The Color Line in Communism: The East German Ministry of Culture's Portrayal of Paul Robeson's State Visit

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THE COLOR LINE IN COMMUNISM: THE EAST GERMAN MINISTRY OF CULTURE’S PORTRAYAL OF PAUL ROBESON’S STATE VISIT

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
History
Western Michigan University
August 2020

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During the 1950s and 1960s, the Cold War, the American Civil Rights movement, and anticolonialism combined to create a complex political, social, and economic landscape and a division of the globe into the so-called first, second, and third worlds. It is within this context that African American performer and activist Paul Robeson traveled to the GDR for an official visit in October 1960.

This visit was highly significant in light of the oppression Robeson had experienced at the hands of the US State Department. In response to Robeson’s communist sympathy, the State Department had revoked Robeson’s passport in 1950, and his travel privileges were not restored until 1958. At this time, various countries and entities began inviting Robeson and his wife, Eslanda, for highly publicized visits. The GDR, trying to gain recognition as the “true” Germany, began a two-year campaign to secure a Robeson visit. Hosting Robeson would allow the GDR to bring itself much-needed publicity. It would allow the GDR to depict itself as an egalitarian state—committed to both economic and racial equality. This thesis relies on archival documents to examine the GDR’s preparations for and public portrayal of this visit. The central argument is that the GDR encouraged Robeson to visit their purportedly class-less and race-less country so that it could promote this visit for propagandistic purposes.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the Department of History and the Graduate College at Western Michigan University for providing funding for my research. I would also like to thank Martin Gontermann, former Humboldt University graduate student, who served as my research assistant while I collected archival sources in Berlin. An extremely reliable assistant, Martin also provided invaluable insights and expertly guided me through the German archival system. I would next like to thank my thesis committee, chaired by Dr. Eli Rubin, for advising and teaching me during the research and writing process. Now, I need to express my gratitude to Dr. Olivia Gabor-Peirce, professor of German in the Department of World Languages and Literature at Western Michigan University. Dr. Gabor-Peirce taught my last two German courses, expanding my knowledge of the language and encouraging my own research. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their support, advice, and love. I thoroughly cherished the opportunity to travel with my parents to Berlin, and together we navigated some challenges while enjoying our time in the city.

Colin J. Rensch
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INTRODUCTION

In the postwar world order, the United States and the Soviet Union pumped resources into the maintenance of their competing ideologies’ public images. European states on either side of the iron curtain digested these propagandistic messages and, in turn, created their own propaganda in support of either democracy or communism. The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) created propaganda that stressed its capitalist economy’s ability to meet consumer demand, while the German Democratic Republic (GDR) touted the strong moral character of its communist state. In the 1950s, the GDR was seeking global recognition and attempting to distinguish itself from its supervising state, the Soviet Union, and its neighbor, the FRG. Despite its best attempts, it was impossible for the GDR to distance itself from the Soviet Union, since much of its military and financial resources came through the Soviets. Therefore, the GDR’s global recognition was dependent upon the Soviet Union’s world favor (or oftentimes lack of favor). The US, of course, did not recognize the GDR until September 4, 1974, when the détente between the US and the Soviet Union was beginning to settle in.

The relationship between the GDR and FRG during this period was characterized by both simple national competition and complicated diplomatic maneuvering. The two states fought for global favor, each claiming to be the “true” Germany. They also monitored each other closely, looking to draw international attention to any perceived or actual governmental and societal failings. On the West German side, many journalists called East Germany the “so-called GDR” or the “Soviet Zone.” Politicians also pointed to the oppressive nature of the East German State,

2 Ibid., 12.
exemplified by the brutal tactics of the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Stasi). On the East German side, politicians charged West Germany with continuing a tradition of fascism because many West German officials had previously served the Nazi regime. (indeed, the GDR would eventually refer to the coming Berlin Wall as the anti-fascist wall). Communist Party propaganda depicted West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer as betraying the German people.³

West Germany’s policy regarding East Germany, which diplomats would eventually refer to as the Hallstein Doctrine, called for a strict diplomatic isolation of the communist state.⁴ The FRG threatened to cut ties with any country that officially recognized the GDR. Although William Gray argues that the “Hallstein Doctrine was no doctrine at all, merely an accumulation of emergency measures,” this policy nonetheless greatly limited the East German state’s efforts to seek international legitimacy.⁵

Although the GDR seemed to have no difficulty drawing attention to the real or perceived failings of the FRG, drawing the world’s attention to its own strengths was more challenging. Although Western countries are often thought to have been the champions of human rights during the war, Ned Richardson-Little argues that the actual situation was more complicated. He writes that “[f]rom the perspective of the SED leadership and GDR elites, it was self-evident that human rights legitimised the cause of socialism, and that UN human rights treaties intended to secure the right to self-determination and state sovereignty for all in the face of (and most definitely not in the service of) Western imperialism.”⁶ Nevertheless, the West’s non-recognition

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³ Ibid., 11.
⁴ Ibid., 2.
⁵ Ibid., 5.
of the GDR made it more important than ever for the state to promote a positive self-image. The official visit of African American singer and actor Paul Robeson in October 1960 provided a means of doing just that. Robeson’s visit provided the singer with an opportunity to experience a purportedly classless and raceless society, and it provided the East German government with an opportunity to exploit a public relations coup. Was Robeson’s state-sponsored visit a random event or an intentional exercise? Was the GDR promoting the visit of a famous black American to make itself appear more egalitarian than its capitalist rivals?

Robeson’s fight to restore his travel privileges was one of the most strenuous challenges in his life. Among other reasons, the US State Department revoked Robeson’s passport in 1950 in response to a speech he had made the previous year in Paris. In the speech, he voiced the opinion that many Americans did not wish to fight a war against the Soviet Union. Although Robeson’s comments expressed his hope that the US and the Soviet Union could avoid war, the American press reported that he had voiced sympathy for the Soviets. Robeson’s words had been taken out of context, and he was suddenly out of any kind of a job.

When Robeson gained back his travel privileges in 1958, he set upon a rigorous travel schedule despite his frequent physical and mental health issues. Robeson was still known throughout the world for his singing and acting abilities, but his later years of travel took on more of a political emphasis. “Big Paul” traveled to join the minority figure, the working man, the overall downtrodden. If he did sing, it was to bring attention to the plight of subjugated souls. It is no surprise that, by the late 1950s, the GDR began a diligent courtship of Robeson. Robeson

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eventually agreed to visit, and the celebrity America had forgotten traveled to the GDR in the fall of 1960.

My thesis will examine Robeson’s state visit, treating it as a case study to reveal East Germany’s treatment of black people, be they Africans, Afro-Germans, or African Americans. I will argue that the GDR exploited Robeson’s visit by projecting an overly positive image of East Germany’s treatment of blacks—the racial minority whose oppression represented a significant failing of democratic (read “American”) ideology. I will also show that, while Robeson hoped to find an East German society more accepting of blacks than its American counterpart, he soon discovered, as he had previously in Great Britain, that this was not the case. Robeson’s visit will be examined at great length in Chapters Two and Three, but it is first necessary to examine the complex socio-political situation of domestic and global affairs occurring in the postwar years.

As is known today, while the end of the Second World War marked a tremendous milestone, it left a tremendous path of social and political upheaval in its wake. Issues that were temporarily forgotten during the war reemerged. Arguably the most pressing issue of the postwar period was the ideological conflict between capitalism and communism, and this broad issue affected countless others, including anticolonialism, labor relations, and race relations. Robeson was caught in the middle of this trickle-down effect. Communism offered an appealing alternative to workers—both white and black. Whether advocating for the rights of workers, colonial peoples struggling for autonomy, or African Americans, Robeson encouraged the embrace of communism. In contemporary times it is difficult to understand why communism, a system of government that has mostly proven unsuccessful, held such appeal for an educated

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9 Ibid., 171.
(and therefore not working class) American like Robeson. Why was Robeson so enchanted by Communism?

Examining the American Civil Rights Movement allows one to better understand Robeson’s inclination toward Communism. The movement sought racial equality, and since socialism centers around the idea of economic equality, the latter can obviously inform the former. Consider Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Although not a Communist, he held many socialist views. To some, this may seem surprising. After all, Dr. King was never called to testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee like Robeson, and skeptics could argue that he would have made a lesser impact if he had fostered socialist leanings. The former statement is true, but the revisionist narrative of Dr. King’s legacy embraced by the US mainstream has covered up the socialism that was integral to his work. Indeed, socialism appealed to the black sharecropper in Mississippi like it appealed to the European proletarian for whom Marx and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto*. The truth is that there were myriad institutional impediments to black Americans’ social mobility. It is a great irony that a capitalist economy is also known as a free market economy. The free flow of capital can be advantageous to both owners and workers, but the latter is often beset by social, political, and legal barriers to economic advancement.

Although the European working class for whom Marx and Engels were struggling was also socially, politically, and legally disadvantaged, the issue of racial discrimination was more central to the American Civil Rights Movement. The Marxist-Leninist approach to socialism was primarily focused on class division since class was the main cause of disparity in Europe at the time. Cedric Robinson examines the history of the use of socialism by black revolutionaries,
revealing that the added variable of race further complicates the socialism equation.\textsuperscript{10} This owes, in large part, to the fact that the idea of race, particularly as defined by skin color, came into being relatively recently in recorded history. Many scholars argue that “race” began to be widely used during the Spanish Inquisition, when Spanish subjects who claimed the Christian faith were saved from expulsion if they could prove their non-Moorish descent.\textsuperscript{11}

If anything, one should find it difficult to believe that Robeson considered any approach other than one firmly rooted in socialism. Robeson, like Dr. King, realized socialism’s ability to level the economic playing field. Although it was important to tackle the social, political, and legal issues facing black Americans, breaking down economic barriers (largely in the form of expanding employment opportunities) was key to upward mobility. This was especially evident in the years following the Great Depression. Some black Americans needing employment soon caught a serious break, as did their white counterparts, in the form of war industries.

