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Book Review: Black Bolshevik

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into its ranks. But the party's program lacked consistency and depth of understanding of the nature of the Black struggle. Early in the 20th century, Blacks began to form their own radical organizations.

Haywood was born in the closing years of the 19th century, 1898, three years after Booker T. Washington's famous Atlanta Cotton Expedition speech; two years after the *Plessy versus Ferguson* decision set a rash of Jim-Crow laws in motion. The seeds of Black America's 20th century troubles had been sown. Men of integrity and good intentions spoke against the rising tide of racism and the bigotry related to it, but were not heard. One of these men was U. S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan, who had written a notable dissent in the *Civil Rights Decision* of 1883 by calling the judgement "quite as pernicious as the decision made by the court in the *Dred Scott* case." He also dissented in the *Plessy versus Ferguson* case. Thus, the concept of separate but equal accommodations was born. Of course the separate was never equal. Thus, Black America came into the 20th century. Booker T. Washington moved to the center stage of leadership. He was soon challenged by W.E.B. Du Bois.

Haywood grew to manhood during the years of Washington's leadership and the conflict around it. These were years when Black Americans were looking for new definitions and a new direction. New men and movements emerged. During the first 20 years of the new century, intermittent race riots erupted all over the country. The intent of the rioters, along with the Ku Klux Klan, was the driving of Black Americans back into slavery, literally. Blacks thought only an organized effort held part of the answer to the atrocities. The Niagara Movement was formed in 1905 and the NAACP in 1909. In 1911, the National Urban League was founded. But in 1916, all of these organizations were challenged by the UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) founded by Marcus Garvey.

This is the period when Haywood became actively involved in the Black struggle. His background had prepared him well for this. The pressure of the Klan had forced his family out of the South to Omaha, Nebraska. As a young man, he served in the First World War and returned home in the midst of "The bloodiest race riots in the United States'

Books

Black Bolshevik

By Harry Haywood
Liberator Press, Chicago, Ill., 700 pp., \$15.00
[\$5.95 paperback]

Reviewed by John Henrik Clarke

This is the first extensive autobiography of a Black member of the American Communist Party. More important, Harry Haywood's *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist*, is a moving human story of one man's search for his role in the Black liberation struggle. It is a political narrative with a running commentary and a capsule history of the relationship of the Communist Party to the Black American struggle; also the struggle of the working class in the world over the last 50 years. This fact alone makes this book worthy of serious attention.

Haywood joined the American Communist Party in 1925 but was expelled in 1957. His direct relationship to the party spans a generation, and after his expulsion, Haywood did not cease to take part in the political activities of the left.

It was not the lack of belief that caused so many Blacks to become disillusioned with the American Communist Party. It was the lack of the party's understanding of the true nature of Black people's situation and how to serve it. Some of the conflict and confusion was around Black Nationalism. The rulers of the party did not understand—then or now—that it is possible for a Black person to be a nationalist, a Pan-Africanist and a socialist, concurrently, without one contradicting the other. Personally, I have been all three for most of my life and I feel no contradiction at all.

In a recent reprint of one of his early pamphlets, "For a Revolutionary Position on the Negro Question," first published in 1952, Haywood attempts to clear up some of the confusion around the subject of Black Nationalism and self-determination. He had started this

assessment earlier, in his book, *Negro Liberation*, (1948). In both cases, his assessment is informative and interesting, but—in my opinion—not successful.

A majority of Black Americans who became involved in the struggle in the 20th century chose to join the Communist Party, or one of the other parties on the political left that advocated a socialist solution to the problems of the world's working class. But most of them either left, became disappointed, or were expelled. This is equally true of those who joined the late-19th century left movements and the Third Party Formations that followed the American Civil War. There is now a need to look—at least briefly—at the relationship of Black Americans to these early left movements in order to understand how the past relates to the present.

Black radicals and activists have participated in the organized labor movement, and with politically left groups since the 1870s. In 1879, the Knights of Labor (forerunners of the American Federation of Labor) made an active effort to enlist the support of Black labor. By 1886 it was estimated that there were 60,000 Black members in the organization. For a decade after 1886, Black workers participated in most of the major labor strikes, agrarian radicalism and in the Populist Movement. On the other side of the political spectrum, Blacks had become a significant voting bloc in the Republican Party in Texas and in other states in the South.

