that one “Sonia Croll, a Jewess, age 24, height 5’1, rather stout, was formerly living in New York, is being trained in ‘special work’ (i.e., Communism and Communistic spying).” They describe her as a: “Romanian Jew, believed to be born in Canada, age 20-22; weight about 130 pounds; eyes blue; complexion fresh; likes to make herself prominent, dresses well and neat, polite and apparently well educated; Home address 733 Dominique Street Montreal, Speaks Jewish, Romanian and English; gives lectures on Marximism [sic] at the Labor College, also holds post as recording secretary, workers political party Montreal.”¹⁴⁷

Despite multiple factual inaccuracies, several things about this report can be confirmed. First, Sonia Croll did cross the border from the USA to Canada on February 4 1923, and returned in September of the same year to attend the inaugural congress of the Canadian Youth

¹⁴⁶ See: William Maxwell.. *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*. (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2015) also see: Theodore Kornweibel. *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns Against Black militancy, 1919-1925*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998)

¹⁴⁷ Letters concerning Sonia Croll, a Jewess, 1928-03, Natalie Grant Wraga papers, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

Communist League.¹⁴⁸ However, in those papers, she listed her last permanent residence as being in Montreal and put her mother Bessie as her point of contact. Sonia also lists her nationality as Canadian. This makes one wonder if the story of her working in the New York textile factories as a child was a later invention. Her actions during the early 1920s are essentially a mystery, but she attended a May-day march in 1924 and donated five dollars (not an inconsiderable amount at the time) to a daily worker pledge drive that same year.¹⁴⁹

By the mid-1920s, Sonia was a student at the Workers School of New York City, studying under William Z. Foster, Alexander Bittleman, and other high-ranking CPUSA members.¹⁵⁰ It was here that she most likely caught the eye of higher leadership—first Karl Marx Reeve, the son of Pennsylvania Communist Ella “Mother” Bloor, who would become her first husband and later send her on to the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) in Moscow. More importantly, it was here that she began to develop the skills that would serve her as an organizer and movement-builder in later life. The worker’s school curriculum included classes in public speaking, the elimination of accents, naturalization, and the fundamentals of Communism.¹⁵¹

Sonia’s time in Moscow is less mysterious than the years prior. Instead of BOI records, the scattered recollections of revolutionaries who attended KUTV illustrate her movements. She arrived in 1925 alongside Karl Reeve and a group of African American students, most likely moving through the same red network in Montreal that Harry Haywood used to get to Moscow.¹⁵² KUTV was the alma mater for Deng Xiaoping (whom Sonia studied alongside), Ho

¹⁴⁸“Vermont, St. Albans Canadian Border Crossings, 1895-1954,” database with images, *FamilySearch* M1461, Soundex Index to Canadian Border Entries through the St. Albans, Vermont, District, 1895-1924

¹⁴⁹ “Militant May-Day Marchers” *The Daily Worker*. (NYC.), 26 April 1924

¹⁵⁰ Jennifer Young, “A Fraternal Society With Emmas: The Emma Lazarus Clubs and the Fight for Black Women’s Freedom” *Die Linke Conference: The Yiddish Immigrant Left from Popular Front to the Cold War* Cornell Video

¹⁵¹ “Thousand Dollars Pledged by National Office Center” *The Daily Worker* December 26th, 1924

¹⁵² Harry Haywood. *A Black Communist in the Freedom Struggle: The Life of Harry Haywood*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) 121

Chi Minh, and Jomo Kenyatta.¹⁵³ Sonia met radicals from every continent, learning—among other things—Leninism and military science. She also met a lifelong friend, Maude Katz White, a Black feminist and Communist with whom she would articulate an understanding of triple-exploitation, an early form of intersectionality.¹⁵⁴ She would have also been present for Stalin’s (then only one of the contenders for Lenin’s former position) speech on “the political tasks of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East” which he listed as:

1. To win the best elements of the working class to the side of communism and to create independent Communist Parties.
2. To form a national-revolutionary bloc of the workers, peasants and revolutionary intelligentsia against the bloc of the compromising national bourgeoisie and imperialism.
3. To ensure the hegemony of the proletariat in that bloc.
4. To fight to free the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie from the influence of the compromising national bourgeoisie.
5. To ensure that the liberation movement is linked with the proletarian movement in the advanced countries.¹⁵⁵

Despite its flaws, this was one significant advantage the Third International had over the second. The social democratic parties of Eugene and Sonia’s childhoods did not ever develop a holistic strategy to overthrow colonialism, even less to train radicals from colonized nations to help them overthrow it. Even in the mid-1920s, before the Comintern adopted the self-determination thesis; it had a vastly more productive relationship with the Black freedom

¹⁵³ Michael Dillion. *Deng Xiaoping: The Man who Made Modern China* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014) 26

¹⁵⁴ Jennifer Young. “A Fraternal Society With Emmas”

¹⁵⁵ Joseph Stalin “Political Tasks of the University of the Peoples of the East” *Pravda* May 22nd 1925

struggle than the Second Internationale. This difference emerged for a variety of reasons. While Lenin had been a committed anti-imperialist and anti-racist on the left wing of the Second International virtually his entire political career, non-communist socialist and social-democratic movements in the West were largely hostile to the Soviet Union.¹⁵⁶ Thus the Soviets looked for allies in the colonized peoples, and throughout the 1920s, an analysis began to converge around classifying African Americans as one such colonized people.¹⁵⁷

This analysis began with Lenin, who continually drew an analogy between Russian serfdom and American slavery calling sharecropping a form of “semi-feudal” economic organization. As incomplete as this analogy was, it marked him as significantly more understanding of the plight of African Americans than many Second International Marxists. When Kautsky offhandedly used America as an example of “perfect bourgeois democracy,” as many European Marxists of the time did, Lenin criticized him, saying: “the learned mister Kautsky could have studied this ‘law’ of bourgeois democracy in connection with the lynching of negroes in America.”¹⁵⁸ Lenin recognized early on that America’s treatment of African Americans was representative of the hypocrisy of liberalism itself.

No longer limited by moderates in the Second International, Lenin made sure that his particular anti-racism was stamped into the Comintern’s DNA. When Jack Reed came as a delegate to the Second Congress of the Comintern in Moscow in 1920, Lenin encouraged him to speak on the oppression of African Americans in the United States.¹⁵⁹ When a high-ranking member of the Comintern wrote a letter to Lenin calling for “Negro and other colonial people to participate on an equal footing with European peoples” in meetings of the Comintern and its

¹⁵⁶ Joe Patman, “V. I. Lenin on the ‘Black Question’” *Critique: The Journal of Socialist Theory*, 48, No.1 (2020) 80

¹⁵⁷ Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013), 70

¹⁵⁸ Patman 82

¹⁵⁹ Patman, 85

conferences, Lenin underlined the words “on equal footing” three times and wrote the word “true!” in the margins.¹⁶⁰ Lenin’s support for the cause of African Americans in the Comintern was more than rhetorical. He wrote letters directly to the CPUSA chastising them for not providing updates on their work with African Americans.¹⁶¹ Lenin even called on the CPUSA to organize a national Congress of African American Communists.¹⁶²

The Soviet Union’s leadership, despite abandoning some of Lenin’s other ideas, generally followed this analysis. However, the Comintern was not the well-oiled, hyper-authoritarian machine that later anti-communist historians described it as. Until 1928 national Communist parties, rather than the Comintern, were in charge of organizing “Negro Work.”¹⁶³ This was a problem in nations with long histories of racism and imperialism, as the Comintern could not effectively count as a counterweight to the occasionally chauvinistic impulses of Communist parties in the imperial core. For instance, the British Communist Party did not directly denounce colonialism until well into the 1920s.¹⁶⁴

This complacency surrounding race changed because of the growing strength of members of the African Diaspora in Comintern institutions. The African American, Afro-Caribbean, and African students that Sonia studied alongside at KUTV, began taking up posts within the Red International of Labor Unions (Profintern), the Comintern secretariat, high-ranking positions in national Communist parties, and were central in the organization of George Padmore’s International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW).¹⁶⁵ Black Communists were not always on the same side of the vicious factional struggles that surged through the Comintern from time to time, but they represented a large bloc in the Comintern and its constituent parties

¹⁶⁰ Patman, 85

¹⁶¹ Robinson, 219

¹⁶² Patman, 85

¹⁶³ Adi, 29

¹⁶⁴ Adi, 29

¹⁶⁵ Adi 93-100

whose needs could not be ignored.¹⁶⁶

The timing of Sonia's return to the United States is unknown, but international students typically studied at Communist universities in Russia for a year or two. Sonia's marriage to Carl Reeve and her longtime association with the Youth Communist League makes it likely that she was one of the YCL cadres that traveled alongside Carl Reeve to aid in the Gastonia National Textile Workers (NTW) strike in 1927.¹⁶⁷ Sonia, under a different name, June, would later be an organizer with the NTW, later renamed the Needle Trade Workers Industrial Union (NTWIU). According to Mother Bloor's autobiography, while in Gastonia: "Carl and one of our textile organizers"—likely Sonia—"were taken for a ride one night and after a beating and threats were dumped into jail."¹⁶⁸

At this point, perhaps under pressure from immigration authorities, fearing arrest, or wanting to avoid using the name she had employed at KUTV, Sonia began to use her third name. On November 6, 1929, one *June* Croll served as "fraternal delegate from the International Labor Defense, "encouraging the New Jersey Paterson silk workers to build up a legal defense fund."¹⁶⁹ Despite a brief mention of a "Sonya Croll" speaking on November 14 in Allentown, Pennsylvania, in support of three Communists arrested on sedition charges, and on November 20 presiding over a pre-convention mass meeting of the Needle Trade Workers Industrial Union. It would be June Croll who entered 1930 and June Croll who was promoted to a member of the women's department of the central committee of the CPUSA.¹⁷⁰ It would also be June Croll who

¹⁶⁶ Adi, 77

¹⁶⁷ Ella Bloor. *We are Many* (New York, International Publishers, 1940) 220

¹⁶⁸ Bloor, 222

¹⁶⁹ *The Daily Worker* November 6th 1929 "Silk Conference Plans Struggle"

¹⁷⁰ Choi Chatterjee, Steven Marks, Mary Neuberger., *The Global Impacts of Russia's Great War and Revolution. The Wider Arc of Revolution* (Slavica Publishers, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2020) 268; *The Daily Worker* November 14th 1929 "Lehigh Valley 12th Celebration Marked by fight on Terror"

met Eugene Gordon a year or so later, though she would send at least one of her letters to him under the name Mary.¹⁷¹

Gordon becomes a Red

The Black literary culture surrounding Eugene Gordon during the 1920s was shaped by the backgrounds of those creating it. It was a small world, one that intimately connected literature and politics. Paul Robeson was one of the judges for the *Opportunity* contest that Eugene won in 1927, and that same year Eugene was the managing editor at the magazine where Langston Hughes published his first story.¹⁷²

That magazine was *The Messenger*, but it was no longer a radical journal. Divisions over the Bolshevik Revolution and Marcus Garvey had caused most of the magazine's more radical staff to abandon it. Many left-wing Afro-Caribbean radicals, previously in *The Messenger's* orbit, left to join the radical African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) and later the CPUSA or the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). By the mid-1920s, *The Messenger* had become significantly more moderate, celebrating Black Entrepreneurship and maintaining a close relationship with the mainstream labor movement.¹⁷³ In fact, by the time Gordon joined the editorial staff, the magazine was on its last legs, and within two years A. Phillip Randolph would stop funding it to focus on working with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.¹⁷⁴

The 1920s was a decade of failure for the Left, failure to organize a powerful labor movement, failure to influence electoral politics, and failure to unify their struggles. The

¹⁷¹“June’s Letter to Eugene in Moscow” (1937) Sc MG 117 Box 1, Folder 14, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

¹⁷² Johnson, 55

¹⁷³ Johnson, 56

¹⁷⁴ Johnson, 56

Socialist Party, shorn of its most radical elements, spent the most of the 1920s declining in membership and losing the influence it had fought so hard to win during the 1910s.¹⁷⁵ At the same time the Communist radicals expelled from the party immediately fell into infighting and factionalism.¹⁷⁶ After the heyday of the African Blood Brotherhood, the CPUSA had failed to organize African Americans outside of a small clique of leftover Black Socialists and Afro-Caribbean party veterans.

