

## Meeting with Stalin (1925)

*Otto Hall*

This archival material represents the recollection of a meeting that Otto Hall, the brother of Harry Haywood, had with Stalin in 1925. Lenin at the Second Congress of the Comintern had referred to the Black Nation in the United States of America; in 'Statistics and Sociology' he referred to the oppressed Black Nation. Sen Katayama in his writings confirmed that Lenin adhered to this view. This meeting is evidence that Stalin played an active role in propagating the understanding of Lenin which paved the way for the provisions of the Comintern on the Black Question especially in the resolutions of 1928 and 1931. Harry Haywood played a major role in this development as is clear from his seminal book, 'Black Bolshevik'. Stalin and Kuusinen coordinated work in the Sixth Congress of the Comintern as is evidenced in the Soviet archives. Leaders such as Lovestone and Browder were hostile to the understanding of Lenin and Stalin on the existence of the Black Nation with the right to self-determination.

At times the out-migration and in-migration of the blacks to and from the Black Belt are examined in an arithmetical fashion to argue that the Black Nation has diminished in particular counties or in the black belt as a whole and therefore had 'disappeared'. In the Soviet Union autonomous state structures were frequently formed precisely where the former oppressed nationalities were in a numerical minority.

It is also argued that industrial development in the Black Belt led to the termination of the Black Nation. How this is supposed to have occurred is not explained. Certainly industrialisation did not lead to the eradication of the former oppressed nations in the Soviet Union.

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The group of five had not been Moscow a week before Stalin sent a notice to the school that he wanted to interview them. He sent a car to take them to the Kremlin where he had his office. With him was Karl Radek who spoke English with an accent and served as interpreter. Tea was brought in, and Stalin made every effort to make them feel at home. The atmosphere was most informal. Then Stalin posed some questions: "Why weren't there more Negroes in the American party? The Negroes represented the most oppressed section of the American working class. Therefore, the American party should have more Negroes than whites". Mr. Hall replied that prejudice and discrimination were largely responsible for the lack of Negro membership in the Party. He related a number of incidents of prejudice to Negroes which had cut the membership of the Southside branch, organised in 1922, with about 75 Negroes in the membership. Mr. Hall commented that he didn't expect to find this attitude in the Party, and that the patronizing attitude of the whites were resented. At that time, Mr. Hall and other Negroes in the Party looked to the Comintern and the Russian leadership to correct these defects in the American party. Stalin then stated: "The whole approach of the American party to the Negro question is wrong. You are national minority with some of the characteristics of a nation". He added that he intended to have more talks with the Negro group. Radek at this meeting also agreed with Stalin's approach. Stalin also said: "The basic problem of the Negro in the United States is land. Lenin wrote a basic work on agriculture in America in 1913, and he had never been to the United States. It is possible to analyse the question in its fundamentals from here. You work on the land and you don't have it, and you are entitled to it." Stalin also asked the group to write memoranda on the

Negro question. He offered to provide books and publications from the U.S. Subsequently, a group of newspapers, including the Chicago Defender, the Baltimore Afro-American, the New York Age and The Crisis as well as such books as Carter Woodson's, were made available in the University's library.

Interview lasted several hours.

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These passages are also in: Theodore Draper, 'American Communism and Soviet Russia', New York, 1986.

Courtesy: Sean Guillory