

# ***Teachers Institute of Philadelphia Black History Month Mini-Unit: The Appeal of Communism to African-Americans in the United States***

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## **Abstract**

Communism, as a political system, is challenging for 7th grade students to understand. Is it a form of government or an economic policy? Communism comes up in the 7th grade curriculum in at least two ways: as a backdrop to an ELA curriculum novel, *Refugee* by Alan Gratz, set in Castro's Cuba; and in the history of great African Americans who experimented with Communism in their lives. Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson are three artists who encountered Communism in distinct ways that reflected their respective moments along a timeline of American rejections of Communism over time.

A few key questions: What is Communism and how does it work? What are the philosophies behind it? How did a Communist Revolution overtake Russia? What is the Cold War and what is McCarthyism? Why did Americans reject Communism? Students can explore this arc of history - of growing intolerance to Communism - through a select few African Americans who traveled to the USSR to witness their goals of classlessness and racelessness. Students will learn about Communism in a lens geared towards exploration and curiosity, asking questions and thinking analytically and critically about race, history, and economic systems of power.

## **Key Words**

Communism, Socialism, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Black History, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, the Cold War, McCarthyism, the Great Migration, the Bolshevik Revolution, the USSR, Jim Crow South, racism, economics, Capitalism, Black Communists

## **Rationale**

This five-class unit plan is designed for Cook-Wissahickon School's seventh grade Social Studies students. Cook-Wissahickon is a neighborhood school in Roxborough and Manayunk in Northwest Philadelphia in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). Cook-Wissahickon serves nearly 500 students ranging from kindergarten through eighth grade. In the SDP, Social Studies education is a little murky. Once most students get to High School, they have a more rigorous commitment based on, at least, a designated course called Social Studies or History with a teacher with expertise on the subject. In the elementary and middle grades, there's more wiggle room. There are some key ideas associated with specific grades: for instance, in seventh, educators are to teach "Western Hemisphere" and Ancient History. I do that alongside the much-more-rigorous ELA curriculum, where I am given daily Lesson Planning documents that dictate weekly lessons related to four novels in preparation for the PSSA exams in the spring.

Something I choose to do as an educator is to try to teach to my students' interests and I have a lot of African-American students. So, I embrace Black History Month as an anchor for February to teach something that isn't Ancient History. I hope that this new knowledge, research, and

lesson planning will make a truly memorable, unique, and out-of-the-ordinary teaching of Black History during Black History Month, which often feels rote and stiff and focused too squarely on slavery, oppression, and misery. This would be a departure from the norm and students will really respond to something out of the ordinary like an exploration of Communism in Modern American Black History. Not only is this an opportunity to give students a baseline understanding of some economic systems, but it can also do something that great History and Social Studies educators aim for: enriching the understanding and making understandings more complex - in this case, the brutal realities of the Jim Crow South and how alternatives to those realities seemed appealing and promising.

### **Content Objectives**

Communism is a curious subject for Middle School scholars. For whatever reason, being mostly 12-year-olds, 7th grade especially struggles to understand and fully comprehend the ideals and practices of Communism. Then, try to explain to them the difference between Socialism and Communism. Appeals to concepts such as Social Security or Medicaid as Socialistic enterprises do not seem to land on 12-year-olds. Most 7th graders want to be rich, but do not understand labor. It's true - most students have a very off-kilter understanding of what it means to work for money or how their parents afford their Smartphones and Air Jordans. They admire America's and the world's millionaires and billionaires and hope to be one someday. They struggle to discuss poverty, inequality, and wage practices in meaningful ways.

And yet, in our 7th grade ELA curriculum this year, we start with a book called "Refugee" by Alan Gratz, a tri-layered narrative that dwells in three settings with three 12-year-old characters: Josef in Germany in 1939, Isabel in Cuba in 1992, and Mahmoud in Syria in 2015. Isabel's story is a story of Castro and Communism, and it requires a great deal of historical contextualizing to make readers truly understand Isabel's life and struggles. This includes rations, hunger, shortages, and riots. Her family and her neighbors sail on a makeshift raft to Florida, not everyone survives, but the promise of American capitalism and its glory engages middle grades readers powerfully. There is a possibility that this will not be a novel that I get to teach next year, which makes things a little bit more complicated for students' understanding of Communism in February, but it could be an opportunity to stretch out the unit on Capitalism, Communism, and Marxism in an interesting way.

This unit is currently conceived of as a four-class unit, about four hours of class time. The progression of ideas is as follows:

The *first sequence* of ideas will be a broad introduction to terms, ideas, and the philosophies of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. An introduction to Communism with a classroom discussion of ideas and question-asking. With videos, note-taking, and discussion questions around ideas of Communism, students will grasp some of the basic concepts of Communism, the Bolsheviks, and the formation of the U.S.S.R.

The *second sequence* of ideas will be anchored to the chronological predecessor of Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson - Claude McKay. We will be introduced to the life and work of McKay, read about his visit to and interest in the U.S.S.R., read and discuss his poetry, and

consider his legacy and whether his interest in Communist ideals somehow influences his notoriety or reputation. This section will also explore the idea of the U.S.S.R.'s pursuit of a "raceless society," a natural benefit of a "classless society."

The *third sequence* of ideas will explore the life, work, and legacies of Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson. We will read about the life of Hughes and read poems by him, as well as a section of his own report of racelessness in the U.S.S.R. Then we will read about the life of Robeson, watch clips of his artistry, and watch a video about McCarthyism. Students will consider the transition of attitudes towards Soviet Socialism in the States, from interest in and fascination with Socialist ideals to rejection of and fearmongering surrounding "Red" Russia during the Cold War.