Attempted Communist entryism into the Negro Sanhedrin in 1922 and the UNIA throughout the early 1920s did not gain the party any friends.¹⁷⁷ From the end of the global revolutionary wave in 1920 to the middle of the decade, very little progress was made in joining together the Black freedom struggle and the Communist party. During this period the Communist's united front policy often forced African American Communists into incredibly humiliating positions to appeal to the organizations with which the Communist party was attempting to build coalitions. For instance, in 1924, Otto Huiswoud's (one of the earliest Black Communists) membership in the CPUSA was briefly suspended after he criticized a white farmer who had spoken against an anti-lynching resolution at a meeting of the Farmer-Labor party.¹⁷⁸ The party higher-ups saw this as undermining coalition-building efforts.

The CPUSA's creation of the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC) in 1925 was a step in the right direction. However, two of its mistakes represent the broader failure of the Left during the 1920s. First, a bizarre decision to have Russian ballet dancers instead of any African American artists inaugurate its first meeting. This was symptomatic of the party's inability to

¹⁷⁵ James Weinstine. *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925* (United States: Rutgers University Press, 1984) 129

¹⁷⁶ Mark Solomon *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans 1917-1936* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998) 17

¹⁷⁷ Solomon. *The Cry Was Unity* 22-37

¹⁷⁸ Maria Van Enckevort. "The Life and Work of Otto Huiswoud" (Doctoral Thesis, University of the West Indies, 2001) 34

appeal to African Americans on their terms, and it certainly did not set the meeting off on the right foot. Several of the ‘Russian’ ballet dancers were not Russian, and Harry Haywood remembered: “A young blonde woman in the “ballet” had been shocked by the complexion of most of the audience, which she had apparently expected to be of a different hue. Loudly, in a broad Texas accent, she exclaimed. ‘Ah’m not goin’ ta dance for these niggahs!’ Somebody shouted, “Throw the cracker bitches out!” and the “Russian” dance group hurriedly left the hall.”¹⁷⁹

Secondly, many African American workers gathered at the ANLC were baffled by Lovett Fort-Whiteman, the organization’s founder and first African American communist, who, according to Harry Haywood, had dressed up for the meeting as a “Black Cossack.”¹⁸⁰

The party’s cultural ineptitude coupled with a total inability to combine efforts with the more moderate and established factions of the Black Left crippled any chance at effectiveness. A. Phillip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car porters and the ANLC went at each other's throats almost immediately. At one point, infighting over the proper tactics to use during a strike led the Communists to accuse Randolph of being in the pocket of the AFL’s racist higher-ups, an accusation which Randolph called the: “sorriest nonsense and silliest tommyrot which could only emanate from crack-brained fanatics or low-grade morons.”¹⁸¹ The Communist party, by the end of the 1920s, had failed to build a mass interracial movement to end Jim Crow or to fight capitalism. Lamenting the state of the Party’s outreach to African Americans in 1928, white Chicago Communist Party Negro Committee leader Lydia Beidel observed, “There are only two Negroes in the party and neither will speak.”¹⁸² This was not an isolated problem; according to

¹⁷⁹ Haywood. *A Black Communist in the Freedom Struggle* 112

¹⁸⁰ Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008) 32

¹⁸¹ Solomon, 63

¹⁸²“Correspondence of Lydia Beidell to B Sklar”, 24th October 1928. Box 1, Folder 6. Chicago Communist Party Archives, University of Chicago Library Archives, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

James W. Ford in a report to the Comintern, there were less than fifty Black members of the CPUSA in 1929.¹⁸³

Many Communists in the late 1920s were fanatics, but few were morons, and their efforts had not been a complete waste. Just as the absence of the Czar's open anti-semitism allowed class struggle to manifest in the Jewish Lower East Side, the absence of Jim Crow led to the emerging class consciousness in Harlem. This consciousness had even begun to reach the Black intelligencia, and Du Bois, once decisively to the right of Randolph, by 1928, refused to condemn the ANLC and took note of the Communist's belief in racial equality.¹⁸⁴ The ANLC also successfully recruited several future Black leaders within the CPUSA and the Comintern, including George Padmore, future head of the ITUCNW, and James Ford, the Communist party nominee for vice president in 1932.¹⁸⁵

However, African American civil society and its intelligencia were more shopping for options as the 1920s turned to the 1930s, than prepared to become full-blown Communists. There was a growing recognition that Harlem could not serve as a Mecca for African Americans because of its rapidly growing income inequality and the divide between the Black elite and the Black workers. However, there is no uniformity in the proposed solutions. Eugene Gordon's writings attest to this. Although *Game* had been a success, Gordon's primary role until 1928 was as a pundit and a tastemaker.¹⁸⁶ His articles included top-ten lists of the best Black Newspapers and the most interesting African Americans. As late as 1930, Gordon ranked Oscar De Priest, the pro-business Black republican congressman from Chicago (and the first Black congressman in

¹⁸³ Adi, 52

¹⁸⁴ Solomon, 54

¹⁸⁵ Solomon, 56-57

¹⁸⁶ Eugene Gordon. "The Negro Press." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140 (1928): 248-56

twenty years) as the second most interesting African American in the United States.¹⁸⁷ At the same time the articles he chose to highlight as the best editorials of the month in *The Messenger* were standard fare for the publication, which supported Black entrepreneurship and buying from Black businesses.¹⁸⁸

Two of Gordon's articles help to frame his intellectual transition "Negro Inhibitions" and "The Negro's New Leadership." In "Negro Inhibitions" published in the *American Mercury* in 1928, Gordon draws attention to the Black Middle Class's self-hatred "The white man, no doubt, has placed an excess valuation upon his white skin and 'good' hair, but the middle-class Afraamerican is generally willing to sacrifice his staunchest Black friend to possess either."¹⁸⁹

Three critical pieces of Gordon's later ideology emerge clearly for the first time in this piece, his Feminism, his conception of African Americans as a Nation, and his genuine *political* as opposed to personal hatred for the Black Elite. In "Negro Inhibitions" he begins by drawing attention to the colorism so common in the Black community, describing how social clubs would always show a preference for inviting light-skinned African Americans with straightened hair. He notes a dark-skinned African American man faces the issue that unless they "drive a car, is fairly intelligent, and a fool with his money... even the Blackest sister will accept him only as a final and desperate resort to escape spinsterhood and a lifetime of domestic drudgery."¹⁹⁰

However, Gordon notes, "But if the road of life for a Black boy is rough with pebbles, the way of the Black woman is strewn with boulders"¹⁹¹ This sort of sentiment was rarely expressed in the

¹⁸⁷Micheal Brandon, "Black CHICAGO'S NEW DEAL CONGRESSMEN: MIGRATION, GHETTOIZATION, AND THE ORIGINS OF CIVIL RIGHTS POLITICS," PhD Diss., (University of Florida Dissertations Publishing, 2015) 221

¹⁸⁸ Eugene Gordon "Best Editorial for June" *The Messenger* September 1927 277

¹⁸⁹ Eugene Gordon "Negro inhabitions" *American Mercury* 1928, 3

¹⁹⁰ Gordon, "Negro Inhabitions" 4

¹⁹¹ Gordon, "Negro Inhabitions" 4

late 1920s, this sentiment bares a striking resemblance to one of the Comintern's directives on the Negro Question issued that same year:

By reason of being unorganized to an even greater extent than male Negro workers, they [Black Women] are the most exploited section. The A.F. of L. bureaucracy naturally exercises toward them a double hostility, by reason of both their color and sex. It therefore becomes an important task of the Party to bring the Negro women into the economic and political struggle.¹⁹²

Gordon describes how light-skinned African American women would refuse to be seen with their Darker-skinned friends when near white people. Here Gordon launches his first political salvo against the Black elite.

"I would submit that there are many whites who are now more liberal on this question than most Negroes are. There comes instantly to mind a number of them, men and women, who would sacrifice their friendships with their own people rather than be accused of such scurvy treatment of their Black friends. But the Ku Klux psychology permeates the colored brother's and sister's system. There are numerous recorded instances of Negroes being refused courtesies by their own kind because some Caucasian has withheld courtesies. There is nowhere a tyrant more oppressive than the Afraamerican lackey at the door of a Jim-crow theater, eating place, or apartment house... Vicariously, these peculiar folk, in such a situation, enjoy all the thrills of a klansmen at a Mississippi Human Barbecue"¹⁹³

Although Gordon acknowledges that he favors white liberals over African American quislings, this criticism encouraged complacent middle-class African Americans to admit that their situation was changeable. Over and over in the piece, he expressed frustration at the Black elite's refusal to take pride in being Black. He notes that "the Average AfraAmerican would rather be proper and unhappy than naturally himself and in paradise,"¹⁹⁴ Gordon does also

¹⁹² Communist International Negro Commission. 1928. "1928 Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States." (1928) in *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History 1919-1929* Ed. Philip Foner, James Allen (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) 195

¹⁹³ Gordon, "Negro Inhabitions" 5

¹⁹⁴ Gordon, "Negro Inhabitions" 6

criticize white people, though through roundabout criticisms of the Black elite, arguing that: “among the middle-class it is better to be a moron, like your white neighbor, than an intelligent curiosity minded-individuality”¹⁹⁵ He goes on to note that African Americans in the North refuse to be seen with each other outside of specific social gatherings, the fear being that in any given establishment: “the management, naturally concluding that Black folk desire the companionship of Black folk, will itself graciously see to it thereafter that they always sit together.”¹⁹⁶

Most importantly, Gordon uses new words to describe his people. For the first time, he uses the terms Afraamerican rather than Negro. He describes African American cultural customs and African American dress almost like an ethnographer. Eugene’s understanding of African Americans has moved from seeing them as Americans with ‘American’ culture that happen to have darker skin to understanding African Americans as a distinct people. Although he does not yet use the term nation to describe African Americans as the Communist party later would, his use of the term “Afraamerica” which describes a location, rather than just a people, indicates that his thinking was moving in that direction.¹⁹⁷ The term Afro-American did not enter the Black mainstream until the mid-1960s. So Gordon’s use of the terms Aframerica and Afraamerican suggest that he was ahead of his time of thinking about the relationship between race, place, and the diversity of the Black experience.¹⁹⁸

Throughout the piece, Gordon shows that he is tired of what he describes as the “freudian” inhibitions holding back what he considers natural Black cultural practices. However, Gordon does not blame these ‘inhibitions’ on culture.¹⁹⁹ He maintains a materialist analysis throughout this entire piece. He explains nearly every one of the inhibitions he lists using one

¹⁹⁵ Gordon, “Negro Inhabitions” 11

¹⁹⁶ Gordon, “Negro Inhabitions” 7

¹⁹⁷ Gordon, “Negro Inhabitions” 4

¹⁹⁸ See: James Houk. “The Terminological Shift from ‘Afro-American’ to ‘African-American’: Is the Field of Afro-American Anthropology Being Redefined?” *Human Organization* 52, no. 3

¹⁹⁹ Gordon, “Negro Inhabitions” 1

economic/historical factor or another. According to Gordon, the African American middle class's unwillingness to use straight razors came from a time when "The tool was the Black man's only offensive or defensive weapon. It grew in popularity for a number of reasons, it could be easily concealed on the person. It was more easily procurable than a firearm. It did a rather messy job, but an effective one. And it made no noise. But now it is taboo."²⁰⁰ As for Black women's cultural unwillingness to wear bright colors at the time, he blames that on "The white man's belief that the Negro is a childish race, and silly about flashy colors"²⁰¹

However, Gordon is not just tired of how these inhibitions restrict cultural practices. He is also of how these inhibitions paint African Americans into a corner separate from the rest of America. For instance, he mentions how middle-class African American women will never buy a watermelon unless ordered: "from a Black tradesmen, by telephone, insisting that it be concealed in a Black bag, and delivered on a moonless night by a Black delivery boy."²⁰² He argues that this is absurd since his economic statistics proved that white people eat more watermelons than Black people. Gordon shows through this piece that he is tired of African American's deep desire to assimilate, but also the way that particularity isolates their community.

A decade of discussion on "the Negro Problem" had left African American intellectuals exhausted and no closer to a solution. The Black economist Abraham Harris, Jr. represented a generation of new liberal African American thinkers when he declared, "Some times I wish I could sit on the Woolworth Building and say God-damn the Negro and his problems so loud that the pronunciation would ring in the ears of a universal audience."²⁰³ Though Black Capitalism and racial particularism disillusioned Gordon, he found a different solution. It is into this tension

²⁰⁰ Gordon, "Negro Inhabitions" 14

²⁰¹ Gordon, "Negro Inhabitions" 10

²⁰² Gordon, "Negro Inhabitions" 15

²⁰³ Jonathan Halloway. *Confronting the Veil: Abraham Harris Junior., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunchie, 1919-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 116

between particularity and universality that the Communist Party boldly strode and presented its case to African American intellectuals. For Gordon, who was keeping one eye on the liberation of his nation and the other on the liberation of his class, the party provided a way to reconcile the two.

