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Meredith Roman. "Soviet 'Renegades,' Black Panthers, and Angela Davis: The Politics of Dissent in the Soviet Press, 1968–73." *Cold War History* 18:4 (2018): 503-519. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2018.1465932>.

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Review by Brenda Gayle Plummer, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Through its joint examination of the scholarship on Soviet and African-American dissidents respectively, this study compares dissents in the two global systems led by the United States and the Soviet Union at a critical moment in the Cold War. Meredith Roman approaches the subject from a distinct angle: the dissenting Americans are black. This original study juxtaposes two groups of synchronous historical actors, Soviet critics of the regime during the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's period, and the Black Power activists who confronted U.S. governmental power during the Vietnam War era. This work is part of a now established trend of lending more credence to the activities and influence of non-state actors in international affairs. It places the internal antagonists of these Cold War foes at the center of the story.

The author examines an array of material that includes articles from the Soviet press, memoirs, Russian and English language histories in book and article form, and state papers collected by the dissident Vladimir Bukovsky. Her sources on African Americans, especially Angela Davis and the Black Panthers, draw mainly from a more limited collection of books. Overall, Roman's research focuses on what has been published in both languages, with the Soviet press serving as a major part of the resource base.

Human rights provides the framework that organizes the narrative. Roman sees the nascent human rights movement as lending cohesion and legitimacy to the claims of activists who aligned themselves with the concept. The idea also proved a useful ideological weapon for the two rival governments to endorse the protests of the political minorities of their adversaries. She notes how welfarist policies that were assumed to be normative by policymakers in the USSR were viewed with distrust by U.S. officialdom, which focused on civil rights. In contrast, Soviet dissidents sought the civil rights that African American activists were finding by the late 1960s to be insufficient guarantees of freedom. The absence of genuine human rights in both countries created the occasion for oppositional movements which Roman identifies in the U.S. instance with Black Power radicals and Angela Davis. Her examples from the Soviet side are more diffuse, including such prominent figures as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Sakharov, and other figures less well known in the West.

Roman describes how the two powers disparaged their own dissenters as subversives and embraced those of the other country, but the skepticism with which the Soviet public had come to receive official pronouncements neutralized its broader support for militant black dissidence. The exception was Davis, who, as a U.S. Communist Party member and an intellectual, had wider appeal. Soviet dissidents did not find common cause with black American activists, and, correspondingly, the Kremlin's domestic critics were decidedly below the radar in radical African American circles. These were two human rights movements, one explicitly defined and the other implicit, which did not meld.

All of this invites a more precise comparison between the Soviet and African-American dissident experiences, but Roman does not claim to be making one. Instead, she sets "the history of Soviet dissent during the Brezhnev era" against "U. S. racism in the Cold War" (513). We learn more about the former than the latter. This reveals a methodological problem: comparison requires some similitude and commensurability between categories. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the author abandons that pairing and goes on to place the actual Soviet and African-American dissidents in conversation. Their characteristics defy simple equivalence. The conventional press in both countries was hostile to dissenters, for example, but the U.S. press was not a governmental entity and an oppositional black press openly existed and circulated widely. Similarly, Soviet dissidents were from an intelligentsia that had been created by the state itself, but many Black Power activists had proletarian backgrounds and professed hostility to elitism. As actors on the Cold War stage, Soviet and African-American dissenters did not occupy parallel spaces.

"Soviet 'Renegades'" substantially engages the Russian and English language literature on dissidents and their detractors as well as standard work on the Cold War and human rights. The engagement with the African-American side of this contemporaneous protest is less focused and perhaps less researched. This leads the author to claim that African Americans had an alliance with the Soviets that they abandoned by the 1960s, a renunciation that she associates with the demise of W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson. While there were and are black Communists, there was no "alliance" with Moscow on the black left, as most black radicals never overcame their skepticism toward homegrown white Communists, instead developing a growing appreciation for the way that Communism looked in China, North Vietnam, and Cuba.¹ It also cannot be maintained, as the author does, that Angela Davis personified a resurgence of black solidarity with the Soviets. As Roman herself notes, "Davis was the only prominent Black Power activist who was a member of the US Communist Party" (513).

The conclusion of the article brings the narrative up to the present, with the hollowness of the successor regime to the Soviet Union exposed. In our contemporary period, Kremlin officials promote rather than condemn racism in efforts to manipulate American public opinion in the interest of various agendas and outcomes, and U.S. leaders do the same. Grassroots activists protesting police killings of black people have been targeted by Russian trolls seeking to influence the American political process by ginning up white racial fears. On the other side of the traditional rivalry, the FBI continues to intimidate black activists as it has done since its founding in 1908 during the Marcus Garvey era. The FBI's claim that police officers are threatened

¹ See, for example, Rosemary Mealy, *Fidel and Malcolm X, Memories of a Meeting* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1993); Mary Hershberger, *Traveling to Vietnam: American Peace Activists and the War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998).

by “Black Identity Terrorists”² sets the stage for greater surveillance and harassment of the successors of the Black Power groups referenced in the essay. In neither country have leaders acknowledged the reality of the political repression that has centuries-long roots in their respective cultures. Both have utilized anti-black racism, the ugliest legacy of the West, to subdue dissent, divide civil society, and inflict double injury on one of the most vulnerable populations.

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² Federal Bureau of Investigation, Counterterrorism Division Intelligence Assessment, “Black Identity Extremists Likely Motivated to Target Law Enforcement Officers,” 3 August 2017, Counterterrorism Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation, online at <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4067711-BIE-Redacted.html>.