The *fourth sequence* of ideas and discourse will cover the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. with the Berlin Wall as a lens through which to define a timeline and the East vs. West mentality. There is a way that the first three lessons can jump to the contemporary with a bridge to post-Cold War Russia, the 1990s, and the beginnings of Putin - something students can identify as closer to them historically. This is also an opportunity to talk about Communism in our worlds now (China, Cuba, Vietnam, Laos, and North Korea.) Then the debate - is Communism bad or just badly implemented? Or both?

### Content Background

\* **Engels, Marx, and Socialism:** Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx co-wrote a pamphlet called *The Communist Manifesto*, which served as the platform for Communist organizing. Engels and Marx were German philosophers and the founding, philosophical forefathers of the Bolshevik Revolution. In the first chapter of their *Manifesto*, "Bourgeois and Proletarians," they write:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed...

The co-authors go on to dramatically elaborate on the ideas of the oppressor and the oppressed, dichotomies of power the world over and through the ages. Their intent was to ignite a worldwide lifting of the workers of the world, and an overthrow of private wealth hoarded by a powerful upper class. Class resentment is a common practice over hundreds and even thousands of years: the disparity of wealth resulting in a disparity of power, and a power imbalance reflected in vastly different lives - the wealthy living comfortably, the poor living miserably. Furthermore, class resentment accumulates as wealth is generated by and for the wealthy class by the lower class. This is something that even 12-year-olds understand: they want to be rich and they don't want to be poor. Many of them want to be professional athletes because that entails enormous wealth.

However, at its essence, does the philosophy that Engels and Marx lay out not articulate a utopian society of equality? Perhaps this Communism thing isn't so good to someone who wants to accumulate as much wealth as is humanly possible. But to the Humanists and optimists, the

idealistic young 7th graders who hate to see homelessness and hunger in their communities, Communism doesn't sound so bad. And modern interpretations of Karl Marx and his philosophical writings, link him to the common understanding of the word Socialism.

Socialism adds another layer to the potential of confusion for 7th graders. Communism is subset of Socialism and, back to that National Geographic [definition](#) for middle schoolers, Socialism is fleshed out when we consider the definition of Democratic Socialism:

Democratic socialism is a form of socialism which emphasizes that both the economy and society should be run democratically, and that the goal is to meet the needs of all the people, not just a rich few... Instead, business institutions should be run by those workers and consumers... This could be implemented, for example, as worker-run cooperatives or publicly owned enterprises managed by workers and consumer representatives.

In the year 2024, unions have made headlines left and right. It is cool to be in a union. Unions are viable Philadelphia lifelines. It is important to be realistic with middle schoolers about their financial futures and give them perspective for their high school- and college-bound selves. I take pride in contextualizing life for middle graders - that a reality of a place to live, making a livable wage, and the goal of some pride in a career is waiting for them as early as 18 for some. This is heady stuff for my students and it seems ever-important to address it - this lens is both fascinating and challenging.

\* **Communism in its Simplest Terms:** In a National Geographic Encyclopedic [Entry](#) geared towards grades 5-8, is defined as a “type of economy where all property, including land, factories and companies, is held by the government.” However, even the article that accompanies this definition defines Communism as:

a form of government most frequently associated with the ideas of Karl Marx, a German philosopher who outlined his ideas for a utopian society in *The Communist Manifesto*, written in 1848. Marx believed that capitalism, with its emphasis on profit and private ownership, led to inequality among citizens.

This feels like the more complete definition and yet I can't help but point out that within a National Geographic explanation of Communism, middle schoolers are told that it is an economy and a form of government. So which is it? Or can it be both? These are ideas that 7th graders ask as middle grades Social Studies teachers try to explain how Communism is bad. But is it? Other terms defined in the set for 5-8 graders: capitalism, dictator, doctrine, exploit, free enterprise, global, Industrial Revolution, proletarian, manifesto, revolution, and utopia.

An American public education seems to instill in the average American that Capitalism is totally cool. So is the United States a Capitalist country and is that inherently good? These are the kinds of things that an adolescent mind goes to - dichotomies, good and evil, wrong and right, true and false.

And how about [Britannica](#), a trusted source where a middle school Social Studies student might go to try to understand this Communism? What do they call it?

Communism is a political and economic system that seeks to create a classless society in which the major means of production, such as mines and factories, are owned and controlled by the public. There is no government or private property or currency, and the wealth is divided among citizens equally or according to individual need.

You see where this is going? This source says there is no government. And how can Communism be a political system - what's a political system? The Britannica entry goes on to mention Marx and Engels, as well as subsequent contributors to Communist idealism and their "corruptions, depending on one's perspective." We're talking Lenin and Stalin here, the two dominant and authoritarian leaders of Communist Russia in the 20th century. Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) was a leader of the Communist Party who was at the vanguard of the Bolshevik Revolution (1917-1923) and died early on in the Russian Communist conversion. Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) assumed power in the USSR and in the Communist Party as Lenin's successor and ruled with authoritarian power for nearly three decades. Stalin's reign would contain dualities as well: moments of great innovation and progressive strides towards an egalitarian society, as well as brutal mass-deportations, murders, and politically-motivated violence.

\* **The Bolshevik Revolution:** What most people, and certainly almost all middle schoolers, don't realize is that the "Russian Revolution," a monumental revolution on the world stage, grew directly out of World War I. The Russian or Bolshevik Revolution was, in fact, two revolutions: the first, which overthrew the imperialist government in St. Petersburg in the spring; and the second, which installed the Bolsheviks, the revolutionary Socialists who would form a Communist Russian government. WWI and the Bolshevik Revolution, combined, lasted nearly a decade and devastated the nation's population. Millions of Russians lost their lives. In this struggle, Lenin and the Communist Party emerged all powerful, with Stalin soon to inherit this power.