Although New Deal entities like the Works Progress Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps created badly needed jobs for Americans, the added need to fill surplus factory jobs during the war led to an even greater employment boom. The desire to fill the large number of job vacancies also lessened the degree to which racially discriminatory hiring practices were enforced. Racial discrimination was also less pronounced in the northern US, where the majority of war industries jobs were located. Nonetheless, unions did their part to bring increased jobs to both white and black workers. Von Eschen writes that “The CIO’s efforts to organize black workers, as well as a marked jump in the number of black workers in


industrialized and unionized jobs during World War II, led to heightened expectations and a strong emphasis in African American communities on the issue of jobs. “

The above discussion suggests that politics, economics, and race were strongly connected during the Cold War. As such, the research for the present study is informed by a diverse literary base that examines the three factors together. One important contingent of scholarship deals with the perception of American music during the Cold War by examining the experiences of musicians sent abroad on behalf of the US. Such is the case with Penny von Eschen’s study of the State Department-sponsored tours of, among others, Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington. These tours were intended to engender sympathy for American foreign policy abroad by celebrating the artistic achievements of black Americans (especially in states considering Communism). Von Eschen argues, however, that such performances disseminated American music but not necessarily democratic political ideology.

Numerous texts also explore the perceptions of East German citizens regarding their non-white socialist brethren across the globe. Quinn Slobodian’s Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World, an edited collection of essays on East German international affairs, is representative of such works. Slobodian and the other contributors present a series of essays that reveal the nature of interactions between the GDR and Communist countries of non-white majorities, including North Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba. East German officials wished to

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13 Penny M. von Eschen, Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
14 Ibid., 257.
16 Ibid., 3.
provide a beacon of light to these countries and offer them its support. As the Cold War progressed, however, the East German government’s inability to appease its own citizens made the very idea of supporting other countries less realistic.

Works like Natalia Rasmussen’s recent dissertation specifically examine the East German perception of Black America. Rasmussen argues that East German propaganda encouraged citizens to support black Americans, in part, because such activity bolstered the state’s legitimacy. Black Americans graciously accepted the support of East German citizens in the struggle for civil rights and their own legitimacy. Black Americans who visited the GDR, however, realized that “anti-racism—a commitment to racial tolerance—existed only at the superficial level of policies and laws and was rarely enforced in East German Society.”

There are other ways to explain the positive experiences of black Americans in the GDR. Positive encounters resulted, in part, from what Moritz Ege calls Afro-Americanophilia—a kind of fetishization of African American culture. As Ege and Andrew Hurley write, “Germans who have loved African American cultures were sometimes merely ‘flipping’ and positively weighting the negative stereotypes that anti-black German racists applied.” Priscilla Layne notes that this act of “flipping” particularly appealed to Germans eager to distance themselves from the legacy of the Nazis. Layne observes that “[i]n postwar German novels and films, black

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18 Ibid., 2.
19 Ibid., 22-23.
popular culture is consistently portrayed as something modern and liberating that can free male white German rebels from the social constraints of convention.”

Uta Poiger examines the reception of jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, and other imports of American popular culture in the GDR and FRG by adolescents and young adults, conservative and progressive critics, and state officials. In the postwar period, officials in both states were concerned with reinventing German identity and distancing their countrymen from the recent history of National Socialism. Young people, who developed a strong appetite for American popular culture as the Cold War emerged, opposed efforts to encourage the adoption of an East German or West German identity.

There is also a significant contingent of literature that explores intersections between black revolutionary (or black radical) ideology and socialism. Robinson, already cited above, explores this often unequal exchange and reveals that a classless political system does not always translate to an egalitarian racial atmosphere. Scholars discuss the often-challenging placement of black revolutionary ideas within the broader context of socialism, but most adopt a top-down methodological approach. What is missing are accounts of the individual experiences of black Americans in the GDR.

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23 Ibid., 1.
24 Robinson, *Black Marxism*. 
CHAPTER I

ROBESON’S PERSONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

As the previous section revealed, the early Cold War period presented a complicated set of political, economic, and racial circumstances. One had to possess a particularly strong will in order to face such challenging times without sacrificing personal integrity. Before examining the specifics of Robeson’s visit to the GDR, it is necessary to examine how Robeson fared in this difficult climate. This will help to explain why the East Germans attributed such significance to him. Robeson was a renaissance man before being so was really economically feasible for a black man in the US. Although possessing skills in numerous areas including athletics, scholarship, and the law, Robeson developed an international reputation in singing and acting. One must thank Robeson’s wife, Eslanda, for his career shift away from law and toward the stage. Paul was already garnering international recognition as an actor by the early 1920s, and Eslanda convinced him to nurture a concurrent career as a concert singer. She thought that Paul was especially suited to singing spirituals—which Robeson’s collaborator, Larry Brown had previously encouraged him to appreciate.25

Performing spirituals allowed Robeson to combine his professional work with his activism. He came to view the spirituals as particularly emblematic of Black America’s struggle for civil rights.26 In Robeson’s case, his association with the spiritual went beyond mere fascination. “Early in his career he was recognized . . . as the first who made the Negro spiritual

an accepted art form.”

Robeson’s embrace of African American folk songs influenced other artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance movement as well. James Weldon Johnson and his brother, Rosamond, created *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, a compilation of spirituals which discusses the particular merits of many of Robeson’s musical interpretations of said spirituals in its preface. Zora Neale Hurston also developed a body of knowledge concerning the use of modern renderings of African American folk traditions. Unlike the Johnsons, Hurston was opposed to the performance of spirituals in concert settings. She believed that such renderings paid “a disservice to and distortion of the original visceral, communal spirit of the folk from whom the songs had arisen.”

Brown, however, did not just encourage Robeson to study and perform African American folk songs. In *Here I Stand*, partly an autobiography and partly a statement of his views concerning African American advancement, Robeson notes that Brown “was firm in his conviction that our music—Negro music of African and American derivation—was in the tradition of the world’s great folk music.”

Named after one of the songs that Robeson often performed, “Love Will Find Out the Way,” Chapter 2 of *Here I Stand* explores his connection to working men and women of every color, from across the globe. Responding to the idea that advocating for white, European workers was somehow at odds with his efforts for African Americans, he writes: “I do not think, however, that my sentiments are contradictory; and in England I learned that there truly is a kinship among us all, a basis for mutual respect and brotherly love.”

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29 Ibid, 82.
31 Ibid.
As was to be expected, Robeson was often called upon to sing a few songs in activist-related settings. It is, however, not necessarily easy to simply take songs and hope the audience will connect the music with an artist’s social or political beliefs (this remains a perennial challenge). Robeson, unlike many performers, did not struggle to infuse his music with political messaging: Robeson’s repertoire is a political message in itself. Neither was this political message somehow thrust upon him by a manager or handler. (What manager would ever encourage their client to project a political message that would inevitably cost them so dearly?)

One of the songs that Robeson was best known for was “Ol’ Man River.” The song is featured in Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II’s musical *Showboat*. Performing the role of “Joe” in multiple versions of the musical, Robeson sang Hammerstein’s original lyrics.32 Around 1940, however, he slightly altered the lyrics for solo performances: “You gets a little drunk / And you lands in jail” became “You show a little grit / And you lands in jail.” The modification is subtle, but it allows Robeson to interject his personal views into the song. Indeed, Robeson’s activism was never exasperated but voiced a polite disagreement with the status quo of the day.

Numerous factors may have contributed to the development of Robeson’s particular style of polite disagreement. Robeson’s father, an ex-slave turned minister, encouraged Robeson to deal gracefully with injustice. In his biography of Robeson, Michael Duberman shares the incident in which Robeson’s father was pestered into abandoning his post at his Presbyterian church in Princeton, New Jersey.33 The city’s white Presbyterian leaders found fault with the elder Robeson and pressured him into resigning despite his congregation’s overwhelming

support for him. As an elite athlete and competitive orator in his high school and college years, Robeson no doubt developed the perseverance that comes with the tough loss and the hard-fought victory. When recalling stories of Robeson, his Rutgers football teammates remember his doggedness in the face of racially-inspired unnecessary roughness on the part of opposing players. As an athletically gifted and intelligent young man, Robeson likely identified himself as a member of the emerging elite class of black Americans. Kevin Gaines explores the ways in which educated or successful black Americans constructed this identity “by distinguishing themselves, as bourgeois agents of civilization, from the presumably undeveloped black majority.” Members of this group believed that they possessed the qualities needed to “uplift” the whole black race. In short, Robeson developed the ability to express discontent while maintaining his composure through a variety of personal experiences. This ability would enable Robeson to withstand the various trials that he would face in his personal life as a public figure.

Robeson did not leave the chronicling of his life to observers but offered his own interpretations of his life circumstances. In this way, *Here I Stand* is particularly poignant. In its foreword and preface, Robeson summarizes his childhood experiences and other early influences in his life. In Duberman’s biography of Robeson, he stresses the strong influence of Robeson’s father. Robeson, himself, remarks on his father’s strong influence along with the influence of his siblings. Robeson writes that “[m]y brother’s love which enfolds me is a precious, living bond with the man, now forty years dead, who more than anyone else influenced my life—my father, Reverend William Drew Robeson.”

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35 Robeson and Brown, *Here I Stand*, “Author’s Foreword.”
Robeson completed the book with the assistance of Lloyd L. Brown, and, although published in 1958 (two years prior to his official visit to the GDR), it responds to the controversy surrounding his persona in the 1950s. In fact, both Brown and Robeson discuss this controversy in the 1971 edition of the book. Brown also addresses the book’s reception in the US and abroad. Despite largely favorable reviews by African American and foreign critics, white-American media outlets ignored the book. Brown interprets the lack of response as part of the broader effort to revise and reduce the public’s awareness of Robeson. Robeson addresses his opponents within the white establishment more directly.

I care nothing—less than nothing—about what the lords of the land, the Big White Folks, think of me and my ideas. For more than ten years they have persecuted me in every way they could—by slander and mob violence, by denying me the right to practice my profession as an artist, by withholding my right to travel abroad. To these, the real Un-Americans, I merely say: “All right—I don’t like you either!”

As the added emphasis indicates, Robeson uses the opportunity to scoff at the members of the US House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committees who questioned him in Washington, D.C. several years earlier. Robeson continues, however, by stating his solidarity with working and middle-class Americans regardless of color.