The beginning of the Great Depression coincided with a series of dramatic events that reframed the views of many African Americans towards the Communist Party, from an odd cult to a vital ally.²⁰⁴ Prominent Black Communists like Harry Haywood maintained that this shift occurred because of a change in Comintern doctrine. In 1928 at the sixth congress of the Comintern, it entered into its “Third Period” where it predicted an immediate revolutionary crisis across the planet.²⁰⁵ The Comintern ordered its affiliated parties to sever all connections with more moderate organizations. It issued a new set of “Theses on the Negro Question” The Comintern’s Negro Commission, led by Harry Haywood, adopted a resolution calling for “Black self-determination on the basis of a separate nation in the Black belt.”²⁰⁶ Discussion of this thesis dominated scholarship on Black-Communist relations during the Cold War. One of the few things that the Independent Socialist George Padmore and the hardline Marxist-Leninist Harry Haywood had in common was their belief that the self-determination thesis was decisive in bringing about the mass organization of African American workers in the United States under the Communist party banner.

However, more recent scholarship disputes this proposition. Firstly, Black Communists did not universally support the self-determination thesis. Otto Huiswoud and Cyril Briggs, two longtime Black Communist Party members with roots in the ABB and SPA, respectively,

²⁰⁴ Solomon 185-200

²⁰⁵ Solomon, 68

²⁰⁶ Adi, 70

claimed the thesis “smelt of Garveyism.”²⁰⁷ Secondly, the self-determination thesis was only one of 25 separate directives sent from the Comintern to the CPUSA on “the Negro Question.”²⁰⁸ Out of all these directives the Self Determination Thesis is best remembered because it supposedly marked the Comintern’s open embrace of Black Nationalism, however the African-American Republic which it called for would only be brought into existence after a hypothetical successful Socialist revolution. Importantly, this republic was to be a *Black Belt* Republic, localized in a specific area, rather than a *Black Republic*, because the Communist party had not abandoned cultural pluralism and cosmopolitanism. Rather than embracing Black Separatism, the Communist Party had endorsed the idea that ethnic autonomy and cultural pluralism were not natural opponents to one another. The Comintern clarified in a later resolution on the ‘Negro Question’ issued in 1930 that:

“The broad masses of the Negro population in the big industrial centers of the North are, however, making no efforts whatsoever to maintain and cultivate a national aloofness, they are, on the contrary, working for assimilation. This effort of the Negro masses can do much in the future to facilitate the progressive process of amalgamating the whites and Negroes into one nation, and it is under no circumstances the task of the Communists to give support to bourgeois nationalism in its fight with the progressive assimilation tendencies of the Negro working masses.”²⁰⁹

More vital in the short term (and in the long term, seeing as the revolution that would have established a Black Belt Republic did not materialize) were other directives issued in 1928. For instance, despite the third period’s intense condemnation of moderate socialism and the moderate labor movement, in directive no. 9, the Comintern distinguished between working-class Black organizations and bourgeoisie and petty bourgeois institutions and called for

²⁰⁷ Adi,72

²⁰⁸ Communist International Negro Commission. 1928. 190-196

²⁰⁹ Communist International Negro Commission. “1930 Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States” *The Communist International* 8 No.2 (February 1st 1931), 26

the party to intensify work within the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) and other moderate African American unions.²¹⁰ The resolution even went as far as to call for the application of “united front tactics for specific demands to the existing Negro petty bourgeois organizations.”²¹¹

This directive was given during the same period that the Communist party condemned the Social Democrats in Germany as “Social-Fascists” and was severing ties with moderate labor movements worldwide. While the radicalism of the Self-Determination thesis is well remembered, this directive, which prefigures the later widespread engagement of the Comintern with Social Democratic and Liberal Political institutions in the mid-1930s, is not. In recognizing the tactical necessity of flexibility when interacting with Black organizations, both working-class and bourgeoisie, the popular front began in Black America five years before it began in the rest of the United States.²¹²

Other important directives during this period include directive No. 13, which criticized racism within the Communist Party, and directive No. 14, which ordered the commencement of efforts to: “to stamp out all forms of antagonism, or even indifference among our white comrades toward the Negro work.”²¹³ This commitment to confront indifference to the Black freedom struggle, as opposed to just stamping out outright racism, formalized the Communist party’s commitment to anti-racism in a way never before attempted by a white-majority radical organization. The CPUSA did this not just because it was the morally-correct thing to do but because it recognized that: “the Negro masses will not be won for the revolutionary struggles until such time as the most conscious section of the white workers show, by action, that they are

²¹⁰ Communist International Commission “1928 Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States” 193

²¹¹ Communist International Commission “1928 Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States” 193

²¹² Communist International Commission “1928 Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States” 195

²¹³ Communist International Commission “1928 Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States” 194

fighting with the Negroes against all racial discrimination and persecution.”²¹⁴ This was a far cry from Debs’ argument that the Socialist Party had nothing special to offer African Americans.

It was through implementing this new commitment to anti-racism in the Communist Party’s internal culture and praxis that it brought large numbers of African Americans into its orbit, not through its theoretical position towards the political independence of a post-revolutionary Black State. Even in the area where this Black state was supposed to emerge, it was praxis, not theory, that most inspired African American sharecroppers to join Communist-party-backed unions. Robin Kelly’s *Hammer and Hoe* shows that the Alabama Communist Party placed remarkably minimal emphasis on eventual political independence in its outreach to Black sharecroppers.²¹⁵ Instead, the CPUSA followed closely another pair of directives from the Comintern, namely, that the CPUSA was to prioritize the special needs of African Americans by emphasizing “organizing active resistance against lynching, Jim Crowism, segregation and all other forms of oppression of the Negro population.”²¹⁶ While also maintaining the universal nature of the Party’s goals, arguing that: “The Negro problem must be part and parcel of all and every campaign conducted by the Party. In the election campaigns, trade union work, the campaigns for the organization of the unorganized, anti-imperialist work, labor party campaign, International Labor Defense, etc.,”²¹⁷

African Americans within the Communist Party would no longer be met with alternating bouts of class-reductionism or a patronizing separation of their efforts from the wider party. The rapid growth in African American engagement with the Communist party resulted from the party’s actions in response to Comintern directives. However, these directives had emerged from

²¹⁴ Communist International Commission “1928 Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States” 195

²¹⁵ Kelly. *Hammer and Hoe*, 225

²¹⁶ Communist International Commission “1928 Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States” 192

²¹⁷ Communist International Commission “1928 Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States” 194

an increase in African American influence in the CPUSA and Black influence in the Comintern. By 1930, six African Americans—Otto Huiswoud, Cyril Briggs, John Hall, Otto Hall, John Henry, and Edward Walsh—were on the central committee of the CPUSA.²¹⁸ While in August of the same year, the first meeting of the International Conference of Negro Workers was held in Hamburg, representing the Comintern's first attempt to bring together representatives of the African diaspora from across the planet.²¹⁹

The growth of engagement between the CPUSA and African Americans, as well as between the Comintern and the African Diaspora globally, cannot be placed on a single change in doctrine or tactics. The African American Community in the 1920s was not a monolith, the African diaspora even less so. Different things drew different sections of each towards the Communist party. The ITUCNW coordinated with African independence activists and embryonic trade unions.²²⁰ While back in the United States, the CPUSA's new policy towards Trade Unions (discussed in June's next section) helped to draw African American workers to Communist-led Unions.²²¹ However, a series of highly publicized examples of the Communist party and the Comintern's commitment to anti-racism, buttressed by the Comintern's new set of directives, drew in large sections of African American intelligentsia and civil society, including Eugene Gordon.

In July 1930, a trial was held in the Soviet Union of six white American migrant workers accused of assaulting another Black American migrant worker named Robert Robinson.²²² Two intoxicated white workers assaulted Robinson when he refused to show the deference they had come to expect in the United States. Despite being outnumbered, Robinson managed to get his

²¹⁸ Solomon, 97

²¹⁹ Adi, 87

²²⁰ Adi, 123-195

²²¹ Solomon 103-111

²²² Meredith Roman. *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of US Racism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007) 32-33

teeth around the neck of one of his assailants until they were torn away from each other by other intervening workers. The Soviet press was infuriated by the incident, and an “international workers committee” was formed out of foreign and Soviet workers from across the Soviet Union to place Robinson’s attackers on trial.²²³ They were convicted of “Racial and National Chauvinism” and expelled from the USSR.²²⁴

Thus in January 1931, when Finnish Communist August Yokinen refused admittance of several African American party members to a New York City Finnish Workers Club dance, the blueprint already existed to deal with him. Harry Haywood made this incident a cause celebre within the Party and used a trial located in Harlem to emphasize the necessity of anti-racist unity. The so-called “Yokinen trial” more resembled a mass display of anti-racist piety than the later Stalinist show trials, as a massive banner hung over the trial emblazoned with the words “Race inferiority is a ruling-class lie: Smash the Jim Crow Laws and Practices.”²²⁵ The white Communist prosecutor eventually triumphed over Yokinen’s appointed Black Communist defense attorney. Yokinen was expelled from the party with the condition, representing an early form of restorative justice, that he would be readmitted if he engaged in the struggle against Jim Crow.²²⁶

Less than a month after the Yokinen trial, the Communist Party’s legal defense team, International Labor Defense (ILD), went into action to protect the “Scottsboro boys” in one of the most climactic trials of the 20th century. The nine Scottsboro boys accused of raping two white women aboard a train between Chattanooga and Memphis were sentenced to death by an all-white jury. The intervention of the ILD saved them the electric chair.²²⁷ For several months

²²³ Roman, 33

²²⁴ Roman, 36

²²⁵ Solomon, 52-56

²²⁶ Mark Neison. *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, 1984) 48

²²⁷ Kelly, 78-91

there was a great deal of infighting between the ILD and the NAACP over who would defend the Scottsboro boys. It is at this point that Eugene Gordon rejoins our story.

In 1931 for *New Masses*—in his first piece for a Communist-affiliated publication—Gordon wrote “The Negro’s New Leadership.” The semi-autobiographical recounting of his turn towards Communism told as though he is referring to all Black Workers. They (he) had noticed “The Countless times Communists had been beaten insensible for defending Negro Rights”; they had observed the minor moments indicating what the party stood for, such as when a mixed-race group of members of the Communist-affiliated League for the Struggle for Negro Rights went “to eat in an ‘exclusive’ Washington restaurant and wrecked the place when the Negroes in the party were refused service.”²²⁸

Gordon noticed that the Communists practiced what they preached. He saw the “white men who were tried and convicted in the USSR . . . and the trial in New York of a white worker who was humiliated for his Jim-Crow attitude.”²²⁹ He also finished his critique of Black leadership that began in *Negro Inhibitions*. He decried them as “Weak, vacillating, hypocritical, ignorant, venal and self seeking.” saying that “they don’t give a damn for the groping Black hundreds of thousands who live on five to ten in a single room.” Instead, they “encouraged an individualism of a roughshod and ruthless kind: Scheme, Connive, Double-Cross, Crush. Climb to the top on the thick skulls of those stupid Blacks who worship you because they see in you the reflection of their white masters.”²³⁰

Gordon saved some of his worst venom for the NAACP, calling it “no longer the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, but the Nicest Association for the Advantage of Certain Persons.” He saw an alternative in the Communist response to Scottsboro.

²²⁸ Eugene Gordon “The Negro’s New Leadership” *New Masses*. July 1931 15

²²⁹ Eugene Gordon *The Negro’s New Leadership* 15

²³⁰ Eugene Gordon *The Negro’s New Leadership* 15

Where every other organization in the country had not even “condescended to glance superciliously in [Scottsboro’s] direction,” the Communist Party sent “men and women who are giving their time and energy and money and talent—everything they have—to save those boys.”²³¹ One such woman was June Croll.

Shop-Floor Anti-Racism

One month before Eugene Gordon wrote his declaration of conversion to Communism, on May 11, 1931, June Croll (alongside the head of the Needle Trades Worker Industrial Union, Louis Hyman, the head of International Labor Defense Richard Moore, and Ms. Ada white, mother of two of the Scottsboro boys) addressed a mass meeting to “protest the murderous frame-up and attempted legal massacre” of the nine Scottsboro boys.²³² June and her Comrade Maude Katz White (also organizing in the needle trades) helped articulate this new class-war anti-racism on the shop floor. Workers had resisted attempts to divide them based on race before, but at least in the United States, this resistance did not include outside help. Where once the party refused to stay at hotels during conferences that would not admit its Black delegates, now it took its anti-racism to the shop floor, and its efforts affected thousands of Black workers struggling to survive during the Great Depression.