True to a commitment to Communism as set forth by Engels and Marx, Lenin and Stalin began the gruelingly challenging and perhaps impossible task of converting a recently-Feudal and agrarian society into an Industrialized, modern, collectivist society with full commitment from all Russians (and many non-Russians, as well). Collectivization included seizing of property from the bourgeoisie, and the act of executing this complex economic overtaking is enormously challenging.

However, after the Russian Revolution and before the arrival of the Nazis in WWII, Soviet Russia showed potential and made strides towards its Utopian promise. Literacy and educational goals emerged. As the now Soviet Socialist Republics collectivized, the outside world took notice and Americans looked largely at this collection of Soviet nation with curiosity. But After WWII, attitudes towards Communism in the United States soured, especially among the American political right (some enthusiasm towards Communism from the left remained). The Cold War emerged - a war of ideas between the United States (and the greater Western World) and the U.S.S.R. that also included the threat of nuclear war. Both nations had nuclear capabilities and the world watched with concern.

\* **Capitalism and Racism:** The United States, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, was practicing Capitalism while the Russian peasants were overthrowing their imperialist Czars. Peasants included disgruntled workers and soldiers, especially Bolsheviks. Capitalism has been the economic system of favor in the U.S. since its inception, but racism has also had a powerful presence in the States since its inception. Slavery is the epitome of class antagonism. In the beginning of the 20th century, nearly 130 years after the American Revolution, racism made the lives of African Americans extraordinarily difficult, long after the institution of slavery was abolished.

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, millions of African Americans moved north in what is known as the Great Migration. The first wave of the Great Migration took place from 1910 to 19140, historians say nearly 1.5 million African Americans fled north, and between 1940 and 1970, another 5 million migrated to cities like Detroit, Baltimore, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York. A byproduct of the Great Migration in New York City was the Harlem Renaissance, which began in 1920. Jobs, wages, living conditions, and a decidedly less violent level of racism spurred great creativity among the blossoming African American communities in northern cities.

\* **Racelessness in the U.S.S.R.:** That same interest in better living conditions, livable wages, less oppression, it drove a small number of African American workers, entertainers, writers, artists, activists and poets to the USSR, where the Soviets embraced a raceless society and vaunted American visitors as VIPs. A very impressive list of America's most beloved and respected writers, poets, and artists took interest in the USSR and accepted invitations to visit because it simply seemed great. A paid trip where you were put up in a five-star hotel near the Kremlin, a tour where you are greeted with adoration and respect, and get paid to do so by the Communist Party? Many Americans were intrigued.

\* **Claude McKay:** From Maxim Matusevich's "Black in the U.S.S.R.," the author writes of great Jamaican-American poet, Claude McKay's visit to Moscow:

The experiences of the acclaimed bard of the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay, were typical in that respect. Having arrived in Soviet Russia in late 1922, McKay immediately gained entrance to the higher echelons of the Soviet political and cultural elite. Embraced by his Russian friends as a representative of the "oppressed Negro race" he received truly royal treatment - participating in the celebration of the fifth anniversary of the October Revolution, delivering a special address on the "Negro Question" to a Comintern Congress, and even being offered an airplane ride over Petrograd. In several travel dispatches published in the African American press, McKay was effusive in his praise for the Russians' tolerance and goodwill, and, for years to come, memories of his "magic pilgrimage" to Russia would continue to excite his imagination, even when his admiration for the Soviet dogma had largely evaporated.

McKay would go on to renounce his interest in Socialist Russia, embracing Catholicism and working at the Harlem Friendship House, an organization of interracial apostolates. He emigrated to Chicago and taught at a Catholic organization there before developing health problems and passing of heart failure in 1948 at the age of 57. He was a prolific and celebrated

poet with six poetry collections, including greats like *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Harlem Shadows* (1922). He wrote another six fiction works, including standouts like *Banjo* in 1929 and *Banana Bottom* in 1933. He also wrote non-fiction, including some of his last works, like 1940's *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*.

\* **Langston Hughes** was another “rockstar” African American visitor to Russia, though he visited closer to WWII than McKay. 1932, a decade after McKay's exultant visit to Communist Russia, Hughes accepted an invitation to work with a band of actors, filmmakers, and artists on a film called *Black & White*, though the film would never actually get made. He was paid very well to wait around while the Communist bureaucrats decided how they wanted the film to look and sound to an international audience. But for about one year and two months, Hughes traveled Russia, the Crimea, and Soviet Republics on a nice stipend and minimal racist violence.

In his 1956 autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, in its “Moscow Movie” chapter, Hughes writes:

Russia, both before and after the Revolution, had a fondness for Negro artists, but after the Soviets came to power, not very many had been there. The reception accorded us twenty-two Negroes who came to make a movie - and whom the Muscovites took to be artists - could not have been more cordial had we been a Theatre Guild company starring the Lunts... But, while we were there, the twenty-two colored folks from Harlem were lionized to no end and at cultural gatherings we were always introduced as “representatives of the great Negro people.”

Hughes is considered to be one of the best American poets in our canon. His work is studied and celebrated across the country and his interest in Communist Russia is rarely discussed. He supported, but often fell short of committing to or working for, many Communist organizations in his writerly efforts before the arrival of WWII. He was questioned in what would be considered the McCarthy hearings and backed away from his associations with Socialist Russia in his waning years. Hughes was the author of over 20 poetry collections from 1926 to 1966 (Hughes passed in 1967 at the age of 66), including his landmark debut, *The Weary Blues*. He authored nearly a dozen novels and short story collections, several major non-fiction works, a dozen plays, and several wonderful works for children.