At the very beginning of Robeson’s book, he discusses the fact that many white Americans were frustrated that, despite his popular success, he maintained sympathy for the Soviet Union. He believed that these critics thought he had taken their support of him for granted and writes:

When it was said (and it was said many times) that Paul Robeson had shown himself to be ungrateful to the good white folks of America who had given him wealth and fame, and that he had had nothing to complain about, the statement was bound to rub Negroes

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36 Ibid., “Preface” and “Prologue: A Home in that Rock.”
37 Ibid., 4; Emphasis mine.
the wrong way. They know that nothing is ever ‘given’ to us, and they know that human
dignity cannot be measured in dollars and cents.  

While this passage reveals the enduring presence of Robeson’s ego (he does, after all, refer to
himself in the third person), it does provide an insightful appraisal of the situation that black
celebrities have faced and continue to face in this country. (Just consider the controversy
surrounding black football players kneeling during the national anthem). In the minds of the
critics of whom Robeson is discussing, his professional success was not completely of his own
making. Robeson may have developed skills as a performer, but the white gatekeepers of
American popular favor had allowed him to become wealthy and famous.

Several paragraphs later, Robeson reveals that he had maintained his particular political
beliefs long before he was criticized for them. Robeson provides a fairly specific record of his
ideology: “[m]ore than twenty years have passed since I first visited the Soviet Union and voiced
my friendly sentiments about the peoples of that land, and before that I had expressed a keen
interest in the life and culture of the African peoples and a deep concern for their liberation.”

Again, Robeson returns to the theme of mainstream America’s historical revision of him.
Although Robeson’s obsession with his popular portrayal may stem from his egotism, his written
commentary on the subject is highly informative. Apart from providing a precise accounting of
personal injury, this commentary provides a window from which the historian can glimpse the
change and continuity in America’s perception of him. Through this record, Robeson basically
puts his character to trial in the court of public opinion.

Robeson further makes his case for working for the advancement of all working people
by discussing a work of particular relevance. The work was a song that he recorded for the film

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38 Ibid., 28.
39 Ibid., 29.
“Song of the Rivers,” which was directed by Joris Ivens and supported by the World Federation of Trade Unions. The film was produced in Europe in the mid 1950s, and since Robeson could not travel at this time and claimed that no major recording studio would associate with him, he was forced to record the song in his brother Benjamin’s home—his son Paul, Jr. serving as audio engineer. The film was not allowed to be shown in the US, but Robeson read rave reviews of the film from foreign newspapers and was eventually able to view the film the following year in Canada.

Robeson thoroughly describes the project in his book. Robeson focuses particularly on the challenging nature of the project. Myriad logistical issues were added to the usual amount of work needed to rehearse and then record a song. Again, Robeson goes into great detail, but these challenges included the inability to meet in person with the film creators, the need to find and equip an alternative recording space (which, naturally, was not sound-proof), and the need to edit the recording without the assistance of professional audio engineers. One wonders why Robeson put so much effort into recording a single song for a film that would never show in the US.

There are really only two possible explanations for Robeson’s tremendous effort. Since Robeson’s reputation in the US had been irreparably damaged by this time, he was surely not concerned with the domestic reception of his contribution to the film. He was either interested in maintaining his international reputation or in spreading the film’s message. Given the analysis of Robeson’s music and politics as being inextricably linked however, both explanations are really one in the same. He was interested in maintaining his international reputation as a champion for working people. While his domestic popularity decreased as his political message became increasingly unfavorable, his international popularity remained mostly unchanged in capitalist

40 Ibid., 60-62.
countries and increased in communist countries. The fact that Robeson still maintained a strong international following can only have made his grounding more unbearable. He met many challenges to record one song, but the additional effort facilitated much-needed artistic connection with listeners.

In the third chapter of *Here I Stand*, Robeson discusses what he believes to be the reason for his travel restrictions. The State Department cited Robeson’s ties with communism as the explanation for its action. Robeson believes, however, that the State Department revoked his passport because he was “an advocate of Negro rights.”\(^{41}\) It is important to consider Robeson’s use of the term “Negro.” Politically incorrect by today’s standards, “Negro” was commonly used to refer to African Americans.\(^{42}\) Robeson’s use of the term here is ambiguous because Robeson was both a champion of the rights of African Americans specifically and the African Diaspora generally. What does he mean here?

As is widely known, “Negro” is but one of many terms Americans of African descent have used to identify themselves. According to the *Sage Encyclopedia of African Heritage in North America*, the term predates that of the currently used term African American, and its antecedent, “Black,” came into use in the late 1800s.\(^{43}\) The term was used by a variety of African American leaders in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, while scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois, black nationalists like Marcus Garvey, and civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. maintained distinct socio-political strategies, they all used the term “Negro.” The term is not

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 63.
typically associated with the experience of Africans or non-American members of the African Diaspora. Why would the State Department have reason to revoke Robeson’s passport because he was involved in the African American struggle for justice? And why would Robeson only mention that he was “an advocate of Negro rights,” when he really advocated for the liberation of the entire global black community?

Even a shallow analysis of this issue reveals its political nature. The State Department clearly withheld information concerning Robeson’s passport case. While this charade may have fooled most Americans (especially those willing to turn a blind eye to clearly misleading information during McCarthyism), Robeson was a seasoned orator, and he, too, was working his audience. Instead of explaining to his readers all of the possible reasons why the State Department revoked his passport, he focuses on the ludicrous nature of one possible explanation in an effort to engender frustration. It is as if he asks the rhetorical question: Can you believe they revoked my passport over a domestic issue?

While Robeson was, indeed, a champion of the rights of black people everywhere, his choice to focus attention specifically on the US government’s interference in his efforts for African Americans displays shrewd political insight. During the 1930s “the scholarship of C.L.R. James and W.E.B. Du Bois had placed black peoples at the center of world events.”44 By 1937, too, black workers conducted wide-spread strikes in the Antilles. Increased awareness of international affairs in the lead up to and duration of the Second World War kept alive frustrations over continued colonialism. As the 1950s approached, however, nations turned their attention inward once again. The discontent of African Americans became an American problem,

just as the discontent of black Martinicans became a French problem, and the discontent of Jamaican immigrants in Great Britain became a British problem. The post-World War II world beheld the splintering of African Diasporic discontent into separate spheres of domestic discontent. Stirring up public discontent regarding the government’s interference into his work for domestic civil rights was one of the only possible ways in which Robeson could fight back.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that official statements by the State Department concerning Robeson cannot really be taken at face value. There would have been severe political backlash if the department admitted to denying his passport on the grounds that he was an active member of the domestic civil rights movement. Citing the preservation of foreign policy, however, the department indirectly criticized Robeson’s involvement in the anticolonial movement—which involved large portions of the non-American African Diaspora.

Furthermore, even if the complaint had alleged which it does not, that the passport was cancelled solely because of the applicant’s recognized status as spokesman for large sections of Negro Americans, we submit that this would not amount to an abuse of discretion in view of appellant’s frank admission that he has been for years extremely active politically in behalf of independence of the colonial people of Africa.”

Although the State Department attempted to depict its restriction of Robeson’s travel in clear terms, the preceding passage reveals that the real reason was far more nuanced.

While Robeson attempted to curry public favor by inflaming the US government’s Achilles heel of race relations (whether it was the cause of the State Department’s action or not), it is still important to understand the State Department’s true motivations for revoking his passport. This is not to take away from the obvious explanation that the government believed his communist sympathy to threaten US interests. It is rather to suggest that there were subtle nuances at play that are not immediately apparent. This closer analysis is also necessary if one

45 Robeson and Brown, *Here I Stand*, 64.
wishes to understand why the government went to such lengths to discredit Robeson even after revoking his passport.

On June 16, 1958, the Supreme Court’s ruling on *Kent and Briehl v. Dulles* finally ended Robeson’s legal battle. The court ruled that the State Department could not withhold passports from communists or communist sympathizers and that it was not required for suspected communists to submit affidavits testifying to their non-affiliation. Robeson could travel abroad as a performer and advocate for the people once again, and the GDR could finally invite him for a formal visit.

This chapter discussed many of the people who influenced Robeson and events which shaped him. From his early observations of his respected father to his collegiate experiences as a barrier breaking athlete, Robeson had learned to navigate difficulty and hardship with dignified perseverance. This ability made Robeson a great advocate for the causes he championed, and it helped him endure tremendous abuse at the hands of the US government. The organization and preparation for Robeson’s visit to the GDR will form the basis of the following chapter.

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CHAPTER II

SECURING AND PLANNING ROBESON’S VISIT

Once his passport was restored, Robeson was eager to resume an international touring schedule. Robeson’s international supporters were also eager to finally meet the man whose cause they had championed from afar. This chapter reveals East German efforts to secure and plan Robeson’s eventual visit to the GDR.

Robeson’s visit presented an opportunity for East Germany to celebrate a socialist hero and improve its public image. Robeson’s visit also provided the GDR with the opportunity to call attention to a major failing of western democracy: the treatment of racial minorities. In this case, the visit of a prominent black American allowed the GDR to condemn American society’s discrimination against African Americans, and the US government’s inability to stop it. This also set a backdrop by which East Germany could criticize West Germany’s alliance with the US. Given the purportedly class-less nature of communism, communist countries argued that they were altogether more egalitarian than their democratic rivals. Indeed, numerous African Americans—including Robeson—had previously traveled to the Soviet Union and spoken positively of the hospitality they experienced there. Additionally, East Germany had an obvious desire to distance itself from the recent memory of Nazi Germany. The importance of this objective cannot be overstated. Formally hosting Robeson would allow the GDR to point out the West’s racial failings by drawing attention to the US government’s poor treatment of a talented black athlete, intellectual, and performer. It would also allow the GDR to display a higher social standard by honoring Robeson and his life’s work.