By the end of the 19th century, the heyday of Blacks in the labor movement and in the early left political movements was over. Left organizations, mainly in the North, made concerted efforts to gain the allegiance of white workers in industry, and to organize the emigrant craftsmen who had arrived in large numbers from Europe.

The Socialist Party, founded in 1901, began to accept a few Black members

history." It was the "red summer" of 1919. He had returned to American reality and found whites who hated Black people with more bitterness than they ever hated the Germans.

The post-war riots and massive unemployment among the returned Black veterans, and Black Americans in general, shaped his mind and temperament to search for some answers to the problems of his people within the framework of a then developing political movement called Communism. For the next 27 years, Haywood worked to build that movement and traveled to Russia and other parts of Europe to learn more about its international mission. In the beginning, there was the search for self and the definition of self. This era is presented in great detail in the opening chapter of an earlier book, *A Child of Slaves*.

The formative years of Haywood's life and the beginning of his political awareness is told in the next two chapters, "A Black Regiment in World War I" and "Searching for Answers." In the next chapter of the book, he writes about a neglected and almost forgotten aspect of Black struggle—the role of the "Crusader Magazine," the rise and decline of the African Blood Brotherhood, a unique Black radical organization, and the Communist Party's negative reaction to Garvey. Two of the most outstanding Black activists of the period were Cyril P. Briggs and Richard B. Moore, who later joined the Communist Party when they felt the diminishing role of the African Blood Brotherhood. Haywood gives the following account:

The African Blood Brotherhood was founded in New York City in 1919 by a group of Black radicals under the leadership of Briggs, who had formerly been the Editor of the Amsterdam News. The Crusader Magazine was established in 1919. The Brotherhood was organized around the magazine with Briggs as its executive head presiding over a supreme council. The group was originally conceived as the African Blood Brotherhood "for African liberation and redemption" and was later broadened to include all African people. As it was a secret organization, it never sought broad membership. National headquarters were in New York. Its size never 3,000. But its influence was many times greater than this; the Crusader Magazine at

one time claimed a circulation of 33,000.

Black Bolshevik is rich with useful information about a single life that touches on so many other lives, and their relationship to the political struggle for Black liberation. Please note, this book is not the last word on the subject and I am not appraising it totally without reservations. I have some strong questions about some of Haywood's conclusions, while believing that most of his information is basically sound. Because Haywood suspected that what he had to say would be questioned, he has included an extensive list of references at the close of the book. The references make the book more useful in looking at the relationship of the political left movement to Black Americans.

The movement was never static. Then, as now, fierce ideological struggles were exploding within the movement. Many Black Communists, who thought that they had found a political home in this movement, were caught in the crossfire of these ideological struggles. Some of them survived, some quietly left the party, some disillusioned, and others—like Haywood—were expelled.

In my opinion, most Blacks who have given serious thought to the matter have concluded that their problem (that is in part universal) cannot be resolved under capitalism which created it. This admission identifies a dilemma, and an unanswered question. Why is it that the Communist Party in the United States and throughout the Black world has been unable to attract and sustain a large Black constituency? The answer is both simple and complex. The program of the Communist Party will have to be reshaped to suit the needs of African people. I do not believe that this is the intent of the party at this, or any other time.

I have moved outside of Haywood's book and deliberately brought up a question that he seemed to have avoided. Is there a future for African people in any movement, left or right, that is integrated or led by whites? The answer is NO! Maybe later, but not now. There is no way that any Black leader can hold a large constituency of his people together without catering to their nationalistic and Pan-Africanist feelings. Here it would do well to remember that the nationalism of an oppressed people differs appreciably from the nationalism of the oppressor who is in power. The nationalism of white people, no matter what they say they believe politically, is generally racist.

There is a need for African people the world over to build an apparatus of socialism that will neither be the enemy nor a satellite of Russia or China. We can work with both or with one of them depending on our needs. We cannot afford to dissipate our energy by being referees in the fights between the various European and Asian socialist camps. Whatever socialist line we follow, it has to serve our own needs above all other needs.

The *Black Bolshevik* needs to be read for the lessons it teaches for today; and for a way of dealing with the tragic revelation that some of the same mistakes that the Communist Party was making in relationship to the Black struggle—all over the world—when Haywood joined the party in 1925, are still being made. □

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