\* **Paul Robeson** would come to epitomize an artist whose career would be crushed by McCarthyism. Robeson's interest in the Soviet idealism of racelessness and how it could crush your career and momentum as an artist, it's a cautionary historical tale ripe for interpretation by middle schoolers. McKay and Hughes were able to avoid the vicious scrutiny that Robeson wouldn't be able to evade as easily simply due to time. Robeson's star was on the rise in the 1920s and 1930s when he was in his 20s and 30s. The incredible talent, mind, and activist for African Americans would become one of the most famous Black American artists in the world! Only, after WWII and the Cold War's onset, interest in and exploration of Communism grew dramatically, dangerously more unwelcome and Robeson would suffer the consequences - professionally and psychologically.

It is always shocking to me to learn of Robeson's talent, success, renown, notoriety, and fame, before and after his relationship with Communism. If you ask a typical middle schooler who Paul Robeson is, they would, for the most part, not have a clue. To best capture his might and power, I turn to Joseph Dorinson, author of the introduction to a collection of essays, *Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy*. He says "Paul Robeson is the greatest legend nobody knows. April 9, 1998, marked the 100th birthday of this brilliant, complex, athletic actor-singer-activist who was, arguably, the most prominent African American from the 1920s through the 1950s. He was the quintessential Renaissance man whose talents and achievements far transcended his first national arena, the football field." Robeson was a superstar football player at Rutgers in New Jersey, a star of Broadway and Hollywood, a touring Opera and folk singer, and a staunch advocate for the rights and dignity of the African American and acknowledging the scourge of Colonialism. Sadly, Robeson would spend the last decade of his life living a secluded existence with his sister in West Philadelphia, unable to use his talents after being labeled a Communist. Robeson passed in 1976 at the age of 77.

\* **U.S.S.R. Satellite States and Modern Russia:** After WWII, the American relationship with Moscow became one of Cold War enemies - an adversarial relationship that even included the threat of nuclear annihilation. Even as Communism became a dirty word, a dangerous accusation in many cases in the United States, Communism continued to spread to other parts of the world. There are several versions of functioning Communist nation-states in the world: China, North Korea, Laos, Cuba, and Vietnam. Some students may realize that they've heard of the Vietnam War but are not well-versed on the influence of Communism in the Vietnam War's origins, power, and complexity. The Soviet Russia that we know of, the Soviet Russia that existed largely until 1991 - two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, is no longer officially a Communist state.

A country of nearly 1.4 billion people, China is one of the largest countries in the world. China became a Communist nation in 1949 after the Chinese Communist Revolution, which installed the People's Republic of China. It is currently one of America's largest economic rivals. Over the course of several years in the late 1950s, the Cubans revolted against their government and, led by Fidel Castro, established a Communist state in 1959. Cuban-American political tensions have existed ever since and culminated in a dramatic nuclear war face-off during the administration of President John F. Kennedy with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

\* **McCarthyism** is the shortened version of the series of hearings led by United States Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin during the 1950s. It was an effort to expose communist infiltration of the United States. In 1952, he obtained chairmanship of the Committee on Government Operations of the Senate and of its Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations.

From a simplified Britannica [definition](#) of McCarthyism:

For the next two years he was constantly in the spotlight, investigating various government departments and questioning innumerable witnesses about their suspected communist affiliations...his colorful and cleverly presented accusations drove some persons out of their jobs and brought popular condemnation to others. [It] both reached



its peak and began its decline during the “McCarthy hearings”: 36 days of televised investigative hearings led by McCarthy in 1954.

McCarthyism and the Cold War may have turned out to be an appetizer to an entree of a contemporary conflict with Russia. As Russia continues its war on Ukraine, in the eyes of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Putin may be trying to reunite a historically skewed perspective of Russia’s borders and historic boundaries. As the United States sides with Ukraine, the legacies of Cold War feel reinvigorated. American politicians are currently arguing over whether or not the United States should fund weapons and share military support for Ukraine, and one of the 2024 Presidential candidates is campaigning on stopping Putin’s influence in Europe.

Communism, as a socioeconomic philosophy and practice, may not be something that very many contemporary American artists are exploring in their life and work. Or at least, artists operating in a capitalistic landscape of success (contemporary pop stars, for an example) rarely espouse Communist ideals, but they might question and criticise American capitalism and racism. But Socialism is an element of daily life that many middle schoolers can actually comprehend - Democratic Socialism is something that 12-year-olds can grasp and embrace. Social Security support for our country’s seniors, help for the poor and downtrodden, and subsidized medical care seems like a practice that our students wholeheartedly believe in. But state-mandated sharing of wages, resources, and life might not be.

Let’s debate: Can Communism work? At all? Why do dictators seem to ruin it? Why can’t Communist ideals work in American culture? Can we go further with our redistribution of wealth and wages?

### **Teaching Strategies**

The following plans are described in an attempt to streamline, chunk, and deliver content and engage discussion in a way that will deliver on the unit’s concepts and goals. This is not an exacting, precise, or exhaustive explanation or presentation of all the materials, techniques, visuals, or tools that may be used to execute the plans. SWBAT is an acronym used to shorten “Students will be able to” and IOT shortens “in order to.”