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Robeson represented both the antiracist ideology of the African American community and the workerist ideology of the global labor community. Whether advocating for impoverished black Americans or Welsh coal miners, he encouraged those he supported to be resilient. He would often remind audiences that his father had been born into slavery, making Robeson only one generation removed from the horrible institution. His father eventually attended seminary and became a well-respected minister. Robeson’s success was a testament to his father’s and his own tremendous determination. To summarize, the GDR highly regarded Robeson because he was a socialist, he had been mistreated by the American (capitalist) government, and he represented the African Diaspora as well as global labor. By formally hosting Robeson, the GDR could win prestige, condemn the capitalist world, and display its commitment to equality.

A Robeson visit would not only cast the GDR in a favorable light for the benefit of foreign observers, it would also serve a more poetic purpose for East Germans themselves. This purpose was rooted in the international support Robeson had garnered for his passport case. Because the State Department had revoked Robeson’s passport in response to his alleged communist sympathy, numerous communist states and organizations provided him with financial and moral support. By supporting Robeson, these governments and political groups accomplished the double goal of helping a comrade in need and opposing the American government.

Robeson was not the only American citizen to receive support from the communist sphere. During the Cold War, communist regimes and organizations often supported oppressed citizens in the US and other democratic countries. Perhaps two of the most famous historical

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48 Duberman, *Robeson*, 227-228; Robeson developed a relationship with coal miners in southern Wales in the 1930s and even starred in a movie, “The Proud Valley” (1940), that drew attention to the plight of Welsh miners.
examples of communist support involved the “Scottsboro Boys” in the 1930s and Angela Davis in the 1970s. The “Scottsboro Boys” were nine black teenagers from Alabama who were wrongfully convicted of raping two white women. The decision to convict these youths was directed by racial prejudice inflamed by a group of white youths who had started a fight with them. Although the NAACP offered the most continuous support to the “Scottsboro Boys” throughout their decades-long legal struggle, the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) originally took the greatest initiative in defending the nine. The party’s legal arm, the International Labor Defense, generated considerable international support for them in the years immediately following their convictions. Angela Davis, a member of the CPUSA, became a fugitive after guns registered in her name were used in a hostile take-over of the courthouse in Marin County, California. The takeover was staged by Jonathon Jackson, who, in the process of attempting to free two prisoners, took four hostages—including the presiding judge. An ensuing shoot-out resulted in the deaths of Jackson, the two prisoners, and the judge. Because of California's guilt by association law, Davis became a wanted woman and was later arrested. The international effort to support her cause became known as the “Free Angela Davis” campaign. East German citizens contributed significantly to this effort, and millions engaged in a significant letter-writing campaign on her behalf.

In Robeson’s case, “Paul Robeson Committees” were created in numerous European countries to support him in his passport struggle. These committees, comprised of socialists and

51 Katrina Hagen, “Chapter 7: Ambivalence and Desire in the East German ‘Free Angela Davis’ Campaign,” in Slobodian, Comrades of Color, 157-158.
non-socialists alike, drew international attention to Robeson’s situation and supported him through fundraising concerts and other events. It is difficult to determine the actual effectiveness of these efforts, but their symbolic importance was highly significant. The English and East German Paul Robeson Committees and their work are the most relevant to the present study.

The effort that the East German state apparatus put into coordinating Robeson’s visit underscores the importance they attributed to it. Entities involved included the Free German Youth (FDJ), Ministry of Culture, and the German Peace Council. Various individuals and smaller institutions (like schools and athletic organizations) also sent invitations for Robeson’s consideration. It is clear that the East Germans were eager for Robeson to visit after enduring his time of travel restrictions.

East German efforts to bring a Robeson visit to fruition began as early as July of 1958. Indeed, this is the earliest these efforts could have begun since Robeson gained back his passport that June. One significant archival file pertains specifically to the Ministry of Culture’s organization of and preparation for a possible Robeson visit. These efforts would take place over a period of two years. Robeson’s state visit occurred in October 1960, preceded only by a brief, unofficial visit in the summer beforehand. The majority of the documents in the file are letters written between Ministry of Culture officials, FDJ representatives, spokesmen of various societies and non-governmental establishments, and Eslanda Robeson. Paul Robeson himself sent no letters and received only two. What is going on here? After his period of State Department-sanctioned travel restriction, was Paul not excited for the upcoming visit? For seven years, he was prevented from physically meeting the international community of workers, having to settle for recordings and broadcasted performances and speeches.
There are other indications that Robeson’s visit was not a given. In a letter from Dr. Richter, rector of Humboldt University, to the State Secretariat of Universities and Trade Schools dated September 1, 1959, Richter writes that Irene Gysi of the Ministry of Culture recommended awarding Eslanda Robeson an honorary doctorate in addition to Paul Robeson himself. Richter relates this suggestion after noting that Eslanda was “the organizer of [Robeson’s] whole life.” Richter believed that he and other East Germans needed to make appeals to Eslanda in order to secure her husband’s visit. Richter adds that awarding an honorary doctorate to Eslanda is a good idea because she was a well-published anthropologist involved in both the American Civil Rights Movement and the struggle for workers’ rights.

The above letter reveals that some East Germans thought that the Robesons needed to be convinced to visit. Richter and Comrade Loeser (Richter’s source of information; former secretary of the Paul Robeson Committee) seem to believe that a simple invitation would not suffice. This leaves one wondering whether the Robesons actually regarded the East Germans as warmly as the GDR would later claim.

The idea that the Robesons needed “convincing” and would not merely accept an invitation to visit the GDR was not specific to the 1960 visit. When Robeson gained back his travel privileges in June 1958, East German officials invited him to a state festival that very summer. In a letter from July 6, Minister of Culture Alexander Abusch asks Robeson’s English friend, Peggy Middleton, to urge him to attend. Abusch writes: “I am confident that you will this

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52 Dr. Richter to the Staatssekretariat für das Hoch- und Fachschulwesen, September 1, 1959, DR 3/2779, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv, Lichterfelde (hereafter, referred to as BAL); Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

53 Ibid.

54 It is important, of course, to remember that an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. The archival sources do not prove that the Robesons were reluctant to visit the GDR.
time again do your best to help us in convincing Paul that he really should not disappoint our people, who belong certainly to the good people whom he might wish as a public.”

Abusch does not openly ask Middleton to persuade the Robesons but adopts an indirect yet insistent tone. This insistence is read in the words “I am confident that you will this time again” and “convinc[ing] Paul that he really should not disappoint our people. Abusch writes in English and not German, but his insistent tone is not the product of reduced language facility. There are two reasons why he is likely being intentional. Earlier in the letter, Abusch thanks Middleton for her “help . . . in our campaign especially on our evening on April 9.” The campaign Abusch refers to is the campaign to urge the US government to grant back Robeson’s passport. Abusch also hopes Robeson will not disappoint the people because they were involved in the campaign, too. Abusch is not content to have merely aided Robeson. He wants Robeson to return the favor by visiting and thanking his supporters.

Abusch employs the same rhetorical strategy in another letter from the same day. In the letter, Abusch asks John Williamson, another friend of Robeson’s, to attempt to convince the singer to visit as well. There is a difference between Abusch’s appeal to Middleton for help and his appeal to Williamson. Abusch cites Middleton’s record of past service to the GDR but does not mention any such record with Williamson. Williamson may not have had such a record, Abusch may not have known about it, or Abusch may have failed to mention it. In any case, Abusch only appeals to Williamson’s friendship with Robeson in his request. Abusch still suggests, however, that Robeson owes something to the East German people: “They would be extremely happy to see and hear him in person and to show him how they love and admire him.

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55 Alexander Abusch to Mrs. Peggy A. Middleton, July 6, 1958, DR 1/19183, BAL.
56 Ibid.
They have really actively participated in our great campaign on his behalf and I think Paul owes it to them."57 Again, Abusch is not satisfied with the idea that he and the East German people helped Robeson gain back his passport. We return to the issue of recognition. He wants Robeson to formally recognize the contribution of the East German people.

The two letters discussed above reveal an insistent tone. Further analysis reveals subtler points that can help us better understand why the East German government so desired a visit by Robeson. In both letters, Abusch writes of Robeson’s obligation to the East Germans who supported him in the passport case. Abusch does not merely ask for Robeson’s gratitude, and he does not leave it up to Robeson to decide how to express this gratitude. Being multi-talented, Robeson could, for example, write a formal letter of thanks, dedicate a performance, or put in a good word on behalf of the East German people in an interview. This, however, would clearly not appease Abusch. Abusch wants Robeson to visit East Berlin and personally thank the East German people.

By formally visiting the GDR, Robeson could improve his image by publicly recognizing his supporters. An open display of gratitude would, in turn, provide the GDR with an opportunity to bring itself much-needed publicity—and good publicity at that. This logic may explain why Abusch was so focused on convincing Robeson to visit and why he utilized such a particular tone in his letters.

Abusch is equally presumptuous and insistent in a letter to Robeson himself a day later.58 He begins the letter by revealing that Peggy Middleton knew that Robeson was in London and not New York (as Abusch had expected). He had sent to New York a telegram for Robeson and

57 Alexander Abusch to John A. Williamson, July 6, 1958, DR 1/19183, BAL.
58 Alexander Abusch to Paul Robeson, July 7, 1958, DR 1/19183, BAL.
realizes that this telegram was obviously not yet received. He then relates the contents of this telegram for good measure: “Heartfelt congratulations for passport. Are celebrating big summer festival on July 16. Whole population is waiting anxiously to see and hear you. Please don’t disappoint them, wire yes. Auf Wiedersehen.”

As it was sent via telegram, the missive is brief, but the message has several important features. For one, the congratulatory remark concerning the successful reinstatement of Robeson’s passport appears to be of secondary importance. Again, this was sent over the wire, but Robeson had just spent nearly a decade attempting to gain back his passport. Any person aware of Robeson’s struggle (and without an ulterior motive) would heartily congratulate him for waging the defining fight of his life. We see what Abusch is really concerned about in the second sentence. Abusch again stresses that the East German population wants Robeson to visit. The fourth sentence sounds like a political advertisement: don’t wait, say yes! It is an altogether bizarre note. Abusch conveys his urgency to Robeson without much consideration for the exhausting legal struggle from which the performer had just emerged.

