



The Brotherhood: A Critique of the Communist Party Background Reading

Communist Party, USA

The Communist Party USA was founded in 1919, three years after the Russian Revolution. It started as a dual organization composed of foreign-language and native-born American groups, but the factions were ordered to merge by the Soviet Union, which helped fund the Communist Party USA. The Communists were active in promoting civil rights and racial equality for blacks. Many black writers and artists were invited to Moscow as guests of the state. When the Great Depression occurred, many Communists believed that Marx's prediction of the inevitable collapse of capitalism was coming true.

The Communists became extremely active on the civil-rights front, and they found a great opportunity to act on the national stage in 1931. Nine black youths traveling on a freight train in Alabama were arrested, falsely charged with raping two white women who were also on the train. The youths were quickly tried, and all but one were sentenced to death. The Communists intervened with a two-fold strategy: They hired first-rate legal talent to appeal the case all the way to the United States Supreme Court, and they also staged mass demonstrations in the United States to rally public support for their campaign to free the youths. The strategy worked. The Supreme Court overturned the first trial and ordered a new one.

In the second trial, the judge himself threw out the case. Alabama reinstated it, and once again the "Scottsboro Boys" were found guilty and sentenced to death. Again United States Supreme Court overturned the verdict. Finally Alabama yielded. All nine defendants were eventually released after spending many years in prison. At the same time as the Communists were fighting the Scottsboro case, they were also organizing sharecroppers and tenant farmers in Alabama. Their goal was to force landlords to give sharecroppers and tenant farmers a fair share of their income, provide food and clothing during the winter, and pay them money that was lawfully

due them.

The party found thousands of black farmers who were willing to participate. It was a dangerous business. Local organizers like Ralph Gray and Clifford James, Alabama farmers, were murdered. Others, like Ned Cobb, were imprisoned. Some just disappeared.

Unidentified bodies of those believed to be organizers were found in rivers. Despite the terror, the party organized some successful strikes in Lee County in the mid-1930s. However, the agricultural situation had dramatically changed by the late 1930s and the party -- while still maintaining a strong civil rights platform -- withdrew from the cotton fields.

Richard Wright and the Communist Party

Richard Wright was born in Roxie, Mississippi. His grandparents had been slaves and his father had abandoned his family when he was six. His mother worked as a cook to support the family. They suffered from extreme poverty, especially after his mother became sick. Wright wanted to write from a very young age and he was overjoyed when, at the age of 16, a local newspaper printed one of the first stories that he wrote. Although no one in his family encouraged his dream, he refused to give it up. He worked at a number of jobs in the South but was unable to accept the prejudices and insults of Jim Crow. He kept reading and thinking about becoming a writer.

In 1927, he left Memphis, Tennessee to migrate to Chicago. There, after working in unskilled jobs, he was given an opportunity to write. He joined the John Reed Club in Chicago, an organization set up by the Communist Party to recruit writers into its ranks. Wright joined the Party, and in 1937 he went to New York to write for the *Daily Worker*, the Party's newspaper. His first book, *UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN* (1938), was greeted with critical praise. His next work, *NATIVE SON* (1940), the story of a black man who inadvertently kills a white woman, made him famous. The book was a best-seller and was staged successfully as a play on Broadway (1941) by the great director Orson Welles. Wright himself played Bigger Thomas, the book's main character, in a motion-picture version made in Argentina in 1951.

In 1944 he left the Communist Party because of political and personal differences. His next book, *BLACK BOY*, told the wrenching story of his childhood and youth in the South, detailing the extreme

poverty in which he lived, his experience of racism and white violence, and his growing awareness of literature. His books made Wright the voice for an entire generation of black Americans. After World War II, Wright settled in Paris; among his political works of that period was *WHITE MAN, LISTEN!* (1957). Toward the end of his life, Wright had become very much involved in the Pan-African movement. He also was engaged in a literary quarrel with a new generation of black writers including James Baldwin. Wright's autobiographical *AMERICAN HUNGER*, which recounts experiences with the Communist Party after moving to the North, was published after his death in 1977.

-- Richard Wormser on [The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow website](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/index.html)
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