These efforts coincided with a shift in CPUSA policy in line with the third period’s ban on working with more moderate left-wing organizations. The CPUSA established the Trade Union Unity League or TUUL, which attempted to (as opposed to the earlier and later Communist strategies of boring from within the existing unions) establish a rival radical union federation to the AFL. Anti-Racism was a vital component of the TUUL’s tactics. The TUUL

²³¹ Eugene Gordon *The Negro’s New Leadership* 15

²³² *The Daily Worker* “Mrs Wright to Be in Harlem on Friday” May 11th 1931

worked with the National Miners Union in Harlan, Kentucky. When “some strikers argued that the strike kitchen should be segregated to prevent a raid by operators on the pretext that Jim Crow laws were being violated, the Communists argued back for six or seven hours; they finally convinced the workers to eat in the same kitchen.”²³³ Out of all the TUUL unions, June and Maude’s Needle Trade Industrial Union would lead the charge for class war anti-racism. At the end of one successful strike in New York, benefits, raises, and better hours were offered to all the striking workers aside from a single African American woman, the Union went back on strike until she gained equal treatment.²³⁴

That was not enough, and both Maude White and the wider Red International of Labor Unions (Profintern) demanded more out of TUUL when it came to organizing African American workers. When “Rose Wortis, a party leader in the dress trade, told White that the Union handled the complaints of the Black workers in the same manner as the white workers, white was ready with hard questions: “Did Blacks not suffer from special oppression? Did they have no special needs? Was the boss's treatment of Black workers really ‘in the same manner’ as their treatment of whites?”²³⁵ The Profintern concurred and, taking, as Mark Solomon puts it, a “strikingly advanced view,”²³⁶ it argued that African-descended peoples deserved promotion to “general leadership and direction of all worker’s struggles, Black and white.”²³⁷ June’s Needle Trade Workers Industrial Union even sent an African American delegate to the International Conference of Negro Workers in Hamburg.²³⁸

June and Eugene were on a collision course, and so were their cultures of opposition. The

²³³ Solomon, 105

²³⁴ *Daily Worker*. “The Red International Greets the Needle Worker’s Section” December 24th 1930

²³⁵ Solomon, 106

²³⁶ Solomon, 107

²³⁷ Solomon, 107

²³⁸ *Daily Worker*. “Huge Assembly Has Discussion; Of Errors, Situation, and Program” June 9th 1930

Harlem Renaissance's Black radicalism and Yiddish Immigrant Socialism. South Rampart Street and the Lower East Side were leading them to the same place and to each other.

Meeting of the Minds

The exact circumstances under which June and Eugene met are unknown. However, one can make a fairly educated guess from the available information. As a high-level organizer for the NTWIU, June Kroll was likely in New York City for its national convention on June 9, 1930.²³⁹ She was in the city at least until August 28, when she helped lead unemployed people seeking relief in a march to City Hall.²⁴⁰ A *New York Times* article from June of 1930 headlined “*Eleven Reds Arrested*” records the arrests of a “Eugene Gordon” and a “Sonia Zucker” at a demonstration in Mount Vernon led by the Bronx Young Communists.²⁴¹ The fact that Gordon’s age is given as 21 and Sonia’s is given as 18 makes it unlikely that this is our pair. However, the FBI consistently noted that Gordon looked younger than his actual age, and June was constantly using aliases, especially in mid-1930 at which point she had been calling herself by her current name for less than six months.

That the circumstances around Eugene and June’s first encounter are unknown may be purposeful, as no records exist which give the exact date they left their previous marriages. Edythe May Gordon stated in an interview with the FBI in the early 1950s that she was granted a divorce in 1941 due to “utter abandonment” in August of 1929. In that same interview, she said that “around 1929,” Gordon moved out, and they separated “because of his interest in other

²³⁹ *Daily Worker*. “Huge Assembly” June 9th 1930

²⁴⁰ *Daily Worker* “Hold Street Meet at Fake ‘Job’ Agency; Prepare for September 1st” August 28th 1930

²⁴¹ *New York Times* “Eleven reds Arrested” June 14th 1930

women.”²⁴² However, census records show the two still living together in Cambridge in 1930. Gordon recalled that he and Edythe separated in 1930, although he had two explanations for their separation, one political and one personal. In a recollection he wrote around 1970, he stated of 1930 that “my wife and I had begun to drift apart; my interests were far to the left of the interests of most of the Saturday evening Quill Club” while in an earlier autobiographical short story of his, “a Green hat on Chambers street,” he recalled that “my 15-year long marriage had ended -childlessly- in 1930.” An FBI informant said that ‘around 1930’ Gordon was living in Greenwich Village NYC alongside a group of “parlor pink friends.”²⁴³ Regardless of the exact situation, Gordon promised to pay for Edythe to attain a master’s degree in exchange for not having to pay alimony, a promise he honored.²⁴⁴

Several of Edythe’s poems make veiled references to Eugene’s new relationship. *April Night*, published in June of 1930, includes the stanza:

I am ravaged with your primrose beauty,
 The wind-swept sky, lined with immortal hue
 For me you are my frailest dreams come true.
 O Glorious-tinted June, have pity!²⁴⁵

Eight years later, her June-theme poetry continued with *Sonnet for June*, a short poem, whose implications remain unknown to anyone besides Edythe, Eugene, and June.

With Praise of you I bring song and psalter,
 I breathe in deep draughts from the fragrant earth,

²⁴² Federal Bureau of Investigation. Case File. Subject: Eugene Ferdinand Gordon. Granted Via FOIA to Verner T Mitchell, University of Memphis.

²⁴³ FBI File Eugene Gordon,

²⁴⁴ FBI File Eugene Gordon

²⁴⁵ “April Night” In *Selected Works of Edythe Mae Gordon*. Ed, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: GK and Hall Co. 1996) 93

Which quickens me with ecstasy and mirth;
and all the day I kneel at your altar²⁴⁶

Eugene and Edythe continued their correspondence long after they separated. When the FBI interviewed Edythe in 1953 about Eugene, she mentioned that he had written to her from the Soviet Union, and they had seen each other once in person since the late 1920s. In 1943, two years after Edythe and Eugene officially divorced, more than a decade after they separated, and a year after Eugene and June were married, Edythe visited New York City, contacted Eugene, and he visited her at the YMCA, where their conversation, at least according to her, “was purely social.”²⁴⁷

The marriage between Karl Marx Reeve and June Croll also ended suddenly, but virtually no information exists on the circumstances behind their separation. The exact details of this love triangle will never be known, but their community was more understanding than most. These were bohemian intellectuals whose communities often supported less than traditional relationships. Anarchists such as Emma Goldman, and some radicals more respected by Communists like Jack Reed engaged in open relationships, and Edythe’s poems often talked of failed marriages and infidelity.²⁴⁸ Personal relationships were vitally important in the interwar left, and as the interwar period wore on, these relationships began to cross racial barriers in a systematic and accepted way.²⁴⁹ The Communist Party’s social world allowed people to practice anti-racism and social equality in ways the regimented workplaces of the time, and cloying

²⁴⁶ “Sonnet for June” In *Selected Works of Edythe Mae Gordon*. Ed, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: GK and Hall Co. 1996) 97

²⁴⁷ FBI File, Eugene Gordon.

²⁴⁸ John Bak “Eugene O’Neill and John Reed: Recording the Body Politic, 1913-1922.” *The Eugene O’Neill Review* 20, no. 1 (1996): 31; “Subversion” in *Selected Works of Edythe Mae Gordon*. Ed, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: GK and Hall Co. 1996) 14

²⁴⁹ Kathleen Brown, Elizabeth Faeu. “Social Bonds, Sexual Politics, and Political Community on the US left 1920s-1940s” *Left History* 7 No. 1 (2000) 5

middle-class social clubs did not. White Communist women often became involved with Black Communist men. This was so common that Black Communist women protested. To correct the imbalance, “party organizers made a concerted effort to teach white male Communists in Harlem to dance, so that they would not be ashamed to ask Black women to dance at party social affairs.”²⁵⁰

June and Eugene began a partnership that would last for the rest of their lives. Together they were greater than the sum of their parts, and from then on, they would face the trials of the twentieth century together. The Communist party they created and embodied alongside thousands of other African Americans and immigrant radicals in this moment of engagement, would lay the social basis for a more liberated society. However, for now, the Communists were still isolated, their values were not mainstream, and their institutions were not strong enough to impose those values on society.

In 1933 June (then living at Maude Katz White’s apartment) and Eugene had a son together, Eugene Gordon, Jr.²⁵¹ The racialized order into which their son was born remained little different from that of June and Eugene’s childhoods. The same year Eugene Gordon Jr. was born, the Nazis seized control of Germany and began imprisoning their political opponents in Dachau concentration camp, and a mob of 7,000 whites stormed a jail in St. Joseph, Missouri, dragged out a 19-year-old man Black man named Lloyd Warner who had been falsely accused of raping a white woman, and burnt him alive.²⁵²

Although successful at aligning specific marginalized populations behind the Comintern, the third period’s radicalism had been a geostrategic failure. The party’s maximalism and refusal

²⁵⁰ Mark Neison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*. 137

²⁵¹ FBI File, Eugene Gordon.

²⁵² *New York Times* “St Joseph Jail Stormed: Mob of 7,000, Defying Gas and Guns, Seize Youth and Hang Him” November 29th 1933

to work alongside social democrats had not been a burden in the American South, where there was no social democracy to speak of, but in Germany, this strategy backfired massively. The Nazis defeated the Communists and Social Democrats in turn. The logic of empire had reached back into the imperial core.²⁵³ When the UK and France declared war on Germany in response to Hitler's invasion of Poland, an infuriated Hitler declared "the British gentlemen know might is right. When it comes to inferior races they were our first schoolmasters. It is disgraceful to present Czechs and Poles as sovereign states when this rabble is not a jot better than the Sudanese or the Indians"²⁵⁴ white dominion had brought its bayonets home. In response to the new threat of Hitler's Germany, the Comintern belatedly changed course, shifting to a policy known as the Popular Front. In this popular front period, lasting from 1934-1945, the anti-racism the Communist party had cultivated over the previous decades was popularized, and the seeds of Jim Crow's destruction were sown.

The Popular Front in Peace and War

While the third period began with the expectation of an imminent global uprising, the popular front began under more dire circumstances. The Soviet Union, long isolated by the capitalist powers, and threatened by the rise of fascism in Germany, looked to ameliorate its ongoing tensions with Western liberal democracies and form a broad anti-fascist alliance. The Comintern issued new orders to the various Communist parties. The CPUSA, recently bitterly opposed to the moderate left and liberals, was ordered to collaborate with them. The CPUSA dissolved the TUUL, and later moved to endorse FDR. Much has been written on what was

²⁵³ Connor Woodman "The Imperial Boomerang: How Colonial Methods of Repression Migrate back to the Metropolis" *Verso*. June 9th 2020

²⁵⁴ Matthias Uhl, Henrik Eberle. *The Hitler Book: The Secret Dossier Prepared for Stalin from the Interrogations of Otto Guensche and Heinz Linge* (Kiev: PublicAffairs, 2009) 47

given up during this process.²⁵⁵ The Comintern abandoned the principle of self-determination in the Black Belt, dissolved the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, and generally retreated from its most strident anti-colonialist stances.²⁵⁶

However, the Third Period was not a moment of uncompromising radicalism, and the Popular Front was not a time of total capitulation to bourgeois interests. The actions of party organizers on the ground gained the party considerable sway with Black America, and these organizers did not disappear with the shift in Comintern policy. Many Black radicals took advantage of their new opportunities to engage with wider civil society and the New Deal coalition.²⁵⁷

The shift to the Popular Front damaged the relationship between the European revolutionary and Black radical traditions. Hardest hit by this shift in understanding were those involved in the international institutions tying the Comintern and Black radicalism together, and it is no coincidence that George Padmore, former head of the ITUCNW, was one of the most animated opponents of this shift and led a sizeable Black break with Marxism-Leninism toward dissident socialism.²⁵⁸ However, Marxism-Leninism was not the only ideological inheritor of the European revolutionary tradition, and Padmore's socialism, developed further by C.L.R James, Eric T. Williams, and Kwame Nkrumah, is still a product of this interwar romance.²⁵⁹

June and Eugene did not split with the Comintern for various reasons. Although he was disappointed with this shift in Comintern policy (that would become increasingly clear as the Communist Party dove deeper into the Popular Front) Eugene Gordon continued with the party

²⁵⁵ See: George Padmore. *Pan-Africanism or Communism?: The Coming Struggle for Africa* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1956) 289-350

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 401-415

²⁵⁷ Glenda Gilmore. *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights 1919-1960* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2009) 301

²⁵⁸ Padmore, 13-14

²⁵⁹ Robinson. 260-261

alongside other luminaries such as Cyril Briggs, Harry Haywood, and Paul Robeson. These luminaries did not remain with the CPUSA because of a willing blindness towards Stalinist excess or a slavish devotion to the party. Instead, it was a shrewd strategic decision, as even this less ambitious stage carried within it new opportunities.