The remainder of Abusch’s letter bears much in common with his previous correspondences with Middleton and Williamson. He emphasizes Robeson’s obligation to his seemingly devoted fans who supported him during the passport case. Like the previous letters, this one also reveals the desperation with which Abusch pleads his case. The many exaggerations and grandiose statements provide the most obvious examples of this desperation. For example, Abusch writes that “[i]t is certainly no exaggeration to say that our whole population has taken part actively in the campaign of our committee on your behalf.”59 This is obviously an exaggeration, for it is doubtful that all 17 million East Germans were actively involved on

59 Ibid.
Robeson’s behalf. One is again left wondering what is behind Abusch’s desperate struggle. Does he want Robeson to greet and sing to his adoring fans, or does he really want the publicity that Robeson’s visit would generate? The archival sources examined for the current study do not explain Abusch’s desperation. Further research is needed to understand the reasons for the pressure that Abusch felt.

The nature of this desperate struggle is most transparently revealed in a letter between two East German officials from October 1958. In the letter in question, G.F. Alexan, then secretary of the East German Paul Robeson Committee, recounts his efforts to secure a Robeson visit to Erich Wendt of the Ministry of Culture. Alexan’s correspondence takes the form of an essay, and he dutifully records his actions and grievances over the course of three and half, single-spaced pages. His first grievance arises from a problem of communication. In order to encourage the Robesons to visit the GDR, Alexan was directed to enlist the assistance of a series of middlemen. He contacted the above-mentioned Peggy Middleton and asked her to speak to the Robesons. After having learned that Paul would be in London, he then asked a colleague with a British passport, by the name of Rosner, to travel to London and personally invite him. Alexan did not stop there. He even passed along a letter from Beatrice Johnson, a friend of Williamson. The letter introduced Rosner and urged Williamson to assist her in meeting with the Robesons.

The above commentary only partly describes the relentless effort by which Alexan pursued Robeson. As the letter progresses, Alexan reveals that Robeson was rather irritated by this pursuit. Robeson’s frustrations were apparently reported to Irene Gysi of the Ministry of

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60 “Memorandum, Subject: The East German Refugees,” Central Intelligence Agency Office of Current Intelligence, August 10, 1961, 25X1; the second page notes “a steady slow decline of the total population from 19,066,000 in 1948 to approximately 17,200,000” in 1960.
61 G.F. Alexan to Erich Wendt, October 14, 1958, DR 1/19183, BAL.
Culture because Alexan writes that “[i]t is completely inexplicable to me why Mrs. Middleton could have told Comrade Gysi that Paul Robeson was annoyed by my pushiness.”\footnote{Ibid.} If Alexan was pushy, was it not because Robeson’s cause was very important to him? As he reminds Wendt, he had expended considerable energy on Robeson’s behalf as secretary of the Paul Robeson Committee. A letter from August 1959, however, reveals that Gysi was well-informed. Reviewing the past year’s efforts to secure a Robeson visit, Neukranz, head of the Ministry of Culture’s Department of Cultural Relationships, shares Middleton’s opinion of Alexan: “She particularly complained about Alexan, who calls Robeson every day and wants to keep sanctifying him with his plans. She explained that Paul Robeson does not wish to come into contact with Alexan in any way and that negotiations for a visit to the GDR regarding Alexan are doomed to fail from the outset, as Robeson strictly refuses to do so.”\footnote{Neukranz to Erich Wendt, August 19, 1959, DR 1/19183, BAL.} It appears that Middleton and Robeson were indeed irritated by Alexan’s determined pursuit.

Alexan was not convinced that his pushiness had caused Robeson injury. He suggests the alternative explanation that the London Paul Robeson Committee, led by Middleton, was jealous of their German counterpart’s efforts. He suggests that “[i]t is also likely that the London committee, which you know is a left wing committee, was a little miffed at our great activity in the Robeson relief effort, especially in connection with the film we [the GDR] made not only to all socialist countries, including China, but even to Africa.”\footnote{Alexan to Wendt, October 14, 1958, DR 1/19183, BAL.} At this point, Alexan seems to be simply venting his frustrations to an available ear. As secretary of the Robeson committee, he made a tremendous effort to support Robeson in his passport case. Once Robeson had his passport in hand, Alexan wanted him to repay the favor by visiting the GDR. This time,
however, his effort to pursue Robeson backfired, and Big Paul became irritated by his relentless pursuit. Alexan’s words may be interpreted as nothing more than complaints, and his comment regarding the London Paul Robeson Committee’s supposed jealousy reflects his embitterment.

However interesting, the matter of the London committee’s supposed jealousy of its East German counterpart is of minor importance to this study. Alexan’s comments are more important because of what they reveal about the East German government’s interest in promoting Robeson’s cause. In the last part of Alexan’s inflammatory pronouncement, he reveals that the East German committee created a film to be viewed in socialist countries and some African countries as well. The film obviously represented a significant achievement for the East German committee. It would have allowed them to spread their message beyond Germany and into fellow socialist states and even parts of the developing world. The East German government was similarly interested in spreading its message into these areas—especially African countries not yet aligned with either capitalist or communist spheres of influence. It is unknown whether the East German government specifically supported the Robeson Committee in creating this film, but the film can only have helped the GDR’s international image. Here we have strong evidence that Robeson support efforts could be put to politically strategic ends.

In the summer of 1960, the GDR was still courting Robeson with great effort and determination. Once again, East German officials were corresponding with various friends and acquaintances of the Robesons in an attempt to secure Paul’s visit. Such is the case with a letter between Harry Francis (head of the English musicians’ union) and Gysi. Through this letter, Francis reveals himself to be a friend of the Robesons. He also affirms his familiarity with the GDR. Francis begins his letter of August 4, 1960, by summarizing his effort thus far.\(^{65}\) He

\(^{65}\) Harry Francis to Irene Gysi, August 4, 1960, DR 1/19183, BAL.
explains that a man named Hans left him a telephone message concerning Robeson’s visit on July 28. After receiving this message, Francis called Eslanda on July 29 and asked her to call the Ministry of Culture. This is the first important revelation of Francis’ letter. Like Abusch of the 1958 letters, Ministry of Culture officials and Francis himself are seeking a response from Eslanda and not Paul. Either Eslanda is the trip coordinator or, as Dr. Richter previously noted, she is “the organizer of [Paul’s] entire life.”

Francis continues his letter by revealing that he had recently seen Eslanda and Paul (again, Eslanda is mentioned first). He continues mysteriously by writing that he “gather[s] that [Paul] will be coming to the DDR on 5th October for some days.” This is an interesting passage which yields little in the way of certainty. Francis’ use of the word “gather” is ambiguous. It is difficult to tell whether the Robesons actually told Francis that they would be visiting or if he merely surmised this. In any case, Francis is conveying this information to Gysi—who is inviting the Robesons for an official visit—so one has every reason to believe the Robesons actually told him they were visiting. This does not, however, completely rule out hesitancy on the part of the Robesons. At this point, still two months prior to October, they may have only been tentatively planning to visit.

Francis continues his letter by noting his inclusion of an article he wrote concerning state support of the arts in the GDR. This article was printed on July 25 in the Daily Worker, a British, communist newspaper. Francis wrote the piece upon returning from his own trip to the GDR, and he lauds the state’s support of symphonies and opera houses throughout the country. By contrast, Francis criticizes the British government’s meager support of musical establishments,

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66 See footnote 53.
67 Francis to Gysi, August 4, 1960, DR 1/19183, BAL.
68 Not to be confused with the Communist Party USA’s newspaper of the same name.
writing of Britain as “the most backward country in Europe so far as State encouragement of the arts is concerned.” The inclusion of the article and Francis’ well wishes to Gysi indicate his sympathy for the Ministry of Culture.

The fact that many East German officials chose to reach out to Eslanda may reveal that she was indeed more organized than her husband. It may also be the result of gender-oriented stereotyping. The East Germans may have assumed that, as Paul’s wife, Eslanda performed the role of personal assistant to her husband. On a more symbolic level, however, officials may have wanted to make contact with her because of her own accomplishments and advocacy work. The 1959 letter from Humboldt University, concerning possibly awarding Eslanda an honorary doctorate in addition to her husband, reveals that East German officials were aware of her writing and her advocacy.69 The letter, examined above, specifically mentions Eslanda’s advocacy for black Americans and international workers. Both Robesons were actively involved in the struggle against the injustices of the West, and specifically, as the East German government perceived it, the capitalist West.

Eslanda’s social justice efforts were also, like those of her husband, diverse and extensive. In fact, these efforts brought Eslanda to East Berlin a year before Paul’s official visit. Along with a contingent of French, British, and other notable American visitors, Eslanda traveled to Berlin on September 11, 1959 for the dedication of the memorial at the former Ravensbrück concentration camp.70 The Robesons’ friend, Peggy Middleton, was also among the delegation. Keeping up their appeals for a visit by Paul, the Ministry of Culture greeted Eslanda at

69 Richter to the Staatssekretariat für das Hoch- und Fachschulwesen, September 1, 1959, DR 3/2779, BAL.
70 Blecha, September 12, 1959, DR 1/19183, BAL.
Schönefeld airfield with a bouquet of flowers and the ministry’s contact information. Again, East German officials were persistent in their attempts to court the Robesons.

The remainder of the summary of Eslanda’s arrival reveals the choreography with which she was courted. After being greeted at the airfield, Eslanda and the other guests were taken to Hotel Johannishof, where they were met with an organized press session and an FDJ delegation. Even while hosting a large number of foreign guests, the Ministry of Culture was still focused on accommodating Eslanda. Comrade Lockhoff was unable to speak personally with Eslanda, but it was no matter. Eslanda’s German host, Diana Loeser, spoke to Lockhoff and also agreed to call the Ministry the following Monday.