### **Classroom Activities**

#### ***Lesson #1: Communism, the Cold War, and McCarthyism***

##### ***Objectives:***

SWBAT explain the idea of Communism in its simplest terms and discuss its concepts IOT articulate a position for or against its practice in the United States or abroad

SWBAT connect their ideas of American history to the practices of Communism at home and abroad between WWI and 1991, including an understanding of the Cold War

##### ***Materials:***

Videos:

[Section #1]

NowThis. (2017, September 21). *Communism vs. Socialism: What's the difference?"* hosted by Jules Suzdaltsev. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrtdZ-LOXFw>

The Economist. (2018, May 4). *Was Karl Marx right?*. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMmDebW\\_OBI&t=38s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMmDebW_OBI&t=38s)

[Section #2]

Simple History. (2017, March 5). *The Russian Revolution (1917)*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOK1TMSyKcM>

History on Maps. (2022, July 9). *History of Russia in 5 Minutes Animation*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mONj9zjRjLQ&t=38s>

Prager U. (2018, August 13). *What was the Cold War?*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QopdZ7G8ww>

Handout for note-taking with definitions for Communism and Capitalism provided and Exit Ticket

Section of an interview transcript between NPR's Michel Martin and historian, author, and professor Dr. Robin Kelley, author of "Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression"

**Procedure:**

This 60-minute lesson would include:

- An introduction to new terms with definitions (entrance activity to take notes about concepts - a handout would have boxes for each clip), followed by watching videos where contemporary digital content creators expand on the ideas of the Communist Manifesto and an introduction to the concept of Capitalism
- More videos about the Bolshevik Revolution, the formation of the U.S.S.R., and the Cold War; all told, this is about 15 to 20 minutes of videos with opportunities to explain or discuss in between
- An exploration of the idea: Would Black Americans in Capitalist Jim Crow see Communism as an appealing and compelling idea? Read aloud of interview between Michel Martin and Robin Kelley - hopefully a popcorn read or by assigning roles. If no one volunteers, the teacher can read it aloud
- The formative assessment would be: "Why do you think some Black Americans could have been interested in Communism? Especially in the Jim Crow South? Write two paragraphs about what Communism is, how you would define it in relation to Capitalism in the United States, and why Black Americans in the Racist South might have been interested in the ideals of Karl Marx."

## ***Lesson #2: Langston Hughes and Claude McKay - Red Poets***

### ***Objectives:***

SWBAT understand and appreciate the life and legacies of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, especially as it's related to their interest in Communism IOT deepen understanding of the African American appeal of Communism

SWBAT explain why artistic giants like McKay and Hughes were drawn to the USSR and deepen their understanding of the Black American interest in Marxism

SWBAT interpret poetry with historical contextualizing IOT consider author's purpose, author's voice, tone, and theme in poetic expression

### ***Materials:***

Videos:

Reading Through History. (2015, July 4). *History Brief: The Great Migration*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ak1Uk8-3EE8>

Black History in Two Minutes. (2020, January 31). *The Harlem Renaissance*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gboEyrj02g>

New York Historical Society. (2023, May 2). *Angela Davis: Resisting the System*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9OnR6wjKTs>

AfroMarxist. (2017, June 11). *Angela Davis - Why I Am a Communist (1972 Interview)*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGQCzP-dBvg>

Biographies of McKay and Hughes:

Biographies: Poets.org [biography](#) of Claude McKay and Poets.org [biography](#) of Langston Hughes

Poems by McKay and Hughes: McKay's "[America](#)," "[If We Must Die](#)," and/or maybe "[The Lynching](#)"; Hughes's "[Lenin](#)" and "[Ballads of Lenin](#)," "[I, Too](#)," and maybe "[Cross](#)."

Handout or Google Form for Exit Ticket

### ***Procedure:***

This 60-minute lesson would include:

- An overview of the connection between the histories of the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance, and Black expatriatism; readings of brief biographies of McKay and Hughes with particular emphasis on their Communist interests
- The reading and rereading of a copy of at least one poem from each poet, preferably a lesser-known poem that pertains to economics, race, the Soviets, or racial equality (TBD)

- An Exit Ticket could be: “Do you think it’s weird that these two poets were interested in Communism? Or can you see why they were drawn to the USSR and Socialism? Does an affiliation with an ideology or political party influence an artist’s legacy, even the greats? Make a connection to a current artist whose work you admire. Think: Kanye.”

***Lesson #3: Paul Robeson - The Most Famous Man in the World (You’ve Never Heard Of)***

***Objectives:***

SWBAT gain a new understanding of a Black Icon for Black History Month that 7th graders are unlikely to be familiar with

SWBAT explain the life, accomplishments, legacy, and Paul Robeson IOT make sense of the arc of Communism and the Cold War’s effect on the United States

SWBAT express an understanding of McCarthyism, the Cold War, and blacklisting in the United States IOT deepen understanding of Black Activists like Robeson and Jackie Robinson’s politicism

SWBAT deepen understanding of the pervasiveness of racism that prevailed in the United States in both overt and subtle ways

***Materials:***

Videos:

[Section #1]

WHYY. (2022, February 5). *Meet Paul Robeson, Acclaimed Performer and Civil Rights Activist (You Oughta Know, 2022)*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlC HdNR-PCs>

Toronto International Film Festival. (2017, November 9). *Paul Robeson: The First Black Star*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN gutuM82rM&t=131s>

[Section #2]

PBS. (2019, December 26). *PBS American Experience: “Langston Hughes on Trial, McCarthyism.”* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96BoTnqyk mE&t=68s>

HistoryNet. (2020, February 10). *This Week in History: 1950 - McCarthyism and the Red Scare*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avSoY9vtlec>

TED-Ed. (2017, March 14). *What is McCarthyism? And How Did it Happen?* - Ellen Shrecker. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N35IugBYH04&t=250s>

Copy of speech about Paul Robeson to the Paul Robeson Society  
Handout or Google Form for Entrance and Exit Ticket

***Procedure:***

This 60-minute lesson would include:

- An introduction to Robeson’s vocal power and acting legacy with video; entrance ticket idea of asking “Have you heard of this man? What is his name and what is he famous for? Ever heard his name or seen a mural of him or heard of a school named after him or anything?” to test knowledge of this American giant of the stage and screen
- Overview of his creative works and biographical information with particular focus on his interest in the Soviet Union and visits, focusing on his commitment to racial equality and his final days in Philadelphia (brief aside to the Paul Robeson house);
- The transition between the Soviet experiment of the late 1920s and 1930s and the consequences that came as a result of the leadup to WWII and subsequent McCarthyism in the ‘50s - suddenly, we were in a Cold War with Russia and Communism became a dirty word in the United States
- Read the speech by historian and Robeson superfan highlighting the incredible accomplishments of Robeson’s career by read-aloud, popcorn read, independent read or small group reading
- Exit Ticket would ask: “Why did Paul Robeson end up spending his last years in obscurity in a house at 4951 Walnut Street? He was one of the most famous singers, actors, and activists of his time - do you think his legacy is well known? Did his interest in the USSR and Communism have much to do with it?”

***Lesson #4: Debrief, Debate, and Analyze: Review then Argue and Write***

***Objectives:***

SWBAT use cumulative knowledge from this unit to solidify some major concept understandings, discuss them with classmates IOT produce a thoughtful writing sample about Communism and Black Thought

SWBAT explain their understandings of Black Communism and McCarthyism to illuminate the careers of Black History Month icons like McKay, Hughes, and Robeson

SWBAT discuss, debate, and analyze ideas, arguments and claims in a productive classroom discussion IOT produce a thoughtful writing sample

***Materials:***

Videos:

Turner Classic Movies. (2022, September 30). *The Hollywood Blacklist, Explained*/Film 101. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Azvc6IacExI>

AlJazeera+. (2021, February 3). *Is Capitalism Anti-Black?* YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kd3\\_6RntTfs&t=14s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kd3_6RntTfs&t=14s)

Blooket or Kahoot! with key terms, historical figures, historical concepts, definitions, and dates to initiate recall of previous lessons

Graded and returned materials from Lessons #1, #2, and #3 (or at least, returned or kept from Lesson #1)

Handout or Google Form for Exit Ticket

### ***Procedure:***

This 60-minute lesson would include:

- A recall and review of key terms and ideas with a 7- or 8-minute Blooket to start things in a lively way: Return previous work with definitions and notes from previous lessons in the unit to refresh and to use as a resource for their debate and Exit Ticket
- Engage students in the idea of identifying as a Capitalist or a Communist - could they defend either? I would really stretch this and question their responses and ask them to respond to each other's ideas. Encourage students to use newly acquired vocabulary and to show their understanding of Communism and Capitalism through debate
- At least 20 minutes to write about which side they would choose in this hypothetical or rhetorical concept. "Would you be willing to explore the Communist Party if you were alive 100 years ago or would you be an avowed American Capitalist? Does it surprise you that Communists were blacklisted? Including Black Americans like Paul Robeson? Write two paragraphs detailing Communism's appeal to African Americans and the backlash that came after World War II and the beginnings of the Cold War."

## **Resources**

### **Book Chapters**

Blakely, A. (1986). "The Black 'Pilgrims,'" "The Negro in Soviet Art." In *Russia and the Negro* (pp. 75–162). essay, Howard University Press.

Duberman, M. (2021). Foreword by Jason Reynolds, "Nazis, Communists - and Hollywood," . In *Paul Robeson: No One Can Silence Me* ((Adapted for Young Adults), pp. xiii–100). essay, The New Press.

Foner, H., Dorinson, J., & Isaacs, S. (2002). "Foreword - Keynote Address from the 1998 Long Island University Paul Robeson Conference," "Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson: Athletes and Activists at Armageddon," and "Paul." In *Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy*. essay, McFarland & Company.

### **Interview**

Martin, M. (2010, February 16). "How 'Communism' Brought Racial Equality To The South" with Robin Kelley . *NPR*. other. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123771194>.

### **Magazine Articles**

Anania, B. (2021, November 6). "Langston hughes was a lifelong socialist." *Jacobin Magazine*.

Dreier, P. (2023, March 31). "The red scare took aim at black radicals like langston hughes." *Jacobin Magazine*.

### **Videos**

NowThis. (2017, September 21). *Communism vs. Socialism: What's the difference?"* hosted by Jules Suzdaltsev. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrtDZ-LOXFw>

PBS. (2019, December 26). *PBS American Experience: "Langston Hughes on Trial, McCarthyism."* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96BoTnqykME&t=68s>

The Economist . (2018, May 4). *Was Karl Marx right?*. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMmDebW\\_OBI&t=38s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMmDebW_OBI&t=38s)

WHYY. (2022, February 5). *Meet Paul Robeson, Acclaimed Performer and Civil Rights Activist (You Oughta Know, 2022)*. YouTube. [https://youtu.be/WIcHdNR-PCs?si=ZAW4WH0Fm6Q0g6\\_2](https://youtu.be/WIcHdNR-PCs?si=ZAW4WH0Fm6Q0g6_2)

## **Appendix on Implementing District and State Standards**

### **ELA Standards:**

CC.1.2.7.C [Reading an Informational Text]: Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text.

CC.1.2.7.L [Range of Reading]: Read and comprehend literary nonfiction and informational text on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.

CC.1.3.7.H [Integration of Knowledge and Ideas]: Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.

CC.1.4.7.A [Informative/Explanatory Writing]: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information clearly.

CC.1.4.7.H [Opinion/Argumentative Writing]: Introduce and state an opinion on a topic.

CC.1.4.7.I [Opinion/Argumentative Writing]: Acknowledge alternate or opposing claims and support claim with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic.

### **Social Studies Standards:**

Standard - 5.1.7.B [Principles and Documents of Government]: Identify the different types of government and the processes they use in making laws.