The victory of left-liberal Franklin Roosevelt created opportunities on the cultural and trade-union fronts. June Croll was one of the first to avail herself of these new opportunities. A longstanding issue within the needle trades was the preponderance of lower-paid contract work for African American women.²⁶⁰ Once Roosevelt was elected, June Croll was one of the signatories to the National Recovery Administration's "Code of Fair Competition for the Cotton and Textile Industry," which established a government-enforced code of fair competition for the entire textile industry. Due to pressure from June and others, this agreement included subcontractors in the general wage increase from 5-6 to 12-13 dollars weekly and headed off any possibility of an explicit wage differential between races.²⁶¹ However, this came with compromises. As with many New Deal programs, the Communist Party, at least in the South, was not sufficiently powerful enough to exert more pressure over Roosevelt than the Bourbon Democrats. Thus the new wages were a dollar lower in the South, disproportionately harming African Americans.²⁶²

Still, in marked contrast to the relatively minor gains made by the TUUL, through the NRA, at the stroke of a pen, wages were doubled and child labor was abolished in the needle trades.²⁶³ The NRA replicated this across the economy and created codes of fair competition on an industry-by-industry basis. The NRA enforced these codes through arbitration between

²⁶⁰ Solomon 106-107

²⁶¹ National Recovery Administration "Code of Fair Competition for the Textile Industry" 15

²⁶² Kelly, 61

²⁶³ National Recovery Administration "Code of Fair Competition for the Textile Industry" 3

employers and often tacitly pro-labor government appointees.²⁶⁴ More importantly for America's radicals, the NRA also made it illegal for corporations to prevent their workers from unionizing and provided a much more equal arena for labor to face capital.²⁶⁵ After FDR signed the National Industrial Recovery Act and established the NRA, union organizing ballooned across the country.²⁶⁶ However, there were many left-wing critics of the decision by the CPUSA to work with the NRA, and several such critics compared this new corporatist arrangement to Italian Fascism, most notably the Trotskyist Communist League of Struggle (CLS).²⁶⁷ The CLS even called on its members to "fight the false line of the June Crolls."²⁶⁸

The Communist party consistently argued that the NRA did not go far enough. Firstly, it did not mandate closed-shop bargaining across the economy leaving room for the proliferation of company unions. Secondly, the Communists would have preferred to bring the economy under state management. The NRA's Corporatist arrangement was backed by the AFL, not more radical unions.²⁶⁹ June openly criticized the NRA, and so did the Communist Party, attempting to negotiate the tension between the opportunities the NRA afforded and the problems it left unsolved.²⁷⁰ While June continued her work in the needle trades, Gordon continued his work on the cultural front. In his "Appeal to the Millions" published by the *Labor Defender*, Gordon cried, "He [the attorney general of Alabama] would make an example of those working class boys for Black Workers around the world to heed. Fellow workers, will we let this thing be done? Is there a white worker within the United States who feels himself secure as long as any

²⁶⁴ Larry G. Gerber. 1994. "The National Industrial Recovery Act in Comparative Perspective: Organized Labor's Role in American and British Efforts at Industrial Planning, 1929–1933." *Journal of Policy History* 6 (4). Cambridge University Press: 421

²⁶⁵ Gerber, 427

²⁶⁶ Kelly, 60; Solomon, 252

²⁶⁷ *Class Struggle* "ROOSEVELT AND LABOR'S MISLEADERS" August 1933

²⁶⁸ *Class Struggle* "FELLOW DELEGATES TO THE CONFERENCE TO SAVE THE TRADE UNION! WE CHARGE THE COMMUNIST PARTY WITH YELLOW OPPORTUNISM!" August 1933

²⁶⁹ Gerber, 406

²⁷⁰ *Class Struggle* "FELLOW DELEGATES TO THE CONFERENCE TO SAVE THE TRADE UNION!"

worker, white or Black, is murdered as an example to teach YOU [sic] your place?”²⁷¹ During the next several years, Gordon founded Boston’s John Reed Club, became the first editor of the left-wing Boston magazine *Leftward*, and continued to write for the *New Masses* and *Labor Defender*. These articles defended the Soviet Union, argued that African Americans should join Communist-led unions, and continued to support the Scottsboro boys.

His most important work during the first half of the 1930s was a pamphlet that he wrote with Afro-Caribbean Communist Cyril Briggs, onetime founder of the ABB, titled *The position of Negro Women*. *The Position of Negro Women* was published in February of 1935 and elaborates on some of Gordon’s earlier feminist thinking. It argues that “in a society based on production for profit to be a women worker and a Negro is a double handicap”²⁷² The pamphlet discusses at length the working conditions and pay for African American women in the needle trades (with data no doubt partially provided by June) it criticizes wage differentials between the North and South allowed by the NRA.

In addition to the Needle Trades, Gordon and Briggs go on to describe the position of Black women workers in domestic service, the professional sector, and in industry, with particular attention paid to the fact that they were significantly more vulnerable to wage theft or “racketeering employers” as Gordon and Briggs put it.²⁷³ They also draw attention to discrimination by the burgeoning New Deal Welfare state, and argue that “inadequate relief, humiliating treatment, and often callous denial of any relief whatsoever is more often her [Black women’s] lot than that of the jobless white women.”²⁷⁴ Gordon and Briggs took special pleasure in exposing capitalist euphemisms:

²⁷¹ Eugene Gordon. “Appeal to Millions” *Labor Defender* Vol.6 No.8 1933 102

²⁷² Cyril Briggs. Eugene Gordon. “The Position of Negro Women” February 1935. American Left Ephemera Collection, Box 1, Folder 65. University of Pittsburgh Digital Collections, Pittsburgh. 2

²⁷³ Briggs, Gordon. “The Position of Negro Women” 6

²⁷⁴ Briggs, Gordon. “The Position of Negro Women” 15

“Wages paid these women, ‘compare favorably’ we are told, with those of white women. “Compare favorably” and “are identical” have different meanings, just as democracy and self determination have different meanings when uttered by representatives of different classes in capitalist society.”²⁷⁵

Gordon and Brigg’s solutions are clear, and their demands range from radical to relatively moderate. On one hand, they demand unity between white and Black women workers and demand that white women workers be an anti-racist vanguard, at “the head of the struggle for improved conditions for Negro working women.”²⁷⁶ They did not just expect more from white women workers and continued by stating, “the same is true for white men workers whose own interests demand that they commit to the sharpest fight against all practices of sex and racial discrimination.”²⁷⁷ Again and again, the Communist Party hammered in that white workers had more to gain by working with Black workers.

Gordon and Brigg’s extolled previous successes, how white and Black workers, working together had prevented the eviction of African American families in cities across the north, prevented discrimination in relief services, and forced certain businesses to hire Black workers.²⁷⁸ Their program called for larger numbers of white workers to join the Communist party and fight for political, social, and economic equality .²⁷⁹ Their example of a country where this fight had been won is not hard to guess:

“The Soviet Union offers a shining example for the correctness of the Communist program of unity between white and Negro workers, and of all sections of the toiling population. In the Soviet Union, women have been emancipated. Nationalities and Races, who, under the old Tzarist regime, suffered oppression equal to that of the Negroes in the United States, are now, under the new Soviet Government of workers and farmers, enjoying complete freedom, equality, and a right to self-determination...They have abolished race hatred and national oppression as well as unemployment and mass misery, the economic and cultural standards of the whole toiling

²⁷⁵ Briggs, Gordon. “The Position of Negro Women” 10

²⁷⁶ Briggs, Gordon. “The Position of Negro Women” 8

²⁷⁷ Briggs, Gordon. “The Position of Negro Women” 8

²⁷⁸ Briggs, Gordon. “The Position of Negro Women” 15

²⁷⁹ Briggs, Gordon. “The Position of Negro Women” 16

population are being constantly raised as a result of fresh victories in the triumphant building of socialist industry and agriculture.”²⁸⁰

Gordon was about to see for himself. At this point he had become a political liability for the *Boston Post*, and had received an offer to become a writer at the *Moscow Daily News*.²⁸¹

Gordon followed in June’s footsteps, although the Soviet Union he arrived in was very different from the one she had left. He spent most of his time covering the industrialization of the Soviet food industry in dull articles with titles like “Dairy factories surpass year’s plan,” and “Bakeries ahead of Plan,” and “Stakhanov work increases, variety, quantity of meat products.” Throughout these pieces Eugene does his best to present Soviet industrialization in an interesting light; however he did not have much to work with and his passions lied elsewhere.²⁸²

After several months, the *Moscow Daily News* gave him an interesting assignment, and he traveled from Moscow down the Volga to Astrakhan. Eugene took a special interest in the lives of Soviet national minorities and often compared their situation in czarist Russia to that of African Americans. The first day Gordon stepped onto the riverboat bound for Astrakhan, he found himself speaking to a young Soviet Turkmen, Mikhail, that he described as “almost as dark as me.” Gordon explained to a growing group of confused Turkmen why African Americans did not have their own language: “The situation is different here from that in the United States. Under tsarism your nationalities were compelled to speak Russian, the African slaves who were landed in America more than 300 years ago forgot their mother tongue when they were forced to learn the language of their masters” the Turkmen responded, “That’s true, only after the Socialist Revolution were our many nationalities encouraged to have their own

²⁸⁰ Briggs, Gordon. “The Position of Negro Women” 16

²⁸¹ “Invitation to Moscow” (1935-1937) Sc MG 117 Box 6, Folder 10, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

²⁸² “Moscow Daily News Articles” (1937) Sc MG 117 Box 6, Folder 10, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

written languages... Their own culture in general.”²⁸³ Although this exchange may have been embellished for propaganda purposes, Eugene’s admiration for ethnic autonomy in the Soviet Union was genuine. He described Astrakhan with glowing praise.

“A globe-trotter might have imagined himself in the streets of Miami, Florida, or of Savannah Georgia in the United States; for the Black and the brown and the yellow complexions he encountered might have belonged to a population of mixed Negro, Indian, and American white characteristics of those cities. The globe-trotter would have also noticed, however, the existence of something he had never seen among the streets of Miami and Savannah- the free and natural mingling of these multitudes of nationalities.”²⁸⁴

In Astrakhan, Gordon could imagine a New Orleans not torn apart by the racist violence that had defined his childhood.²⁸⁵ As the father of a biracial son, it is unsurprising that Eugene took more notice of the Soviet Union’s successful racial pluralism, its ‘free and natural mingling,’ than the self-determination these nationalities supposedly enjoyed. Gordon, by all accounts, enjoyed his time in the Soviet Union. He gave lectures on African American history to the American expat community in Moscow and found time to travel to Tolstoy’s birthplace.²⁸⁶ However, Eugene was blind to Stalin’s reign of terror. Eugene interviewed Andrei Vyshinky, head of the Stalinist show trials, and supported his decisions to the hilt.²⁸⁷

Upon his return from the USSR Gordon wrote “*Genuine vs Bogus Democracy.*” Gordon listed all the ways people he met on his way back to New York explained that the Soviet Union was not a democracy.²⁸⁸ Their complaints rang hollow. He had grown up surrounded by grinding

²⁸³ Eugene Gordon, “An American Worker’s Notes on a Volga River Trip” *Moscow Daily News* August 2, 1937

²⁸⁴ Eugene Gordon “Visiting Colorful Astrakhan” *Moscow Daily News* August 10th 1937

²⁸⁵ Eugene Gordon “Visiting Colorful Astrakhan”

²⁸⁶ “Moscow Daily News Articles” (1937) Sc MG 117 Box 6, Folder 10, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

²⁸⁷ Eugene Gordon “Lawbreakers in Countrywide Movement to Leave Old Life for New” *Moscow Daily News* May 1st 1937

²⁸⁸ “Genuine vs Bogus Democracy” (1938) Sc MG 117 Box 6, Folder 5, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

poverty and racial terror, and in the Soviet Union, he had encountered, for the first time, a society that guaranteed racial equality as well as food, housing, and education. Gordon, understandably, would not take the accusation that the Soviet Union was a dictatorship seriously when he could not vote in many parts of the United States.

