

Paul Robeson and Itzik Feffer: A Story of Betrayal and Compromise

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Paul Robeson was an astonishingly multifaceted man; one whose talents knew no bounds. He started his academic career at the University of Rutgers where he made a profound impact on the football field becoming an All-American athlete and later on as a professional football player. After earning his law degree while playing professional football, he transitioned into an immensely successful acting career. Unfortunately, at times, he felt the need to compromise his integrity to portray the Black caricature roles created for him. However, he gained his most notoriety as a singer, where he used his platform to effect change for Black Americans. Alongside these political efforts, he also became immensely popular and performed around the world.¹ Throughout his life, Robeson became proficient in over twenty different languages and fluent in over ten. In particular, Robeson was proficient in Yiddish, a language in which he could read, write, and sing. Through his study of Yiddish and work comparing the experiences of the Jewish people during the Holocaust to the Black American experience, Robeson bonded with the Jewish people over shared struggles of being persecuted. In particular, Robeson became particularly close friends with Itzik Feffer. Throughout his career, Robeson used his platform to stand up for oppressed groups of people, which included Jews. In 1949, Robeson visited the USSR and asked to meet with his good friend. The Soviet authorities allegedly complied, but in secrecy, Feffer revealed that he was under arrest and set to be killed. Feffer was executed three short years later. However, despite this information being revealed, Robeson denied what had happened to Feffer.² This paper aims to put *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writing, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974* in conversation with historical background on Robeson and those he met, to explain why he decided to deny this antisemitic persecution.

¹ Blind Spot: Inclusivity. "Paul Robeson: Here I Stand Documentary." August 16, 2014

² Jordan Kutzik, "How Paul Robeson Learned Yiddish And Fought Fascism," *The Forward*, February 21, 2018.

Ultimately, Robeson viewed life beyond himself and he used his platform as a musician to stand up for the marginalized. His primary goal, however, was to speak on behalf of the mistreatment of people of color in particular in the United States. His support of the Soviet Union depended on his view of the country as a powerful entity in opposition to the imperialist and racist nation that he lived in. Had he criticized the Soviet persecution of Jewish intellectuals like Feffer, his words would be used as a tool against the nation that he believed stood between the United States and the subjugation of people of color worldwide, and thus Robeson decided against this criticism.

Historians and scholars have differing opinions on Robeson's failure to acknowledge what was happening to Feffer and other Jewish intellectuals, but they tend to agree that Robeson did so to preserve the positive image of the Soviet Union. There is less consensus, however, on Robeson's motives for protecting the USSR's reputation. His alma mater, Rutgers University, hosted a panel that discussed the matter. Panelist, Nancy Sinkoff stated "He was drawn to the Jewish left because, like him, some Jews—those associated with the Communist Party—believed that the Soviet Union had ended racial discrimination. They also believed that their alliance could combat the persistence of racial inequality in the United States."³ Sinkoff added that Robeson aligned himself with leftist Jews who saw the Soviet Union as a defender of racial justice. However, she recognized that Robeson, like others, misevaluated the U.S.S.R especially when more information surfaced after Stalin's death in 1953. She concluded her remarks with the following, "History is always complicated. No hero is unblemished. If historians chose to represent Robeson as simply a great hero and ally in fighting antisemitism and racism, they would be deceiving the American public."⁴ Questions about what he failed to confront and why he intentionally ignored the signs of the Soviet Union's oppression both at home and abroad are

³ Andrea Alexander, "Examining Paul Robeson's Connection to the Jewish Community," *Rutgers Today*, September 27, 2019.

⁴ Ibid.

critical. We need to talk about the whole picture: what he was up against in the United States, what kind of discrimination he faced as a person of color, and why he fell for the allure of the Communist Party. The documentary *Here I Stand* details Robeson's life story and focuses on why he decided against exposing the antisemitic brutality of the Soviet regime. Robeson himself remarks that in the USSR he felt like a "full human being," which likely played a major role in his support for the nation. In the documentary, Paul Robeson Jr. states that his father's world "was a world of relative evils."⁵ Furthermore, the documentary unpacks how the Soviet Union acted as a "barrier to world domination by the right-wing of this system."⁶ Therefore, in Robeson's eyes, the Soviet Union was the lesser of the two evils and thus he deemed it necessary to publicly support the nation more than the United States, which required denying accusations of Soviet antisemitism. Other people interviewed in the documentary argue that Robeson continuously lied about the situation and that he, in fact, knew better. When deciding which of these historical opinions most accurately sums up Robeson's intentions, it is important to first understand his experiences as a Black man and understand his complicated relationship with Jewish people both from his perspective and from those who interacted with him or studied his life.