Eslanda’s 1959 visit reveals that Abusch’s efforts to secure a visit from Paul, begun in 1958, continued a year later. In a letter addressed to Eslanda from September 14, Deputy Minister of Culture Dr. Hans Pischner invites the Robesons to attend the Berlin Festival on behalf of Abusch. Like Abusch’s invitation of a year previous, this invitation was served upon relatively short notice. Pischner explains that the Berlin Festival occurs from October 3-18—less than a month away.\footnote{Hans Pischner to Eslanda Robeson, September 14, 1959, DR 1/19181, BAL.} As Pischner is inviting such a famous couple, the letter is highly formal. He greets Eslanda as “very honored Mrs. Robeson” and refers to Paul as “your revered spouse.” Similar to Abusch’s letters of the year before, Pischner’s letter explains how important the East German people would consider a visit from Paul. Pischner refers to the Robesons as “long-awaited friends and guests of the people of our republic.”\footnote{Ibid.} These emotional appeals continue in the last paragraph of the letter. Speaking of Eslanda’s comments at the dedication of the
Ravensbrück memorial the previous day, Pischner writes that her words “touched the hearts of Berliners.” Again, he is sure to thank Eslanda on behalf of the people of Berlin.

There are numerous similarities between Abusch and Pischner’s writing styles. Some of these have already been noted above. But in addition to their formal tone and use of emotional appeals, both Abusch and Pischner are sure to explain that the Robesons’s visit would please the German people. Perhaps intentionally, they avoid discussing how the couple’s visit would benefit the East German government.

The East German Paul Robeson Committee and Ministry of Culture were not the only organizations interested in a Robeson visit. Many other organizations corresponded with the Ministry of Culture or Robeson directly, in the hopes of meeting him. Although not exhaustive, here is a list of some of these groups. In advance of Robeson’s 1959 visit that would eventually be canceled, the Pioneers at the Reichenhain elementary school in Karl-Marx-Stadt asked the Ministry of Culture if Robeson could visit them.\(^73\) The Buna Chemical Works VEB also requested time with Robeson.\(^74\) In 1960, the deputy chairman of the Leipzig district council corresponded with the Concert and Guest Performance Directorate, requesting that Robeson perform in the city.\(^75\) The Alfred Scholz Culture and Sport Hall in Hoyerswerda asked the Ministry of Culture if Robeson could visit their location.\(^76\) The Hermann Duncker Archive, named after a prominent East German labor leader, asked the Ministry if Robeson could visit their site in Bernau.\(^77\) The latter group even sent a letter directly to Robeson that referenced the

\(^{73}\) Paul Robeson Pioneers to Ministry of Culture, March 26, 1959, DR 1/19181, BAL.
\(^{74}\) Buna Chemical Works VEB to Ministry of Culture, July 29, 1959, DR 1/19181, BAL; a VEB or volkseigener Betrieb is a publicly owned company.
\(^{75}\) Häußler to Oelschlegel, August 5, 1960, DR 1/19181, BAL.
\(^{76}\) Purschke to Ministry of Culture, August 2, 1960, DR 1/19181, BAL.
\(^{77}\) Karl Dröll to Nike, September 30, 1960, DR 1/19181, BAL.
recently deceased Duncker’s meeting with Robeson in the US.⁷⁸ They reminded Robeson that he had a longstanding promise to sing for Duncker in Berlin.

Based on the preceding list, it is possible to assess the validity of Abusch and Pischner’s claim that a Robeson visit would please the East German population. It seems, at least to a certain extent, that East German citizens would indeed welcome a visit by Robeson. In fact, many of the correspondences cited above reveal that many East Germans would be honored to meet him. It is difficult, however, to determine the authenticity of the East German population’s feelings regarding state-sponsored activities and events. It was of practical importance for people to display outward interest in state initiatives, especially when a lack of interest could raise the suspicions of the state and the governing Socialist Unity Party. It is unclear whether the members of the organizations listed above were genuinely interested in a possible Robeson visit. It is likely, however, that the leaders of these organization realized how important such a visit would be for the East German government. Regardless of their actual level of interest, the organizations could hope to remain in the government’s good graces by voicing excitement for the opportunity to meet a socialist hero. Those East Germans who were genuinely excited to meet Robeson were likely influenced by the fetishization of black Americans discussed in the Introduction.

This chapter examined the efforts to schedule, plan, and execute an official Robeson visit. Although the process examined herein took two long years, the idea was even longer in the making if one includes the time that the Robeson Committee spent supporting Robeson’s cause. The extent of these efforts reveals why officials like Alexan and Abusch were so invested in the project—often to the point of exasperation. A number of non-governmental entities, realizing the

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⁷⁸ Karl Dröll to Paul Robeson, September 30, 1960, DR 1/19181, BAL.
importance of Robeson’s visit, also vied for what would be the performer’s limited time in the country. The next chapter will concern the public portrayal of Robeson’s visit.
CHAPTER III

SELLING THE STORY OF ROBESON’S VISIT

After two years of effort, East German officials finally brought the much-anticipated Robeson visit to fruition from October 4-8, 1960. The event in itself was a success, but more political capital could be obtained by spreading news of the visit both at home and abroad. The current chapter reveals how the East German government interpreted this visit for the sake of propaganda—for both domestic and international consumption. The majority of the material this chapter examines comes from “Tage mit Paul Robeson,” a thirty-six-page pamphlet that the East German Peace Council published to commemorate Robeson’s visit.80 Affiliated with the World Peace Council, the East German Peace Council was a national organization that sought to promote worldwide peace in accordance with socialist principles.80 The pamphlet was most likely created for consumption outside of East Germany because it is mostly written from the third-person perspective, and it describes people, institutions, and events which would have represented redundant information to East Germans. The difficulty of assessing the feelings East German citizens maintained in regard to state-sponsored activities was briefly discussed at the end of the last chapter. The Peace Council pamphlet introduces a different yet connected issue: separating the overt meanings of state-published material from more hidden objectives. The pamphlet is obviously intended to inform readers about Robeson’s visit, but this chapter will explore possible political motives behind the booklet’s publication.

79 “Tage mit Paul Robeson,” DZ 9/2015, BAL.
On viewing the cover of the pamphlet, one’s eye is first drawn to the warm smile emanating from a Robeson headshot photograph (see Figure 1). Robeson was a large man, and, when viewed from head to toe, his figure is striking. His height and physique obviously benefitted him as a football star in his younger years. By 1960, time and experience had aged him. He resembled more of a kind but strong grandfather as opposed to an All-American lineman. On the cover of the pamphlet, Robeson looks content yet eager, as if he has some wisdom that he cannot wait to share with the world.

The photograph and title are set against a background that begins to indicate the nature of Robeson’s wisdom. At first glance, the background is all white, but faint music notes soon appear (see Figure 2). The music is unrecognizable until one looks closely at the words and turns
the booklet over to the back cover. The music is taken from the score of “Ol’ Man River.” The incorporation of the song connects Robeson with one of his well-known performances and provides a symbolic representation of Robeson’s political work. Arguably one of the most memorable songs that Robeson performed during his career, the song (discussed in Chapter 1 of the present study) laments the ambivalence of the Mississippi River—which has come to be recognized as a symbolic stand-in for racial complacency. The pamphlet’s back cover is further garnished with the outlines of three doves. This addition could allude to either Robeson or the Peace Council’s efforts for peace.

The inside title page states that Robeson visited the GDR at the invitation of Prof. Dr. Walter Friedrich, both the President of the German Peace Council and the Vice-President of the Academy of Sciences. After another page devoted to a poem commemorating Robeson’s activism, the content begins. The reader is first familiarized with Robeson’s passport case and the brief history of the Robeson support movement. The pamphlet explains that the movement began in Manchester. This is significant, as Manchester is both connected to Robeson’s career and embedded in the history of the struggle for workers’ rights. As the pamphlet states, Manchester is an “old working-class town, where Friedrich Engels once worked and Paul Robeson had achieved his first success as an actor in the 1930s.”

Indeed, Manchester bred some of the key manufacturing innovations that led to the Industrial Revolution. Because Manchester beheld such an industrial boon, job prospects had been drawing both workers and businessmen to the city throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. It is no surprise that the city’s laborers, oppressed by often-deplorable working conditions, came to play an important role in the labor movement. The pamphlet’s

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81 Ibid., p. 6.
suggestion that Robeson achieved “his first success as an actor in the 1930s” in Manchester is a historical stretch. Robeson spent much of the 1930s in England, but most of the major theaters were located in London. Robeson’s advocacy and not his acting would have brought him to Manchester. Nevertheless, the fact that the pamphlet credits workers in Manchester for forming the first foreign Robeson organization is a highly symbolic gesture.

The Manchester organization held a benefit concert in March 1956, and this initiated a movement that would spread across Great Britain by the year’s end.\textsuperscript{82} This National Paul Robeson Committee maintained its strong membership of working-class Britons, but prominent figures supported the organization as well. These national leaders and celebrities included the canon of St. Paul’s Cathedral, Labour Party politician Aneurin Bevan, and composer Benjamin Britten. The height of the national committee’s materially and symbolically supportive efforts occurred at a concert at Saint Pancras Hall in London in early 1957.\textsuperscript{83} During the concert, Robeson spoke and sang to the attendees over the telephone while in New York. United by the plea to “let Robeson sing,” the committee had “freed” his voice in order to help free the man himself.

The discussion of the British National Paul Robeson committee reflects the pamphlet’s overtly hopeful message. It is, however, possible to identify potential hidden intent. Because the pamphlet discusses the National Paul Robeson Committee, it is likely that the London Committee was simply a regional branch. This may explain why the London committee is not mentioned. Alexan’s letter to Wendt, in which he details his interactions with Middleton and the London committee, describes events that occurred in 1958. The pamphlet might neglect to

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p. 7.
mention the London committee because it didn’t exist yet in 1957. These explanations, however, do not explain the lack of any mention of Middleton. Even if the London committee did not exist in 1957 or was not involved in planning the London concert, Middleton was an important friend of both Paul and Eslanda and she would likely have been involved in supportive efforts.

In his letter to Wendt from 1959, Alexan stated that the London committee may have been jealous of the efforts of the East German committee—particularly their creation of the film on Robeson’s behalf. This may help to explain the omission of Middleton or her committee. It may also explain why the pamphlet does not emphasize the efforts of the East German committee. Instead of reminding the London committee of the competition between Robeson supporters in East Germany and London, the pamphleteers focus on a broader history of supportive efforts.