However, Soviet superiority on the issue of race relations was of little comfort to Lovett Fort-Whiteman, the first African American Communist, who, a month after Gordon interviewed Vyshinsky, was whisked away from his home by the NKVD (the Stalinist Secret Police) and sent to perish in a GULAG in Kolyma Siberia.²⁸⁹ James Patterson, the leader of the ILD, had written a letter to the Soviet government about Fort-Whiteman. He argued that Fort-Whiteman was embracing “an openly anti-Comintern line” and was engaging in the “corruption of the Negro elements” under orders from the US government. This was a lie, but Patterson wrote that Fort-Whiteman “could not be allowed to return to the United States,” and that was a death sentence.²⁹⁰ Fort-Whiteman had constantly been on the wrong side of ideological disputes, and during the 1920s Cyril Briggs heavily criticized his leadership of the ANLC. The consequences of ending up on the wrong side of party leadership were very different in the Soviet Union compared to the United States.

Despite the Comintern’s growing ideological rigidity and Stalin’s increasing paranoia, back in the United States the Communist Party’s strident anti-racism was already seeping into the rest of the Popular Front. After abandoning the Trade Union Unity League, the Communists created a bloc within the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations that pushed for racial egalitarianism within its structures.²⁹¹ Meanwhile, the other factions of the radical Left,

²⁸⁹ Joy Carew. *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in the Search for Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 183

²⁹⁰ Carew, 182

²⁹¹ Solomon, 291

much smaller and more marginalized than the Communists but often more acceptable to respectable people, began adopting its positions on anti-racism.

In 1933, the Socialist Party's militant faction finally seized control from the old guard, denouncing its former colorblindness and embracing the militant anti-racist tactics pioneered by the Communist party.²⁹² The Socialist Party and its affiliates, the League for Industrial Democracy, the Young People's Socialist League, and the pacifist Fellowship for Reconciliation all embraced the strident commitment to anti-racism first advanced by the Communist Party.²⁹³

In 1933 the delegates of the Socialist party demonstrated their commitment to anti-racism by staging a mass walkout from the Cairo hotel in Washington, DC after it did not allow an African American delegate to rent a room. In the following years, Socialist leader Norman Thomas began to advocate for anti-lynching and civil rights laws, promoted A. Phillip Randolph, and criticized FDR for not doing enough for racial justice.²⁹⁴ Socialist luminaries such as John Dewey and fellow travelers like Orson Wells would also add their names to a growing list of actively anti-racist white intellectuals.

It helped that the Left had a common enemy. The Communists used the term "fascists" and "lynchers" interchangeably for years. However, Norman Thomas spoke for a growing number when he asked, "How can we either protest Hitlerism with good grace or hope to escape similar ills in America, when we chronically carry out a more thoroughgoing discrimination against our colored fellow citizens than he has yet imposed upon the Jews?"²⁹⁵ Over the 1930s, the Popular Front succeeded in tying homegrown reactionaries to foreign fascists, minimizing the effects of Stalin's worst failures, and building a powerful integrated union federation, the

²⁹² Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 162

²⁹³ See: Anthony C. Siracusa. (Nonviolence Before King: The Politics of Being and the Black Freedom Struggle. Durham: University of North Carolina Press) 2021.

²⁹⁴ Sitkoff, 163

²⁹⁵ Sitkoff, 164

CIO.²⁹⁶

Even more important than the Socialist Party's change of heart the NAACP embraced direct action and radical anti-racism in its 1933 Amenia conference. The Amenia delegates argued for "reformed democracy," an expanded welfare state, and direct nonviolent action against Jim Crow.²⁹⁷ Jonathan Holloway, the author of *Confronting the Veil* described this as "Democratic Socialist."²⁹⁸ The NAACP agreed, as Ralph Bunchie, African American economist and Nobel laureate, put it: "the Negro is in need of everything that a constructive, humane, American political program can give him—employment, land, housing, relief, health protection, unemployment and old-age insurance, enjoyment of civil rights—all that a twentieth-century American citizen is entitled to"²⁹⁹ This was a tremendous change from the political agnosticism and strict legalism of the early NAACP, this shift was partially inspired by the Socialist and Communist Party.

Things were changing rapidly. When Eugene Gordon left the United States in 1935, an anti-lynching bill was introduced on floor of the Senate, but neither Northern nor Southern Democrats wanted to split the party over it.³⁰⁰ Things had changed when the bill again came up for a vote upon Eugene's return in 1938. This time, debate raged for almost two months, punctuated by night sessions and attempts to invoke cloture. Southern senator after Southern senator took to the senate floor to blame Roosevelt personally for aligning with the Popular Front and its allies which had supplanted them in the democratic party's hierarchy.³⁰¹

Unlike the Wilson administration, the Roosevelt administration was not led by an ideologically-committed racist, and was amenable to pressure from its Left. The New Deal and

²⁹⁶ Sitkoff, 180

²⁹⁷ Holloway, 11

²⁹⁸ Holloway, 185

²⁹⁹ Holloway, 185

³⁰⁰ Sitkoff, 117

³⁰¹ Sitkoff, 118

the Popular Front formed a mutually-beneficial circuit. Leftist intellectuals (including Eugene Gordon) received wages from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and churned out favorable social realist art and literature.³⁰² Meanwhile workers were not as afraid of being fired for attempting to unionize as in previous years, partially because of the expansion of the welfare state. Additionally, workers who were unjustly fired or injured at work could depend on the assistance of powerful workers' self-help and mutual aid organizations such as the International Workers Order (IWO).³⁰³ June Croll worked with the IWO; specifically the Jewish People's Fraternal Order (JPFO), one of its ethnic branches, and even founded the JPFO's female wing, the Emma Lazarus Division. The Emma Lazarus division would long outlive the JPFO and the IWO, and after its parent organizations were "sentenced to death" as Robert Zecker puts it, during the early Cold War, June refounded the Emma Lazarus Division as the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's clubs.

While Eugene was in the Soviet Union, June led more dramatic actions. June shifted towards anti-fascism as her main line of work. In September 1933 the Communist Party founded the American League against War and Fascism, but by 1935 June was utterly disillusioned with the organization. In one of its first significant meetings, the American League had called for a joint conference of Socialists and Communists to condemn the massacre of workers in Red Vienna, but the two groups almost immediately began to fistfight one another.³⁰⁴

This level of incompetence was not typical for the American League. The League successfully organized nationwide boycotts of Nazi products, condemned the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and educated Americans on the growing danger of Fascism.³⁰⁵ The League also tied its

³⁰² Richard A. Russ "American Folksongs and Left-Wing Politics: 1935-56." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 12, no. 2/3 (1975): 93

³⁰³ See: Robert Zecker, *A Road to Peace and Freedom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018)

³⁰⁴ Nigel Copsy "Communist and the Interwar Anti-Fascist Struggle in the United States and Britain" *Labor History Review* Vol. 76 No.3 192

³⁰⁵ Copsy, 191

anti-fascist foreign policy to anti-racism at home through a series of Anti-Lynching campaigns so successfully that one Willam Blanchard, a member of the Miami white Front, demanded to know, “Must the American white man accept the n*gger as his equal by a brace of Jewish commissars?”³⁰⁶

Still, the League did not go far enough for June; it refused to endorse direct action. In a move roundly criticized as “duplicating the work” of the American League by party higher-ups, June Croll channeled some of the Jewish self-defense tradition and founded the “New York Anti-Nazi Federation.” She then promptly led a protest which stormed the Nazi liner *SS Bremen* in New York harbor, rioted on its decks, and ripped the swastika off its mast.³⁰⁷ This would not be the last time that June faced Nazis directly.

However, the vagaries of Soviet foreign policy almost sent all of this crashing down. In 1939 the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact almost destroyed the Popular Front and June and Eugene’s partnership. The Popular Front failed to secure a direct military alliance between the Soviet Union and the Western powers. Stalin decided to sign a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. Never before had the interests and ideologies of so many CPUSA members diverged dramatically from Comintern policy. In 1938 Gordon attended the famous “night at the Garden,” a German American Bund rally in Madison square garden where they had attempted to make Nazism palatable to an American audience. He viciously mocked the event’s organizers for being pot-bellied ‘aryan supermen.’³⁰⁸ Now the Soviet Union, a nation he praised was handing over emigre Communist Party of Germany members over to the Nazis, shipping thousands of tons of raw materials to the Nazis (soon actively at war with the Western allies) and republishing Hitler’s

³⁰⁶ Sitkoff, 120

³⁰⁷ Peter Duffy. “The Day New York Rose up against the Nazis on the Hudson” *Longreads* March 2019

³⁰⁸ Nazi Fascism in Madison Square Garden (1917) Sc MG 117 Box 6, Folder 11, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

speeches in *Izvestiia and Leningradskaia*, two Soviet Newspapers.³⁰⁹

The American League almost immediately imploded, but the New York Anti-Nazi Federation did not disband. June and Eugene's relationship came under immense pressure. June was a Jewish woman who had survived a Pogrom led by Hitler's ideological predecessors, and Eugene was a Black man who had already shown he would support the Soviet Union through thick and thin. One FBI informant claimed that June and Eugene Gordon separated in 1940.³¹⁰ It would not be surprising that a Jewish woman could not tolerate Stalin's open flirtation with Hitler.

The pair would not have to bear the consequences of Molotov-Ribbentrop for too long. In 1941 Operation Barbarossa and Pearl Harbor changed everything. The United States embarked on a great crusade against fascism alongside the Soviet Union, a stunning reversal from the year before. June and Eugene reconciled and went to work—although now J. Edgar Hoover would have his eyes on Eugene, and June would go by her final name, June Croll Gordon.

War on White Dominion

According to FBI files, during WWII Eugene Gordon worked to undermine the Communist Party's policy of cooperation with the American government. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the outbreak of the war sidelined African American issues within the Communist and Democratic parties. Gordon chafed under the Popular Front's dependence on progressive Democrats. In early 1938 Roosevelt had come tantalizingly close to directly attacking Jim Crow and had supported the repeal of poll taxes across the South. In the following

³⁰⁹Ewa M Thompson "Nationalist Propaganda in the Soviet Russian Press, 1939-1941." *Slavic Review* 50, no. 2 (1991): 389

³¹⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation. File: Eugene F Gordon

years, Roosevelt backed away from this position; the increasing importance of foreign policy meant that he needed Southern Democratic votes to initiate conscription and prepare for war.³¹¹

Despite his behind-the-scenes work undermining the official party line, Gordon publicly embraced its diktats. Gordon, alongside other Black Communists like Claudia Jones, rejected the *Pittsburgh Courier's* 'Double V Campaign' which called for victory at home against racism to accompany victory abroad against Fascism. Gordon wrote in the *Daily Worker* that "Hitler is the main enemy.. And foes of Negro rights in this country are secondary."³¹² Still, Gordon chafed under the restrictions the CPUSA had placed on him. CPUSA had endorsed a wartime no-strike pledge and limited its criticism of the US government and the war effort in a display of its fealty to Soviet foreign policy. The Communist Party, now increasingly domesticated, was on the road to abandoning its revolutionary commitments.

