

# The First African-American Communist

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Hamilton College is acknowledging the hundredth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution with displays of crimson banners, books from International Publishers (a Communist organization), and visages of Lenin in the library.

What should be added is a rendering of a hand-less and toothless frozen corpse with the death certificate from 1939:

Surname, name and patronymic Fort-Whiteman, Lovett

Year and place of birth, 1894 American

.....

Nationality American

Social position White-collar worker

By whom and when convicted Special board of the NKVD of the USSR art. of criminal code Anti-Soviet agitation sentenced to 5 years

Other distinguishing features Above-average height, normal build, black hair, normal nose . . . .

Another “distinguishing feature,” not listed, was the color of Fort-Whiteman’s skin. Presumably this did not matter to a regime that presented itself as a multicultural workers’ paradise.

Lovett Fort-Whiteman, an African American hailing from Texas, and a drama critic for the Messenger, among other things, in the 1920s, was a path breaker, traveling to the Soviet Union for educational training and then returning to the U.S. to recruit. In 1930, he moved to Moscow and married a Russian woman.

Fort-Whiteman was discussed in the autobiographies of two other African Americans who had moved to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s and escaped decades later: Homer Smith, a journalist, wrote *Black Man in Red Russia* in 1964; and Jamaican-born Robert Robinson, an engineer, wrote *Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union* in 1988.

Smith described Fort-Whiteman as the “ideological mentor” to the “small group of American Negroes,” all college-educated “intellectuals,” but classified as “non-politicals’ and distinct from other Negroes, mainly from Africa and the West Indies, who were being trained as revolutionaries in Communist political schools.” Fort-Whiteman “stoutly supported the Communist ‘line’ of that time on a separate Negro state to be gerrymandered out of the southern American Black Belt” and defended sending gold to the outside world for “fomenting and financing revolutionary organizations and movements.” He helped write a script for the anti-American propaganda film “Black and White” and “pleaded fervently for formal and material support for the Scottsboro boys and Angelo Herndon. . . . expounded loud and long on lynchings, Jim Crow and oppression of his people in America and condemned with fiery emotions the enslavement of black people in the African colonies of European imperialist nations.”

But in 1936, Fort-Whiteman disappeared.

Robert Robinson, in his 1988 memoir, also noted Fort-Whiteman’s disappearance. He knew that Fort-Whiteman had been accused of being a counter-revolutionary for criticizing Langston Hughes’s short story collection, *The Ways of White Folks*.

In August 1935, at the Foreign Workers Club in Moscow, Fort-Whiteman was critiquing the stories, which Hughes had begun to write during his own sojourn in the Soviet Union in 1931-1932. Hughes, whom many may know as the “poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance” for such poems as “Harlem” (“What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?”), had recruited a cast of about twenty African American

“actors” for the “Black and White” movie. The project was scotched when the Soviets sought diplomatic recognition from the U.S. Though most of the “actors” went home upset, Hughes took up the offer to live and travel throughout the Soviet Union and write for their newspaper *Izvestia* and then later poems for *New Masses*, like “Stalingrad.”

For Fort-Whiteman, Hughes’s stories had not been revolutionary or anti-bourgeois enough. Fort-Whiteman had apparently not gotten the memo (so to speak) of the change in the party line to the “Popular Front”: “reformists,” like FDR, were no longer enemy “social fascists,” but allies. William Patterson, another black Communist “leader,” overheard Fort-Whiteman’s barroom “anti-revolutionary” literary critique.

Long-standing rumors about Fort-Whiteman’s demise were confirmed when archives were opened for a period after the fall of the Soviet Union. The death certificate and finger prints, which came from Kazakhstan after its independence in 1996, were reproduced by Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson in their book *The Soviet World of American Communism* (Yale University Press, 1998).

They revealed that in 1935 Fort-Whiteman was the subject of a Comintern committee meeting concerning the American party, with Earl Browder, William Schneiderman, and Sam Darcy present. This led to a resolution for “Comrades Paterson (sic) and [James] Ford [another black Communist “leader”]” to hold “a meeting with all the Negro comrades” to discuss the “reported efforts of Lovett Whiteman to mislead some of the Negro comrades.”

Fort-Whiteman had also praised Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek who were accused of sympathizing with Trotsky.

On July 1, 1937, Fort-Whiteman was sentenced to five years of internal exile in Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan, where he taught school and boxing.

On May 8, 1938, Fort-Whiteman’s punishment was upped to five years’ hard labor at the Sevvostlag Prison Labor Camp in Siberia where prisoners slept in holes they dug in the tundra as they worked on the Kolyma Highway. Temperatures went down to 60-below.

His fingerprints were taken posthumously; hands had to be chopped off from frozen corpses and then thawed in a heated office. Official “cause of death” was “Weakening of cardiac activity.” He was 44. The former teacher, actor, writer, and athlete had not been able to make his work quota. So he received decreased food rations and beatings so severe that all his teeth were knocked out. Details came from eye witness accounts and medical records.

One would think that everyone would be horrified at the fate of Fort-Whiteman. But Yale University History Professor Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, who holds an endowed chair, in her book *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (W.W. Norton, 2008),

praises Fort-Whiteman as the “first African American communist.” For her, the Soviet Union’s disregard for the race of the corpse evidences racial progressivism.

Gilmore rebukes her native South, in which she grew up in the 1950s, for its ill treatment of African Americans and its anti-communism. Ignoring overwhelming evidence to the contrary, she writes, “In the 1920s and 1930s, the Communists alone argued for complete equality between the races” and thus led the way for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. She contends that the idea of “Moscow gold” is a “myth.”

In their 1998 book, Klehr, Haynes, and Anderson ruefully noted that Fort-Whiteman had been ignored by historians in the 1980s and 1990s. Gilmore, in her 2008 book, takes a different tack. She acknowledges their path-breaking archival work but ignores their conclusion: “The Soviets established the ideology, provided the money, chose or approved the leaders, and monitored the tactics of the Americans.” That included ordering American Communists to agitate for the “black belt” in the South, which would mean civil war, and sure death for thousands, mostly African Americans. They used the Scottsboro Boys rape case for publicity, stole from their funds, put their lives at risk, and prolonged their imprisonment. Communist agitation led to deaths of tenant farmers. Communists betrayed, and then tortured and killed Lovett Fort-Whiteman.

Gilmore, however, praises Fort-Whiteman for “never allowing [himself] to be silenced,” then describes his experiences, including his tenure in “Alma-Ata, a beautiful small town in southeast Kazakhstan in mountainous Central Asia.”

She ends her chapter about Lovett Fort-Whiteman with the following paragraph:

Deep disappointments, crushing blows, starvations: It took them all to break Lovett Fort-Whiteman. Did he dream, there in a frozen hole in the tundra, of hot nights on Sweet Ellum Street back home in Dallas? Of midday classes at Tuskegee, where sweating students performed the heavy work of uplift? Of humid mornings in Yucatan spent imbibing Socialism? Of escaping J. Edgar Hoover’s men in St. Louis? Or did he dream his own ‘dream deferred,’ of bringing the revolution to Chicago streets, equality to the South, and black liberation to the Kremlin? There in Kolyma no one mourned him, no one knew he was the first African American Communist. No one knew of his eagerness, his recklessness, his abiding faith in poor working people. In the final, perfect equality of the gulag, it mattered not a whit that he was a black man, only that he was a broken man.

Communist ideology inspired unthinkable cruelties in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, Communist ideologues, some at Ivy League universities, romanticize the death of the “first African American Communist.”

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