One of the pamphlet’s subtle goals is to display the East German society’s egalitarian nature. This goal is evidenced in various quotations from some of the speeches East German officials delivered during Robeson’s visit. As part of his congratulatory remarks at the awarding of Robeson’s German Peace Medal, SED Politburo member Albert Norden indirectly alludes to the GDR’s quest for equality. He addresses Robeson with the words “You, Paul Robeson, as fighter and artist and scientist, give all people, including us Germans, the spiritual bread that strengthens those who stand for the freedom, equality and fraternity of all peoples and races.”

The words obviously compliment Robeson, but one can draw other meanings from them as well. Germans are included in the group of “those who stand for the freedom, equality, and fraternity, of all peoples and races.” Notice that the “us” Norden refers to are labeled Germans and not East Germans. The choice to drop the directional modifier reflects the idea, espoused by officials in

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84 Ibid., p. 17.
both East and West Germany, that their own state was the “true” Germany. This is why the ability to differentiate East from West Germany identity and vice versa was such an important policy initiative for both governments. By drawing a connection between Robeson’s activism and the GDR’s own supposed interests, Norden implies that his country stands for the egalitarian values which have been neglected by the “other” Germany.

The message that the GDR was committed to “equality among all peoples and races” is not always promoted as indirectly as in the previous example. In many instances, the East German officials quoted in the pamphlet directly address East Germany’s commitment, and West Germany’s lack of commitment, to equality. In fact, Norden changes course and adopts this approach in the same speech quoted above. This time, he calls out the FRG for its support of the racially oppressive South African government: “the West German state has recently loudly praised the South African Union's genocide policy through the mouth of its President Lübke.”

Whether Lübke “loudly praised” or tacitly condoned a genocidal policy, the linking of the FRG to South Africa would have been damning. The idea that capitalist states like the FRG and the US were maintaining their diplomatic relations with Apartheid South Africa was a political flashpoint for any good socialist.

Despite Norden’s efforts to praise his state’s efforts for equality and highlight West Germany’s failings in this area, his words contain their own failings. In his same discussion of West Germany and South Africa, Norden mentions the recent honors bestowed on General von Lettow-Vorbeck. Lettow-Vorbeck served the German colonial forces in Africa, most notably during the Herero War. Norden reminds his listeners that “General von Lettow-Vorbeck, who degraded the Hereros and Hottentots in South West Africa 55 years ago, was recently showered

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85 Ibid., p. 17.
with high honors and orders from the Bonn state.”

Unfortunately for Norden’s credibility, “Hottentot” is an offensive term for the Khoikhoi people. Although Norden’s comments are intended to discredit the FRG, they also reveal his own ignorance. Norden likely did not understand that this term was inappropriate, but neither did the writers and editors of the pamphlet.

Robeson’s visit lasted only four days, and his schedule was filled with award ceremonies and special events. On October 5, the philosophy faculty at Humboldt University awarded Robeson an honorary doctorate, the German Peace Council bestowed upon him the above-mentioned German Peace Medal, and he attended a large assembly of German youth in the evening. After Robeson addressed the young crowd at this last event, President Walter Ulbricht took his turn lauding Robeson and his work. Ulbricht’s words yield several points of interest. He begins by greeting Robeson with the formal yet strangely familiar “dear friend Paul Robeson.”

After offering a flattering appraisal of Robeson’s contributions to the quest for racial equality, he offers the following words: “Here, before the youth of the new Germany, you sang the most wonderful song by our great national poet Friedrich Schiller, the hymn to joy set by Beethoven: ‘All Men Become Brothers’.” Like Norden, Ulbricht does not refer to his country as East Germany. He refers to it as the “new Germany,” thus evoking the idea of a better Germany.

While praising Robeson’s contributions to the Civil Rights Movement and anticolonialism, Ulbricht incorporates references to East Germany’s own contributions. To avoid appearing to pander to the crowd, he weaves these references into the nuanced logic of his

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., p. 21.
88 Ibid., p. 22.
89 “All men become brothers” is the seventh line of Schiller’s poem.
message. Ulbricht’s reference to the origin of “Ode to Joy”—which Robeson had just finished singing to the crowd—reveals the subtle nature of his approach. He acknowledges Robeson’s performance of this “most wonderful song” while reminding his young audience that it is a product of German artistic culture. Schiller’s poem (published in 1785) forms the basis of the finale of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 (premiered in 1824). Both Schiller’s poem and Beethoven’s symphony displayed artistic innovation and promoted Enlightenment-era ideas.

The connection between Schiller and Beethoven bears relevance to the relationship between Robeson and the GDR. Beethoven’s musical setting would obviously not exist without Schiller’s poem, but Schiller’s poem might not have reached as large of an audience if it were not for the popularity of Beethoven’s symphony. Schiller and Beethoven mutually benefited each other. Robeson and the GDR also mutually benefited each other. Robeson may not have been able to continue fighting inequality without the assistance of his East German supporters. The GDR could not claim to defend the cause of equality without publicly displaying its support for the cause. By hosting Robeson and bestowing him with honors, the GDR was displaying this support. It would be difficult to determine whether Ulbricht intentionally drew this parallel, but this example reveals Robeson’s visit’s potential for creating positive international messaging.

Ulbricht, like Norden, also praised the East German state directly in his remarks. Ulbricht adopted both nuanced and direct approaches in the same speech as well. Addressing the continuing struggle against colonialism, he states that “[b]y honoring you, dear Paul Robeson, we are once again expressing our solidarity with the former colonial oppressed peoples and all those who still have to live in colonial servitude. Like you, we will not rest until freedom and

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human dignity are guaranteed for all people.” In this brief statement, Ulbricht continues to commend both Robeson and his state. This time, however, he actually equates honoring Robeson to “expressing solidarity.”

In addition to the messages from the various speeches cited above, the organization of the Robeson visit events themselves reveal East Germany’s desire to promote their commitment to equality. Although the pamphlet is not specific as to the number or their home countries, African students attended the youth event discussed above. The pamphlet quotes Robeson’s public acknowledgment of them, even if extremely brief: “I am very proud to see brothers from all over Africa here tonight. I thank you, in the German Democratic Republic, that you have given them the opportunity to study.” A full-page photograph also shows several African students of Karl Marx University in Leipzig performing on stage next to Robeson. Although possibly important, it is fairly easy to explain away the inclusion of Robeson’s acknowledgment of the African students. The two sentences are a small part of his remarks to the audience, and the pamphleteers may have not wished to break the flow of the speech by cutting them. The inclusion of the full-page photograph of the African student-performers, however, is not easily ignored. The devotion of a whole page to a single photograph reveals the importance of its inclusion.

Although the pamphlet mostly includes remarks from planned speeches by Robeson and East German officials, it does cover a brief press conference that occurred on the penultimate day of Robeson’s visit. This event’s organization and Robeson’s words at the beginning reveal that it is was a highly orchestrated affair. The pamphlet is careful to mention that Robeson “agreed to a press conference, which was chaired by Mrs. Greta Kuckhoff, Vice President of the German

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91 “Tage mit Paul Robeson,” p. 22.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid., p. 24.
Peace Council.” One might expect that Robeson would be hesitant to participate in press conferences. He had damaged his reputation during question and answer sessions and informal speaking opportunities at several points throughout his career. The misinterpretation of his remarks in Paris in 1949 contributed to the loss of his passport, and the recording of his HUAC hearing in 1956 displays his quick temper. Robeson may have grown wary of the limelight. The fact that a high-ranking member of the German Peace Council chaired the event, however, implies that it was a moderated affair. The press conference had been organized to reduce the risk to both Robeson and the GDR.

The press conference was a sanitized affair, but it is not completely devoid of relevance to the present study. Dr. Georg Krauss of the Association of German Journalists sets the tone by honoring Robeson yet again. Krauss states that “[f]or us journalists, you are the ideal of a great, globally active propagandist of your ideas and your ideals, which are also ours, for which we journalists in the German Democratic Republic fight with the pen, with our brains, with our hearts and with our hands.” Like Norden and Ulbricht, Krauss exclaims that Robeson and the GDR are committed to the same principles. Although Krauss refers to journalists and not government officials, East German media outlets mostly censored themselves to ensure that they supported the state or, at least, did not directly criticize it.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Krauss’ comment, however, is his suggestion that Robeson is a propagandist. Up to this point in the pamphlet, Robeson has been labeled “singer of freedom,” “peace fighter,” and “fighter for the people,” but never a propagandist. In this case,

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94 Ibid., p. 29.
96 Ibid., p. 29.
Krauss uses the term in a positive light. He could have used the words “advocate” or “spokesmen,” and conveyed the same sentiment. However, he chose “propagandist” and, in so doing, implied that Robeson effectively manipulates information. Krauss’ use of the term is also ironic. Western critics of the time may have very well called him a propagandist because he was a spokesman of sorts for a communist state. Irony aside, though, Krauss’ excerpt reveals the importance attributed to propagandists in East German society.

Despite Krauss’ suggestion that Robeson is a “globally active propagandist,” the press conference really displays the propagandistic prowess of the East German journalists. Robeson answers the questions raised with seemingly genuine responses, but the questions are either vaguely conveyed or oddly specific. The first question is presented as follows: “When asked by a press representative about the true representatives of America, Robeson replied: ‘I would say Lincoln led those in America who were for freedom.’”

Robeson continues by also identifying Frederick Douglass (misspelled as “Frederic Douglas” in the pamphlet) and President Franklin Roosevelt. The last choice is surprising, but Robeson explains that Roosevelt “would understand today that we, the Americans, and the people in the socialist countries can and must live in friendship and in healthy competition with one another.” This leads Robeson to briefly discuss peace and nuclear disarmament, prompting him to ask, “Who are the people who say: listen to Khrushchev, let's get together with him.”

While on the subject of Khrushchev, the next journalist asks for Robeson’s opinion regarding the Soviet leader’s recent suggestion that all previously colonized nations should gain their independence. As one would expect, Robeson strongly approves of Khrushchev’s proposal.