So Gordon charted his own course. He met with Indian and Filipino independence activists during the middle of the war, immediately drawing the attention of the FBI, after an informant suggested he "might possibly be mixed up with other Negroes in stirring up the Negro race against the war."³¹³ It was finally time for Gordon to be noticed by Hoover, who had been searching for his wife fifteen years beforehand. Hoover described Gordon as "more powerful in the party than even James Ford." Another informant concurred, describing Gordon as "elusive, shrewd and one who usually captures the imagination of Negroes by appealing to their nationalistic feelings."³¹⁴ Whether or not those feelings were nationalism towards the Aframerican nation or the United States is unclear. Gordon traveled across the South gathering information on the success of CIO union drives and wrote scathing accounts of abuse towards

³¹¹ Sitkoff, 137

³¹² Albert Parker "Why The CP Attacks the 'Double V' Campaign" *The Militant* April 4th 1942

³¹³ FBI file, Eugene Gordon

³¹⁴ FBI file, Eugene Gordon

African Americans in wartime labor battalions.³¹⁵

Although his exact actions are shrouded in mystery, this was a decisive moment for the American Labor movement, as wartime victories and defeats, especially in the South, would direct much of 20th century American history.³¹⁶ The Communist party was deeply involved in this process, and many of the members of the Farm Equipment Workers Union (FE) were Communists. During wartime the FE carried on the TUUL's legacy, maintaining that "Management has no right to exist" and that it was only through interracial unity that capitalism and prejudice could be defeated.³¹⁷

In addition to the rest of his efforts Gordon launched a large-scale campaign on behalf of Recy Taylor, an African American woman who was assaulted by seven white men in Abbeville, Alabama.³¹⁸ Writing for the *Daily Worker*, Gordon roared, "Mrs. Taylor was not the first Negro woman to be outraged, but it is our intention to make her the last. white-supremacy imitators of Hitler's storm troopers will shrink under the glare of the nation's spotlight. The attack on Mrs. Taylor was an attack on all women... No woman is safe or free until all women are free."³¹⁹

Gordon traveled South to investigate the case, working alongside a young NAACP organizer, Rosa Parks.³²⁰ While in Alabama, Gordon successfully drew a promise from Governor Chuancy Sparks to investigate Abbeville's failure to punish rapists.³²¹ Back in New York, Gordon, alongside Parks, formed the Provisional Committee for Equal Justice for Recy Taylor to

³¹⁵ FBI file, Eugene Gordon

³¹⁶ See: Nelson Lichtenstein. *Labor's War at Home* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and Michael Goldfield *The Southern Key* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

³¹⁷ Tony Gilpin. *The Long Deep Grudge: A Story of Big Capital, Radical Labor, and Class War in America's Heartland* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020) 6

³¹⁸ Danielle McGuire. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black women, Rape, and Resistance: a new history of the civil rights movement, from Rosa Parks to the rise of Black power* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2010) 48

³¹⁹ Danielle McGuire. "It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped': Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle." *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 3 (2004) 911

³²⁰ McGuire "It was like all of Us Had been Raped" 911; FBI file, Eugene Gordon

³²¹ Thomas Aiello. *The Grapevine of the Black South: The Scott Newspaper Syndicate in the Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2018) 102

combat what he called “the old South’s Nazi-like practices towards Negroes.”³²² The FBI was impressed by him, describing him variously as “the Brainy Communist Leader.” An unknown informant stated that “this man is one of the smartest Negro Communists in the country.”³²³ This is a high compliment. For the past fifteen years Gordon was continually writing and publishing, but he never attended KUTV, nor graduated from any higher educational institution. Perhaps this complement came not just because of his writing but because of his adaptability; no matter how much the party line changed, Gordon was never on the wrong side of a factional struggle. He would die with his CPUSA membership card still in his wallet.³²⁴

Gordon was so passionate about the United States’ wrongdoings that informants told the FBI that certain segments of the CPUSA’s leadership thought he was “Pro-Nazi.” The situation around the dinner table must have been tense, as June’s main actions during the war included chairing the wartime conservation committee of the Lower East side, directing a series of incredibly successful war bond drives, and participating in a flag-raising ceremony alongside the IWO and even the American Legion.³²⁵

Still, it would be incorrect to simply label June and Eugene’s wartime activities opposite poles of the Popular Front, her accommodating herself entirely with American power in the interests of anti-fascism and he chafing under wartime restrictions and focusing his critiques narrowly on America. *The People’s Voice*, a Black newspaper that published Eugene Gordon’s article on Recy Taylor also, published a cartoon comparing the American “Crackerocracy” and

³²²Eugene Gordon FBI File

³²³Eugene Gordon FBI File

³²⁴ *People’s World* Obituary (1941-1943) Sc MG 117 Box 1, Folder 1, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

³²⁵ June’s Wartime Actions (1941-1943) Sc MG 117 Box 1, Folder 10, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

the Polish ghettos.³²⁶

Their universalism was not one-sided. At a JPFO meeting called to support making the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) permanent after the end of the War, June directly challenged the idea that an institution created to protect Black workers could only hurt white workers: “The opponents of the F.E.P.C speak of it in terms of a gift to the Negro people at the expense of the white. Well we are white; but we are Jews, and we also suffer the effects of this policy of discrimination.” June continued by comparing American racism to the Nazi treatment of Jews, warning how prejudice across the Atlantic had culminated in the Holocaust.³²⁷

Over and over, Eugene connected the current war against fascism to earlier episodes in American history. He gave speeches on “Lincoln, Douglass, and Lenin” as great liberators and compared the Southern Democrats to the “Copperhead Democrats and Traitors” of the Civil War.³²⁸ He argued, “Most Negroes today look upon this anti-fascist war as breaking the last of the bonds which John Brown and his compatriots struck so valiantly 83 years ago.”³²⁹ Gordon blamed segregation for the poor performance in the current war of the troops in his old 92nd division “The trouble with the 92nd and all other all-Negro outfits is the problem of discrimination. Get rid of those anti-democratic evils and you will get rid of all such troubles.”³³⁰

Gordon was a pioneer at appropriating American history for left-wing causes. He helped develop what “Americanism” might be outside of Christian nationalism, Manifest Destiny, and white dominion. Rather than wanting to “burn the constitution” as William Lloyd Garrison once did, Gordon expressed his new idea of America in his unpublished radio play *Man Against*

³²⁶ General Research Division, The New York Public Library. "American Crackerocracy and the Polish Ghetto" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed July 8, 2022.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/a8b57ef0-e2f3-0133-a9c9-00505686a51c>

³²⁷ Zecker, 113

³²⁸ Eugene Gordon FBI file

³²⁹ Eugene Gordon FBI File

³³⁰ Eugene Gordon, FBI File

Oppression.³³¹ In *Man Against Oppression*, Gordon attempts to reconcile his support for Black Liberation, Communism, and the American war effort.

The play begins with an omniscient narrator declaring “You can’t beat an idea with Oppression! Especially if it's an idea like the unity of the whole people against their common enemy. This truth the Negro Patriot, Crispus Attucks, in Boston, knew in 1776....”³³² The narrator tells the story of Attucks, framing him as an eternal representative of human freedom and the British colonial government as just another incarnation of trans-historical despotism “If George the III in his day never learned the futility of oppression against an idea born of the people, neither have Hitler, Hirohito, or Mussolini today... 173 years after, a free American people and a free English people are united with their allies to keep burning that flame which Crispus Attucks murder ignited.”³³³

Gordon was describing the “Idea borne of the people” that he had fought for most of his life and one that the United States was partially embracing and partially rejecting during WWII. This dialog between white patriot Samuel Gray and Crispus Attucks exemplifies the themes of interracial humanism that Gordon explored in *Man Against Oppression*.

ATTUCKS: I was once [an enslaved person] I fought myself free. (Passionately) I never was meant to be a slave skipper!”

GRAY: None of us were Crispus! None of us will be again.³³⁴

The Roosevelt Administration often flirted with these themes in wartime propaganda. The Propaganda movie *The Negro Soldier*, which encouraged African Americans to enlist, used Hitler’s open racism as a recruiting tactic, tacitly admitting that the United States saw itself as

³³¹ Radio Script, *Man Against Oppression* (1943) Sc MG 117 Box 3, Folder 15. Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

³³² Eugene Gordon, *Man Against Oppression*. 1

³³³ Eugene Gordon, *Man Against Oppression*. 1

³³⁴ Eugene Gordon, *Man Against Oppression*. 8-9

fighting on the side of racial equality. In the movie's first scene, after comparing World War II to the Boxing match between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling, an African American minister preaches to his congregation specifically three Black soldiers, two men and one woman. The preacher uses this quote from *Mein Kampf* to illustrate Hitler's unacceptable barbarism "From time to time the illustrated papers show how a Negro has become a Lawyer, a teacher, perhaps even a minister. It never dawns on the degenerate middle-class America that it is criminal madness to train a born half-ape until one believes he has made a lawyer of him."³³⁵ The priest then goes on to eulogize Crispus Attucks.

However, Gordon went two steps further, and these steps are why *The Negro Soldier* became widely distributed, and *Man Against Oppression* was never produced. Gordon did not whitewash Attuck's story or ignore the racism of his fellow patriots. Though he did change history in one respect, he made Attucks the leader of those killed in the Boston Massacre. Attucks cements his leadership in a scene where he addresses his fellow patriots.

ATTUCKS: Patriots! Mates!

First Voice: Silence! Silence! Let the Negro Speak!

Second Voice: A Negro Sailor is speaking, Silence!

Third Voice: (Jeering) What can a common Black tell a white Patriot?

[Paul] **Revere:** (Sharply): Silence, Drunk! Tory! (Softly) That word Tory silenced him. Did you see, John, how, like a rat, he slunk into that hole in the crowd?"³³⁶

In this dialog, Gordon declares in no uncertain terms that a patriot cannot be a racist. This claim would have been inconceivable forty years earlier. Attuck's speech hammers this home.

³³⁵ *The Negro Soldier*, directed by Frank Capra (United States Department of War, 1944), 4:30-5:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dln2dQyLNVU> .

³³⁶ Eugene Gordon, *Man Against Oppression*. 15

Attucks: Liberty won't come from the clouds, like rain in August... Liberty will come up from the Earth, like a forest of hardy pines, because it will come from us, the people!³³⁷

Gordon dramatizes Attucks as a Jacobin firebrand leading a popular multiracial uprising, but that controversial interpretation still was not enough. Gordon did not beat around the bush. Attucks' story ends with his death, and the narrator is revealed not to be some disembodied voice of history, but an organizer with a Union in a war production plant who has been telling Attucks' story to the workers.

Speaker: "...And now brothers and sisters, [after being told this story] having discussed this matter pro and con, in accordance with our Union Policy of Genuine Democracy, what do you say we put it to a vote? Remember the issue, it is simply this: Are we American workers going to allow Hitler and company to forget that THEY are the enemy we are fighting and not ourselves? Are we American workers, forgetting that Hitler, Tojo and Mussolini are the enemy, going to allow them, through their agents, to foment more Bloodshed, as in Mobile, Beaumont, Los Angeles, and Detroit? That is the issue, brothers and sisters."³³⁸

Gordon is referring to the wave of hate strikes spreading across America. The FEPC's creation led to the integration of many Northern Industries against the will of their right-wing management and many racist white workers. Many unions went on strike to force African Americans out of their workplaces, disrupting war production. In criticizing these hate strikes Gordon could most easily combine his criticism of US racism with supporting the war effort. *Man Against Oppression* ends with these memorable lines.

Shout from the Hall: Aw, we know the issue! Come on! Let's vote and get back to work!
Speaker: All right, brother, we'll vote. (Pause) All in favor of giving the Fascists a poke

³³⁷ Eugene Gordon, *Man Against Oppression*. 15

³³⁸ Eugene Gordon, *Man Against Oppression*. 15

In the puss by rebuking that anti-negro walkout in our plant (Drowned out)

VOICES: (thunderous) “*AYE!*”

Speaker: Anybody opposed? (silence) Anybody opposed? Anybody object to going Back to work alongside our Negro shopmates and brothers-in-arms?

VOICE: Yeah! Hitler! (Tremendous Cheer Fades into National Anthem)³³⁹

The wartime censors did not enjoy *Man Against Oppression*, and even though Gordon wrote a second draft which cut the walkout scene no radio station would air the play. To the censors, *Man Against Oppression* risked wartime national unity by linking the war against Fascism abroad to the war against racism at home. Calling white American workers participating in a hate strike agents of Hitler was a bridge too far. Mortimer Frankel, left-wing the founder of Audiola radio, wrote a letter of recommendation for Gordon “Within the past year or two, Eugene Gordon submitted to me some radio scripts that I considered to be of unusual excellence.. I recommended his scripts for purchase and broadcast, but they were rejected for reasons of policy- mainly because they were a little too outspoken on the subject of the Negro in America.”³⁴⁰

Although *Man Against Oppression* was never aired, the ideas it espoused were taking root. As early as 1937, W.T Couch, head of the University of North Carolina press, whined “Is there any sanity in the view now often stated that no one but a Fascist or Nazi can believe one people or race superior to another?”³⁴¹ The answer seemed clear as American and Soviet troops marched into the heartland of the Nazi Empire and revealed the horrors of the Holocaust.

Bringing the War Home

When WWII ended, and the soldiers came home, American racists were confident they

³³⁹ Eugene Gordon, *Man Against Oppression*. 15

³⁴⁰ Mortimer Frankel to Eugene Gordon, Explanation for the Rejection of *Man Against Oppression* (1943) Sc MG 117 Box 3, Folder 15. Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

³⁴¹ Sitkoff, 123

could repeat the mass repression they had engaged in after the Great War. Senator James O. Eastland of Mississippi declared on the Senate floor in 1945 that “white soldiers expected to come home and find the integrity of the institutions of the South unimpaired.”³⁴² He was in for a rude awakening. NAACP membership had grown tenfold over the course of the war.³⁴³ By the end of the War Gordon, always a critic of the organization, stated it “is in its present form decidedly not reactionary.” because of its willingness to oppose legal discrimination directly.³⁴⁴ This was quite a step up for the “National Association for the Advancement of Certain Persons.” At this point, African Americans demanded (as opposed to asking as they did in the Great War) that victory abroad would result in citizenship at home.