Robeson became acquainted with racism from an early age, which fueled his passion to change the system that was oppressing him. Despite graduating from a prestigious law school, and landing a job at a prestigious law firm, many of the firm's white clients did not want to work with Robeson. Experiences like this bolstered his solidarity with Black people in the United States and abroad. During an interview in 1936, Robeson stated the following:

⁵ Blind Spot: Inclusivity. "Here I Stand Documentary."

⁶ Ibid.

I am 100 percent in agreement with the Communist Party position on self-determination for the colonies and for the Negro people in America. That seems to me the only way in which these cultures can be developed. They are stifling under imperialism. Such things as the Negro spirituals in America show that the Negroes have something fundamental to contribute to civilization, which they cannot do unless they have their own cultural and political autonomy.⁷

Robeson viewed the U.S.S.R as the supporters of African self-determinism and thus supporters of Black people as a whole. His solidarity with Africans mirrored his views towards Black Americans. Robeson often makes parallels between the two groups. One such example was in a 1935 article in the *Jamaica Daily Gleaner* when Robeson responded to the following interview question: "How do you hope to awaken the self-consciousness of the Black man?" He responded:

We must remember that outside America there are three other centres of negro population: the Caribbean Islands (Jamaica, Haiti, &c), Brazil, with the whole of South America, and Africa. In these various regions negroes speak different languages, but in spite of that even the American negroes feel instinctively in sympathy with their own blood, the Black men of the whole world.⁸

Robeson sought to connect the experiences of Black people around the world because he believed through solidarity and resistance to assimilation, true freedom could be achieved. Robeson furthered the connections in his 1951 piece called the *Southern Negro Youth*. In this work, he writes, "No people can sympathize more with these Black African, brown Indian and mixed colored populations of South Africa than we Americans of African descent, rooted as we are in Talmadge Georgia and Rankin Mississippi, with Dewey Peekskill and Stevenson Cicero

⁷ *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974*, edited by Philip Sheldon Foner, (New York, NY: Carol Pub Group), 1978.

⁸ Ibid.

right up there with them.”⁹ Through the language Robeson used here and in his other writings, it is clear why Robeson grew to like the Soviet Union so much. He echoes the Communist chants of the working people when he connected the experiences of Black and colonial people around the world. Robeson fought against discrimination in the United States in many capacities, however; one was his fight against lynching. He met with President Truman in 1946, but despite his pleas, the meeting resulted in inaction from the Truman administration.¹⁰ The combination of experiences with vehement racism that Robeson shared with many Black Americans and his frustration at the U.S. government’s failure to respond sparked an initial curiosity in the Soviet experiment.

In his experiences fighting racism, Robeson drew many parallels to fascism. He connected with another group that he viewed as victims of fascism, the Jewish people. In an article written by the *Daily Herald* in 1935, Robeson remarked, “Only those who have lived in a state of inequality will understand what I mean -- workers, European Jews, women . . . those who have felt their status, their race, or their sex a bar to a complete share in all that the world has to offer.”¹¹ In Robeson’s eyes, anyone who had been oppressed by Western society faced a similar struggle and needed to work together. One of the many inspirations for Robeson’s singing was Negro Spirituals. Examples he noted were largely influenced by Old Testament hymns. In an interview in 1927, Robeson explained that many Black Americans living in slavery looked at the Jews in Egypt for inspiration, and thus a connection with the Old Testament was born. When asked to define fascism, the self-proclaimed anti-fascist Robeson spoke the following, “[r]acial superiority, the kind of racial superiority that led a Hitler to wipe out 6,000,000 Jewish people, that can result any day in the lynching of Negro people in the South or other parts of America,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