98 Ibid., p. 30.
99 Ibid.
Robeson then thanks Khrushchev for his support of previously and currently colonized populations as well as black Americans.\textsuperscript{100}

Then, again unprompted, Robeson provides a comment of particular importance to the assembly of journalists. Following his statement of gratitude for Khrushchev, Robeson explains that the Soviet Union and other socialist states support “those who struggle for their freedom.”\textsuperscript{101}

He further elaborates:

I may add that it is precisely for this reason that I am here in the GDR, that I have visited the Soviet Union many times, and that I intend to spend at least half of the years of my life, if not more, in the socialist countries. I can repeat once again that as an American who is loyal to his people and the old traditions of America, I was, and always will be, a friend of the Soviet people and all the peoples of the socialist camp.\textsuperscript{102}

These two sentences provided the GDR with the kind of publicity they needed to gain much-desired international recognition. It is the kind of publicity that they were hoping the Robeson visit would produce. This is why Robeson’s official visit was so important to the GDR and why officials like Abusch and Alexan so desperately pursued Robeson.

The journalists save the question that will yield perhaps the most anticipated answer for the end of the press conference. They ask Robeson whether racial discrimination existed in the GDR or other socialist countries. For the journalists present, Robeson’s reply must have constituted a public relations victory: “I haven't found the slightest trace of racial discrimination and I can't imagine that I will find anything like that.”\textsuperscript{103} In order to analyze this statement, it is important to consider Moritz Ege’s concept of Afro-Americanophilia once again. Was Robeson’s claim that he had not found the slightest trace of racial discrimination genuine? And, if so, were

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
the positive experiences upon which Robeson based his claim the result of Afro-Americanophilia? In other words, Robeson may not have observed obvious discrimination in the GDR, but the country’s lack of discrimination may have been camouflaged by the flipping of racial stereotypes.

Although seemingly innocent, a story told on one of the final pages of “Tage mit Paul Robeson” reveals that Afro-Americanophilia may indeed have influenced Robeson’s perception of the absence of discrimination in the GDR. On this page is a photograph of Robeson meeting eight-year-old Anka Goll. In the photograph, Anka is holding a black doll. Although wearing doll’s clothes and partially obscured by Anka, the doll does not appear to bear racially exaggerated features. The revealing details are presented in the text of a note that Anka apparently sent to Robeson: “I wanted to write to you in America before but nobody knew your street. I am 8 years old. And my favorite doll is called Jimmi and is a Negro child. We would love for you to stay with us in the GDR. When you're in America, I'm always afraid for you.”

The first interesting detail is the doll’s name: Jimmi. Anka is a German girl, yet she refers to her doll by an incorrectly spelled Anglicized name. She also refers to the doll as a “Negro child.” The combination of these details suggests that the doll’s name derives from a racially based stereotype.

Anka was a child at the time and likely unaware of the racial implications surrounding the name of her doll. It is likely that Anka’s parents or another adult supplied both the name and race. The presence of these details in the pamphlet, reveals that the East German Peace Council believed them to be acceptable for publication. This suggests that the Peace Council was unaware of their offensive nature. This example does not represent the ideas of all East Germans,

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104 Ibid., 35; emphasis mine.
but it shows that, counter to Robeson’s press conference claim, racial discrimination did indeed exist in the GDR.

This final chapter examined the official East German portrayal of Robeson’s visit by analyzing the messages, both obvious and subtle, contained in a mass-produced pamphlet. The pamphlet discusses actual events, but it interprets these events in glowing terms—projecting a tone of self-aggrandizement. The remarks included from East German officials, Robeson’s own words, and specific episodes are used to advance an inflated image of the GDR. The next section will draw together the research and observations presented in the above three chapters.
CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters reveal the complex relationship between a repressed performer and a country trying to gain a sense of dignity. There were few ways for Robeson to gain back his dignity and the GDR to gain its dignity in the first place. For Robeson, the GDR provided a hospitable setting for him to spread his message to a sympathetic audience, and, although initially hesitant, he finally agreed to the idea.

Returning to the introduction: Robeson’s visit provided the singer with an opportunity to experience a supposedly egalitarian society, and it provided the East German government with an opportunity to exploit a public relations coup. The first question raised in the introduction asks whether Robeson’s state-sponsored visit was a random event or an intentional exercise. This study finds that the visit was intentional. The documents analyzed in Chapter 2 reveal that East German officials carefully pursued and planned the trip. The second question asks whether the GDR promoted the visit of a famous black American to make itself appear more egalitarian than its capitalist rivals. Through the explicit and implicit messaging of “Tage mit Paul Robeson,” the East German Peace Council presented an overly positive view of East German egalitarianism. Although the pamphlet describes the actual events of Robeson’s visit, it draws the reader’s attention to certain details in order to compare the GDR more favorably to capitalist states.

The above answers to this study’s guiding questions advance the argument that the GDR exploited Robeson’s visit by projecting an overly positive image of East Germany’s treatment of blacks—the racial minority whose oppression represented a significant failing of democratic ideology. Robeson may have hoped to find East German society more accepting of blacks than American society, but despite his claim that he “[hadn’t] found the slightest trace of racial
discrimination” in the socialist countries he had visited, there is no evidence that he discovered the GDR to be any more or less racially prejudiced than the US.105

Robeson’s visit and its portrayal shed light on the intersections between the Cold War and the ongoing Civil Rights Movement. One may never understand the true motives behind the GDR’s support of American Civil Rights figures like Robeson and Angela Davis. What is clear, however, is that exploiting American racial issues had a clear significance for its Cold War rivals. Historians devote considerably more attention to the Soviet Union’s portrayal of American racial failings in its propaganda (one propaganda film even incorporated Robeson’s recording of “Motherless Child”—citation needed), but its understudy—East Germany—similarly weaponized these failings. The messaging engaged in the struggle for hearts and minds in the countries of both the American and Soviet spheres of influence was not solely positive. That is to say that propaganda did not focus exclusively on the positive attributes of the country creating it. As cracks in the capitalist and socialist armor were exposed, both sides drew attention to the other’s weaknesses and failings.

This negative propaganda was created for foreign as well as domestic consumption. One of the most important international audiences of such propaganda was the “Third World.” Capitalist and communist countries transmitted their messages to non-aligned, developing countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East in the hopes of gaining allies in exchange for economic or military support. While capitalist countries pointed to the economic failings of socialism, communist countries drew attention to the social issues affecting their rivals. In this context, it is easy to understand why the GDR was so intent on portraying its treatment of Robeson during his visit. Robeson’s particular circumstances were representative of American

105 “Tage mit Paul Robeson,” p. 32.
society’s long-standing oppression of its black minority. If white Americans treated such a prominent black American like Robeson so poorly, how would they treat black Africans? By showing off its treatment of Robeson, the GDR hoped to appear more attractive than the US to potential allies in the “Third World.”

The present study represents an initial output of original research from which subsequent studies by the present author or other scholars will hopefully emerge. It is, therefore, appropriate to address research limitations and suggest ways to avoid similar issues moving forward. Most of the primary sources cited in the study were collected at the German Federal Archive Lichterfelde location. The document collection process revealed, however, that relevant materials may be housed at the Stasi archive. In order to visit this archive, one must obtain specific approval which may take up to several months. Relevant sources may also exist at the archive of the former East German Academy of Art. Please note that this archive permits a limited number of photocopies and that it may become necessary to transcribe documents. The last suggestion is to become well acquainted with the East German bureaucracy before continuing this research. Although the government-related sources cited in this study mostly relate to the East German Ministry of Culture, a broad awareness of the state apparatus will facilitate greater understanding.

This study focuses on interpreting Robeson’s visit to the GDR in 1960, but a similar analytical approach could be applied to the visits of other American Civil Rights figures. For instance, Angela Davis traveled to the GDR in 1972 to meet her East German supporters. In 1983, Harry Belafonte visited the GDR and performed a concert at the Palace of the Republic.

106 “Erich Honecker empfing Genossin Angela Davis,” Neues Deutschland, September 12, 1972, in DZ 9/246, BAL.
alongside West German pop star Udo Lindenberg. Possibly owing to the Stasi’s monitoring of Lindenberg (who was an outspoken critic of the GDR), files pertaining to the concert are maintained at the Stasi Archive. By analyzing Davis and Belafonte’s visits to the GDR, scholars could understand changes and continuities in East German interpretations of the experiences of prominent black Americans in the country.

107 Der Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, BStU, MfS, ZOS, Nr. 2541, Bl. 14-16.
“1936 ‘Show Boat’: A Multiracial, Musical Melodrama, Now Out on DVD.” *Fresh Air.*

Abusch, Alexander to John A. Williamson. July 6, 1958. DR 1/19183, BAL.

Abusch, Alexander to Peggy A. Middleton. July 6, 1958. DR 1/19183, BAL.

Abusch, Alexander to Paul Robeson. July 7, 1958. DR 1/19183, BAL.

Alexan, G. F. to Erich Wendt. October 14, 1958. DR 1/19183, BAL.

Blecha. September 12, 1959. DR 1/19183, BAL.


Buna Chemical Works VEB to Ministry of Culture. July 29, 1959. DR 1/19181, BAL.


Der Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik. BStU, MfS, ZOS, Nr. 2541, Bl. 14-16.


Dröll, Karl to Nike. September 30, 1960. DR 1/19181, BAL.

Dröll, Karl to Paul Robeson. September 30, 1960. DR 1/19181, BAL.
Dr. Richter to the Staatsssekretariat für das Hoch- und Fachschulwesen. September 1, 1959. DR 3/2779, BAL.


“Erich Honecker empfing Genossin Angela Davis.” *Neues Deutschland*, September 12, 1972. In DZ 9/246, BAL.

Francis, Harry to Irene Gysi. August 4, 1960. DR 1/19183, BAL.


Häußler to Oelschlegel. August 5, 1960. DR 1/19181, BAL.


Neukranz to Erich Wendt. August 19, 1959. DR 1/19183, BAL.

Paul Robeson Pioneers to Ministry of Culture. March 26, 1959. DR 1/19181, BAL.

Pischner, Hans to Eslanda Robeson. September 14, 1959. DR 1/19181, BAL.


Purschke to Ministry of Culture. August 2, 1960. DR 1/19181, BAL.


“Tage mit Paul Robeson.” DZ 9/2015, BAL.