600,000 African Americans registered to vote in 1946, but more importantly, for the future of civil rights, both African American and white veterans demonstrated in no uncertain terms that they would no longer put up with the Southern Oligarchy’s untrammled rule. In February of 1946, in Columbia, Tennessee, African American veterans opened fire on a violent white mob and their police allies.³⁴⁵ That August, in McMinn county Tennessee, Black and white veterans overthrew the local political machine responsible for rigging that county’s elections for years.³⁴⁶ Civil Society from Chicago to Hollywood had turned on the South’s dictatorial tendencies. When the Columbia veterans were on trial A. Phillip Randolph and Eleneor Roosevelt came to their defense but so did the relatively conservative actress Helen Hays.³⁴⁷

Violent, frothing at the mouth racism was now considered un-American. While in the

³⁴² Bryan Greene “After Victory in World War Two, Black Veterans Continued the Fight for Freedom at Home” *Smithsonian Magazine* August 30th 2020

³⁴³ Green. “After Victory”

³⁴⁴ Reyc Taylor Case (1944) Sc MG 117 Box 7, Folder 9, Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC.

³⁴⁵ Chris Lamb. “America’s first post-World War II race riot led to the near-lynching of Thurgood Marshall” *Washington Post* February 25 2021

³⁴⁶ John Egerton. *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1995) 393

³⁴⁷ Green, “After Victory”

aftermath of the Great War, white civil society ignored, or worse, openly celebrated the murder of African American veterans, in the aftermath of WWII, the response was markedly different. After African American veteran Issac Woodard's eyes were beaten out of his head by policemen in Aiken, South Carolina, Orson Wells took to the radio with his *Affidavit of Issac Woodard*, where he spoke to "Officer X," the officer who was responsible and who, to Wells, represented "the accumulated ignorance of the Feudal South."

WELLS: "Wash your hands, Officer X, scrub and scour; you won't blot out the blood of a blinded war veteran. Nor yet the color of your skin... Wash a lifetime, you'll never wash away that leprous lack of pigment, the guilty palor of the white man. We invite you to luxuriate in secrecy, it will be brief. Go on, suckle your anonymous moment while it lasts. You're going to be uncovered! We will blast out your name! We'll give the world your given name! Yes! Your so-called Christian name. It is going to rise out of the filthy deep like the dead thing it is. We're going to make it public with the public scandal you dictated but failed to sign... What does it cost to be a Negro? In Aiken South Carolina, it cost a man his eyes. What does it cost to wear over your skeleton the pinkish tint officially described as "white?" in Aiken, South Carolina, it cost a man his soul."³⁴⁸

Wells gained this clarity of vision and his trenchant critique of whiteness from his experiences with the Popular Front. In 1936 he had directed an all-Black version of *Macbeth* for the American Negro Theatre, a progressive WPA-funded Harlem theatre deeply tied to the earlier Communist-adjacent Negro People's Theatre.³⁴⁹ Eugene Gordon often reviewed the Negro People's Theatre's plays, and Wells, like Gordon, relied on the WPA to pay the bills during the Depression's lean years.³⁵⁰ Gordon and Wells were representative of a paradigm shift in American culture; the left had succeeded in guiding a generation of artists towards anti-racism.

Charlie Chaplin, an open Leftist, read his final speech from *The Great Dictator* at the presidential gala the night before Roosevelt's inauguration in 1941. The principles expressed in

³⁴⁸ Orson Wells. 1946 "The Affidavit of Issac Woodard" Orson *Welles Commentaries*. American Broadcasting Corporation

³⁴⁹ Judith Smith. *Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Postwar Democracy, 1940-1960*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 14-15

³⁵⁰ Eugene Gordon "From Uncle Tom's Cabin to Stevedore" *New Theater*, July 1935, 23

the lines “I should like to help everyone if possible, Jew, Gentile, Black man and white” and “it is written that the kingdom of God is in man, not one man or a group of men, but in all men! In you!” evoked a variety of reactions.³⁵¹ Fury from the Southern gentry, joy from Northern liberals, and a combination of cynicism and guarded hope from many African Americans. Roosevelt did not bring the promise of those lines to fruition, in fact, they are still unfulfilled, but the Popular Front ensured that the United States, which purported to believe in those principles, could no longer ignore its greatest hypocrisy.

Two years after the end of World War Two, this anti-racist coalition won its most significant victory up to that point. A combination of pressure from A. Phillip Randolph, the NAACP, Communists (both Marxist-Leninists and Trotskyists), and an increasingly powerful bloc of Black voters forced Truman to end segregation in the military.³⁵² The armed wing of the federal government no longer officially recognized racial ideology. A decade later, the integrated 101st airborne division would protect the Little Rock nine as they attended their first day at school.

However, Gordon was not satisfied. He had called for the desegregation of the military repeatedly during the war. Now he worried about who that military would be used against. His writings are especially feverish near the end of the war and immediately after it. He wrote and published extensively warning that the United States could easily transition the war on Fascism into long-term wars against the peoples of the newly liberated territories.³⁵³ He worried that American troops in general and Black troops, in particular, would be forced to restore postwar

³⁵¹ “4,000 ATTEND GALA ON INAUGURAL EVE Actors and Other Artists Give Varied Program Honoring Roosevelt and Wallace EDDY AND CHAPLIN HEARD Other Celebrities Recite or Give Impersonations — The National Symphony Plays” *New York Times* January 20th 1941

³⁵² Susan M. Glisson. *The Human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) 91

³⁵³ “World War Three Brews in China” (1946) Sc MG 117 Box 1, Folder 13. Eugene Gordon Papers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NYC. 8

order in the Asian colonies on behalf of unpopular capitalist governments or European colonial powers. In his unpublished 1946 article *World War Three Brews in China* Gordon appears prophetic about the coming Cold War and predicted that China would be the staging ground for an “Imperialist, Anti-Soviet War.” Though he was wrong about where in East Asia the upcoming conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States would first turn hot, Gordon was right about one thing; the postwar period would not be peaceful.

Conclusion

Though proven wrong in its details, Gordon’s prediction bore out in general. The world divided itself into armed Communist and Anti-Communist camps. While a reactionary backlash did not immediately follow WWII the backlash did come. Eugene McCarthy and the HUAC former members of the Popular Front members to either line up behind American Cold War policy or to exit public life. The Popular front’s most radical elements were eliminated, and its acceptably moderate elements folded into the New Deal coalition.

The alliance between the Black radical and European revolutionary traditions, in general, and between the Jewish radicals of the Lower East Side and the Black radicals of Harlem, in particular, had been articulated through the form of the Communist Party.³⁵⁴ However, during the Cold War, the national security state no longer tolerated this direct opposition. Try as the Communist Party might to carve out a niche for itself in the postwar world, it was in an impossible situation. The party was banned, its representatives were interrogated and arrested, and the New York Attorney general dissolved the International Workers Order. June salvaged

³⁵⁴ The Communist Party both radicalized other left-wing institutions such as the CIO and the National Negro Congress and built up alternative structures of its own. These structures raised children, and taught Communist values (Camp Kinderland) advanced revolutionary culture (The John Reed Clubs) and provided mutual aid (IWO) The rich alternative life-world it built was the only things broad enough to appeal both to a Jewish Woman from Odessa and a Black man from New Orleans.

the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs from the wreckage.³⁵⁵

Throughout the 1950s, Eugene was constantly surveilled and harassed by the FBI. In 1954 he had a chance to stop it. The FBI targeted him as part of their TUPOLEV program, aimed at turning high-level members of the American Communist Party into informants. When he was approached on the street outside his house in 1954 by two G-men he refused to hear them out, declaring "I will have nothing to do with you and you ought to know it." The FBI noted that "at this point the interview was terminated and the agents observed GORDON [sic] to continue walking west on 13th street, GORDON did not turn around to see if the agents were watching him" of course he did not, he had dealt with much worse.³⁵⁶

June and Eugene continued the fight well into the postwar period, transitioning to focus on nuclear disarmament and anti-imperialism. More remains to be told of their story. However, in the postwar period the Second Red Scare and the emergence of a New Left would place them as secondary characters, not protagonists, in the American struggle for justice.

When once Black veterans armed themselves to defend their neighborhoods during the Red Summer, now Black veterans went on the attack, bearing arms in defense of CORE organizers in the deep south as part of the Deacons for Defense and Justice.³⁵⁷ By the 1960s, the anti-racism the Communist party had helped popularize had long outgrown it. Tactics such as public displays of anti-racism, integrated strikes, and direct action against segregation, once used to show the Communist and Socialist Party's commitment to Black freedom, would be popularized as civic disobedience and utilized as the main component of a successful mass-movement strategy to destroy Jim Crow—a mass movement that we know as the civil

³⁵⁵ Robert Zecker, 213

³⁵⁶ FBI File, Eugene Gordon.

³⁵⁷ Annelieke Dirk. "Between Threat and Reality: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Emergence of Armed Self-Defense in Clarksdale and Natchez, Mississippi, 1960-1965." *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1, no. 1 (2007): 71 See also: Charles Cobb Junior. *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get you Killed* (New York: Basic Books, 2014)

rights movement.³⁵⁸

These Communists and Socialists never disappeared from the fight for racial justice. In the early 1950s, with red-baiting and widespread purges of the left-wing of America's labor movement all too common, the FE organizer Jim Wright still found time to go out with a group of his Union brothers, Black and white, each weekend to fight Jim Crow and "map out an area of Louisville to do something in we wasn't supposed to." They led sit-ins fifteen years before the NAACP utilized them as a common tactic.³⁵⁹

The Northern white intelligentsia's growing indignation at the suppression of Black freedom, the arrival of civil rights as a national issue for the first time since Reconstruction, the birth of the CIO as a powerful integrated trade-union federation, and the pressure of a geopolitical rival which would not hesitate to criticize the United States for its treatment of African Americans allowed militant civil rights tactics to be employed without systematic violent state repression. Utilizing these tactics, a new generation of largely social democratic activists, from CORE and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to Walter Reuther and Martin Luther King, Jr., would begin to command the popular front's legacy.³⁶⁰

No amount of state repression could force the American working class, Black and white, to unlearn the lessons of the Popular Front. While the Communist party and its affiliated organizations could be destroyed, the effects of its crucial interwar commitment to anti-racism could not be undone. The struggle for racial and economic justice was inextricably linked in the eyes of a whole generation. Neither June or Eugene lived to see the United Socialist States of

³⁵⁸See: Robert R Korstad. *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2003)

³⁵⁹ Gilpin, 270

³⁶⁰ For more on the connections between the Popular Front and the Civil Rights movement see: Patricia Sullivan *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*. (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) and Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein. "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement." *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (1988) See Also: Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005)

America that they envisioned in their most optimistic moments. However, they did live to see an America that would have been fundamentally unrecognizable to their parents.

Martin Luther King, born the year that June was thrown into the back of a paddy wagon with Carl Marx Reeve, and Eugene wrote “the Negro Grows up” declared in May of 1963 that it was time to “let the Black Laboring Masses speak!”³⁶¹ Two months later, nearly 300,000 people converged on Washington, D.C. for a march on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. While the march had explicitly rejected the support of any Communist organizations, June, Eugene, and the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women’s Clubs showed up anyway. This was their moment of triumph, too, and as the pair marched past the counter-protesting George Lincoln Rockwell and his Brownshirted American Nazi Party thugs, June stepped forward with her banner right alongside Eugene.³⁶² This time, unlike when they hid from the white mob and the Black Hundreds as children, the Gordons had them outnumbered, and they were not afraid.

³⁶¹ “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford, July 20th 2022, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>

³⁶² A Dramatic Skit on the Life and the Contributions of our Unforgettable Leader June Gordon Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women’s Clubs Records.

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Appendix: List of Acronyms

ABB: African Blood Brotherhood

ANLC: American Negro Labor Congress

AFL: American Federation of Labor

BOI: Bureau of Investigation

CIO: Congress of Industrial Organizations

CPUSA: Communist Party of the United States of America

FE: Farm Equipment Workers Union

HUAC: House Un-American Activities Committee

IWO: International Workers Order

ILD: International Labor Defense

ILGWU: International Ladies Garment Workers Union

ITUCNW: International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers

IWW: Industrial Workers of the World

JPFO: Jewish People's Fraternal Order

KUTV: Communist University of the Toilers of the East

NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

NRA: National Recovery Administration

NTWIU: Needle Trade Workers Industrial Union

NTWU: Needle Trade Workers Union

RSDLP: Russian Social Democratic Labor Party

SPA: Socialist Party of America

TUUL: Trade Union Unity League