Standard - 5.3.7.J [How Government works]: Identify various types of governments.

Standard - 5.4.7.A [How International Relationships Function]: Identify how countries have varying interests.

Standard - 5.4.7.B [How International Relationships Function]: Describe how countries coexist in the world community.

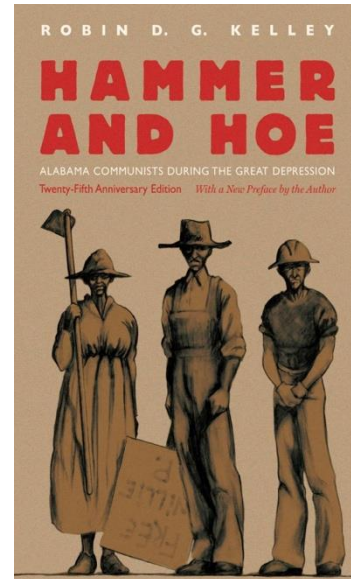
Standard - 6.2.7.A [Markets and Economic Systems]: Describe the interaction of consumers and producers of goods and services in the state and national economy.

Standard - 8.4.7.C [World History/Historical Analysis]: Differentiate how continuity and change have impacted world history: Belief systems and religions; Commerce and industry; Technology; Politics and government; Physical and human geography; and Social organizations.

## HANDOUTS:

**Conversation between Michel Martin and Robin D. G. Kelley from NPR:** *Hammer and Hoe* tells the story of how, during the 1930s and 40s, Communists took on Alabama's repressive, racist police state to fight for economic justice, civil and political rights, and racial equality.

*The Alabama Communist Party was made up of working people: devoutly religious and poor black laborers and sharecroppers, and a handful of whites, including unemployed industrial workers, housewives, youth, and renegade liberals. In this book, Robin D. G. Kelley reveals how the experiences and identities of these people from Alabama's farms, factories, mines, kitchens, and city streets shaped the Communist Party's tactics and unique political aims. The result was a remarkably resilient movement forged in a racist world that had little tolerance for radicals like Communists.*



**MARTIN:** So, how effective do you think the Alabama Communist Party was?

**Prof. KELLEY:** Well, I think it was very effective in some areas. One, even in training and organizing. Some of the most important organizers in steel, in iron were communists; who, after 1935, were some of the lead organizers in training and organizing, which really made a difference in workers lives in the 50s and 60s. The other thing is that there were many people who were trained in the Communist Party who went on to become Civil Rights activists. Asbury Howard, who was a radical (unintelligible) who went onto to play a significant role in Alabama's Civil Rights Movement.

And then, Rosa Parks. Was does Rosa Parks had to do with any of this? Well, some of her first political activities were around the Scottsboro case, you know? She never joined the party, but as a young woman, she and her husband, in fact, attended some of the meetings. Then the other area is, just in the rural areas - this may seem like a small thing, but imagine if you're picking cotton at basically 30 cents a day and you fight and fight and you can get your wages up to 50 cents or a dollar a day. It took about five years and a lot of bloodshed, but they were able to raise the wages as a result.

So, they may not be huge victories, but I know one thing, the infrastructure that was laid forward becomes the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, was laid in many ways, not entirely, by the Communist Party.



**MARTIN:** Why do you think this history isn't better known? I mean, these are not the names and the faces that you see on the calendars?

**Prof. KELLEY:** They are not. And part of it has to do with a long history and the Cold War, and the fact that we think of communist as these terrible horrendous people. But more importantly, if you think of them as somehow outside of American culture and history, when what I and others who have written on similar areas have argued, is that is very much native and home grown. I mean, the Communist Party in Alabama, they began their meetings with a prayer. These were Christians. These people believed in Jesus, in redemption. And they believed in armed self-defense, and they believed that Russia would come and save them if anything got to be really bad. It just made perfect sense to those who lived in that period.

**MARTIN:** What happened to the Communist Party in Alabama? How does it still exist - I guess, maybe it would be the question. I don't know. Are they still there? Is anybody still around?

**Prof. KELLEY:** They are sort of around actually, but not like they were. What happened to them? Two things. After 1935, the party decided to come above ground and build alliances with liberals and others who are not communists, but who are against Nazi Germany and Italy and that sort of thing. So, what ends up happening is that, you can form alliances with liberals in New York - you can't do that in Alabama because white liberals are not that friendly - southern liberals. And so, what they did was they gave up a lot of the militancy. They gave up their industrial base and other things for the sake of building alliance with people who don't want to form alliance with them.

And so they lost interest. And many of their main activists left the South and moved North. The other thing that happened was, Bull Connor, who was very active (unintelligible) becomes like the man in the 40s and 50s. And Bull Connor and his police force waged a war on the Communist Party in the middle 40s. By that time, the main organization was called the Southern Negro Youth Congress, which was not entirely communist, but it was a group of young black men and women who, in fact, prefigured SNCC, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And they had their last meeting in Birmingham in 1948 under enormous police repression and violence.

And that sort of spelled the end of them. And so by that time the Communist Party itself, on a national scale, was declining with the Cold War, and the Smith Act and other things which let people to go underground or go to jail. So, it was part of a national process of snuffing out the Community Party as a whole.

**MARTIN:** Hmm. So, what would you hope people would take away from all the work that you've done, documenting this history?

**Prof. KELLEY:** Well, first what I really emphasize is the fact that these were ordinary people, most of whom could not read or write, who were able to, on their own, form a very strong and productive movement that saw not just black people's problems, but all people's problems as connected. They saw joblessness and Civil Rights, and the right not be raped or lynched, self-protection - that all these things are part of one big struggle. And they really did succeed in

building an interracial movement. Even if the whites were in the minority, those whites were there with them. And that vision, that ordinary people can make change, was a legacy they left us.