the denial of their rights, the constant daily denial to any Negro in America, no matter how important, of his essential human dignity which no other American will accept, this daily insult to the human being”.¹² He viewed Communism as the antithesis to Fascism and thus it garnered his support. In Russia and the Soviet Union, Robeson was met with adoration and treated with a level of respect he could not find in the United States. It is through his deep appreciation of the struggles of the Jewish people that Robeson explored Jewish culture and music. For example, Leah Zazulyer, a Jewish-American, recounts the excitement she felt when she listened to Robeson sing as a child during the McCarthy era. She remarked that the night Robeson performed at the Yiddish theater, there was a tremendous sense of excitement in the room. He was announced as a champion of the underdogs. She wrote, “to my utter amazement, he began to sing all the Jewish songs I had ever heard my mother sing to me.”¹³ Robeson continued to sing uplifting songs that depicted Jewish people as resilient and strong, striking an accord with the author and making her proud of her Jewish identity. One such song he sang was “Zog Nit Keynmol”, which he sang in Moscow after visiting his friend Itzik Feffer in 1949.¹⁴ Despite warnings from Soviet officials not to sing music with Jewish nationalistic content, Robeson defied their orders.¹⁵ The song itself is a Yiddish song from the Warsaw resistance during the Holocaust. The song is profoundly powerful. Robeson’s act of intentional defiance showed that he felt a continued connection to the Jewish people, which would continue for many more years. In the book *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise*, author Joy Gleason remarks that in 1960-61 while in the Soviet Union, Robeson sang “a song [from] the Jewish tradition that decried their persecution through the centuries. I know this song would

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Leah Zazulyer, “When Paul Robeson Sang To Me,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 66 (1) (1999): 94–99.

¹⁴ Paul Robeson - Topic, “Zog Nit Keynmol (Song of the Warsaw Ghetto),” November 7, 2014, video.

¹⁵ Kutzik, “How Paul Robeson Learned Yiddish And Fought Fascism.”

alienate party officials in the audience. I wondered whether Robeson...was even aware of Soviet antisemitism. I decided that he must be and perhaps he knew what he was doing. As he sang, there was a cry in his voice, a plea to end the beating, berating, and killing of Jews".¹⁶ It is with this information that one must view Robeson's denial of Soviet persecution of Jewish intellectuals. Robeson used Jewish music, Yiddish songs in particular, to spread the strength of the Jewish people and to subtly criticize the mistreatment of Jews in the Soviet Union. This does not mean to defend his actions as an ally of the Soviet Regime which perpetrated widespread violence on its people as well as targeted persecution of Jews but rather seeks to explain why Robeson held the mentality he had in the context of his time.

Ultimately, it is important to dissect the complicated legacy of Paul Robeson. There were times in his career when he compromised the image of Black Americans to increase his success and there were other moments when he acted selflessly for the greater good. Throughout his career, he compared the suffering of Black Americans to other oppressed peoples around the world. One group which resonated particularly strongly with Robeson was the Jewish people. In some of his recorded statements, he mentions the role that Jews played as abolitionists and defenders of Civil Rights. His appreciation of Jewish people is not only evident in his music but also in the relationships he formed with prominent Jewish figures. With much of the world subjugated by colonial powers, Robeson believed in the dichotomy between the West and the Soviet Union. While in the Soviet Union, Robeson was presented with the best image of the state and it is with this information in conjunction with internalizing the continued denial of his humanity by his fellow citizens at home that made him pro-Soviet. It is important to criticize the racial oppression in the West as well as the brutal killings that occurred in the Soviet empire.

¹⁶ Zallen, Doris, and Joy Gleason Carew. *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise*. (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press), 2008.

However, it is also important to understand why a man as bright as Robeson would deny the persecution and suffering of his friends. Ultimately, Robeson prioritized the suffering of Black Americans ahead of all else and in an attempt to bring an end to that suffering, he turned to the Soviet Union's communist ideals. The USSR presented itself as a society with racial equality while the United States outwardly rejected Robeson's requests for change. Therefore, it is important to continue to study the role that the Soviet Union played in American Civil Rights and simultaneously understand why some Black intellectuals such as Robeson were drawn to its utopian ideologies, while also acknowledging the violence carried out by Stalin and his successors.

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