Paul Robeson was born on April 9, 1898, in Princeton, New Jersey, the son of an escaped slave. He rose to heights unparalleled in the century in which he lived. Here are just some of his accomplishments:

He was hailed for more than three decades as one of the greatest singers and actors in the world, fluent in twelve languages and conversant with the cultures of Europe, Asia, and Africa.

He was twice winner of All-American football honors at Rutgers College, in 1918 and 1919. He also starred in baseball, basketball, and track, and earned twelve athletic letters in four sports.

Early in his career, he was recognized for his important contributions to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s as the first who made the Negro spiritual an accepted art form and for his performances in two plays by Eugene O'Neill, Americas foremost dramatist: *The Emperor Jones* and *All Gods Chillun' Got Wings*.

He was the recipient of honorary degrees from Rutgers College in 1932, from Hamilton College in 1940, from Morehouse College in 1943, and from Howard University in 1945.

In December, 1943, he led a delegation of African-American newspaper publishers that met with baseball commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis and with the top officials of all the major league baseball clubs, to urge the breaching of the color line in baseball, which paved the way for the historic breakthrough, three and a half years later, when Jackie Robinson was signed as the first African-American player in baseballs major leagues.

He received the Donaldson Award in 1944 for outstanding male actors for his performance in Shakespeare's *Othello*, which held the record as the longest running Shakespearean play on Broadway up to that time. It eclipsed the record held by Orson Welles' production of *Julius Caesar*.

He appeared in eleven feature films in Hollywood and England, including *Show Boat* and *The Emperor Jones*.

In November, 1939, he introduced on CBS Radio the "Ballad for Americans," which received such a tumultuous response that for a while, it possessed the status of a second national anthem. In 1940, the Ballad was sung at the conventions of the Democratic, Republican and Communist parties - and you can't get more universal than that!

During World War II, he became a national symbol of unity in the fight against fascism abroad and racism at home, giving benefit concerts for war relief agencies, touring war plants,

## A TRIBUTE TO PAUL ROBESON



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and speaking at war bond rallies. In 1945, while our armed forces were still segregated, he sang to U.S. troops in Europe as part of the first interracial USO-sponsored overseas show.

He also received the prestigious Spingarn Medal from the NAACP in 1945 for "his active concern for the rights of the common man of every race, color, religion and nationality."

He played a leading role in the major civil rights struggles of the 1940s: to end the crime of lynching, to eliminate the poll tax, and to fight against job discrimination, all of which laid the basis for the groundbreaking civil rights victories of the 1960s. In 1946, he led a delegation that met with President Harry Truman to demand passage of a federal anti-lynching law. To our shame, that year, there were a total of 54 lynchings perpetrated against African Americans, some of whom had just returned from fighting for their country against fascism. When Truman was asked to make a statement against lynching, he refused on the ground that it was not "politically opportune."

Robeson was also a firm and unwavering supporter of the American labor movement during the period of its greatest growth and influence in the 1930s and 1940s. He marched on picket lines, assisted in organizing drives, sang in union halls, and was awarded honorary lifetime memberships in more unions than any other public figure of his time. His speeches and writings played a decisive role in the successful campaign in 1940 of the United Automobile Workers to organize that bastion of the open shop: the Ford Motor Company.

He helped focus the attention of our nation and the world on the struggles of all colonial people for freedom. He founded and later chaired the Council on African Affairs where he worked tirelessly, along with his good friend, Alphaeus Hunton, in the cause of African freedom.

At the height of his career, he earned the highest income of any concert performer in the world and was probably the most internationally renowned American, second only, perhaps, to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was inducted in 1972 as the only African-American charter member of the National Theater Hall of Fame that is housed in New York City's Gershwin Theater.

He was inducted into the National College Football Hall of Fame in 1995, almost fifty years after it was established. It is something of a commentary that it took almost half a century to recognize the greatest college football player of his time.

And finally, in February, 1998, he was the recipient of one of the lifetime achievement awards from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, otherwise known as a lifetime "Grammy" Award.

A person with this almost incredible record of accomplishments became, in effect, a non-person as a result of a campaign of intimidation and harassment conducted by the FBI and other agents of our government that was only matched, some years later, by the attack on another great fighter for freedom - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Let me conclude by relating my own personal contact with Paul Robeson. In 1949, I was an officer of the International Fur and Leather Workers' Union, one of the unions that had bestowed honorary lifetime memberships on Robeson. That summer, he was invited to perform at our union's Fur Workers' Resort at White Lake in upstate New York. I was asked, and gladly agreed, to write a radio script that would be used to introduce him. I did so, and I shall always treasure his inscription on the first page of the script: "Thanks a million, Paul." A few weeks later, I was part of the cordon of World War II veterans assigned to protect him during the second Peekskill concert. We had to run a gauntlet of a jeering mob, armed with rocks and other missiles, while hundreds of state troopers stood by and did nothing. Because Mr. Guinier was a stately African-American, some in the mob mistook him for Robeson and our car was the object of a special venom.

I had one more link with Paul Robeson and that was through my late brother, Dr. Philip S. Foner, who was introduced to Robeson by Eslanda's mother, the daughter of Francis L. Cardozo, one of the leading figures of the much-maligned Reconstruction period. Together,

Robeson and Phil made tentative plans for him to record some of the speeches of Frederick Douglass, on whose biography my brother was working. That project never reached fruition, but it was carried through by another great African American, Ossie Davis.

In short, I am sure that these essays, along with other publications and events commemorating Robeson's centennial, will restore this giant figure to the recognition he so deserves.