

# The Jervis Forum

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### Review 169

Meredith Roman. *The Black Panthers and the Soviets: A Comparative History of Human Rights Movements*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. ISBN: 9781350436138.

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*New York Times* journalist Harrison Salisbury interviewed Soviet dissident Valery Chalidze in 1973, and the two discussed the emotions that citizens in each country experienced toward the police. For his part, Salisbury suggested that Americans had no reason to fear the police. Historian Meredith Roman uses this exchange to highlight the ways white Americans may have overlooked the negative experiences that many of their fellow citizens have had with the police and ways in which they did not see parallels between those fighting for human rights in the Soviet Union and the United States.

In this well organized and tightly argued book, Meredith Roman analyzes the impetus for, government repression of, and decline of the Black Panther Party in the United States and the dissident movement in the Soviet Union. Her comparison is innovative, bringing together two significant rights movements that are rarely considered together. Roman shows that the two movements arose along similar timelines and that the governments that were faced with their demands adopted comparable approaches to blunting their salience. At the time, these two groups did not recognize the transnational kinship that Roman seeks to demonstrate decades later.

Roman's objectives for the book include writing African Americans, and more specifically the Black Panther Party, into human rights history. One consequence of such efforts will be a broadening of the types of rights protected or advocated for in order to include greater attention to social and economic rights.

In terms of chronology, Roman periodizes the Soviet dissidence movement and the Black Panthers as launching in 1966, undergoing turning points in their purpose and support in 1968, and faced increasing repression from government actors in 1969 and 1970.<sup>1</sup> Roman shows that these two human rights

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<sup>1</sup> On Soviet dissidence, see Benjamin Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement* (Princeton University Press: 2024); Ludmilla Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent: Contemporary Movements for National*,

movements were motivated by similar philosophical underpinnings. Activists in the Soviet Union listened to their consciences in a fight for respect for civil rights. They achieved self-liberation or a feeling of freedom due to their activism and feared dying spiritually if they remained inert. The Black Panthers similarly focused on the rights that had been granted in the US Constitution, which were not being upheld. They also advocated for self-defense as a means to achieve those rights. In response to Soviet and American surveillance, Soviet dissidents and members of the Black Panthers espoused a commitment to living within the law and both offered aid to their allies who faced violence from the state. Roman acknowledges that the Black Panthers' commitment to self-defense "often led to armed standoffs if not shoot-outs with policy." (60)

Soviet dissidents and the Black Panthers adopted similar methods in order to advocate for greater protection of their rights. Each developed a publication that documented human rights abuses, and engaged in the practice of "information politics" to secure domestic and foreign attention and to mobilize allies in service of the cause.<sup>2</sup> In the Soviet Union, these activists published the *Chronicle of Current Events*, and in the United States, the Black Panthers published *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service*. The two publications often differed, however, in terms of the tone and the intended audience. The inclusion of images of or from each publication might have heightened the reader's appreciation of Roman's analysis.

Roman shows that two leaders, J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the United States, and the Yuri Andropov, head of the KGB, or Soviet secret service, employed similar measures to curb the activists' influence despite the fact that they operated in ostensibly opposed political systems.<sup>3</sup> Both agencies sought to limit the dissemination of the activists' flagship publications. Roman reveals that in several key instances, Soviet human rights activists used their deep knowledge of the law to fight back against government search and seizure. They also directly supported those who faced repression for their activism.

Government officials in both countries utilized the media to solidify narratives of criminality by the activists. Soviet agents confined healthy dissidents to psychiatric hospitals as a means of ensuring their silence. In the face of international outcry, Soviet officials increasingly expelled those who protested government practices. In the United States, FBI agents spread false information that successfully divided

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*Religious, and Human Rights* (Wesleyan University Press, 1985); and Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990). On the Black Panthers, see Sean L. Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism during the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2017); Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2013); Peniel E. Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 96:3 (December 2009): 751-776; and Donna Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Cornell University Press: 1998), 16.

<sup>3</sup> On Hoover, see Beverly Gage, *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (Viking, 2020). On the KGB's efforts, see Joshua Rubenstein and Alexander Gribanov, ed., *The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov* (Yale University Press, 2005); and Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (Basic Books, 1999).

different groups within the Black Panthers. Over time, Soviet and US operatives enjoyed a degree of success in neutralizing the rights activists. They were abetted in these efforts by journalists who depicted domestic activists as criminals and valorized those in their Cold War adversary's state.

For all of the rich material that Roman delivers in *The Black Panthers and the Soviets*, the book's title could be more precise in two respects. First, the author offers a comparison between the Black Panthers and Soviet dissidents rather than Soviet officials more broadly. Second, given the flourishing of work recently on foreign friends in the Soviet Union and communist China, the book might have explored the connections among Black American radicals, Soviet citizens, and Soviet authorities.<sup>4</sup> I recommend it as a possible avenue of further research because despite the depth of Roman's comparative history, I yearned for a transnational approach as a complement to the book's comparative method that would remove Soviet dissidents and Black Panthers from parallel tracks of analysis and bring them into direct conversation.

In that vein, the book might have provided more juxtapositions of American and Soviet conceptions of human rights activism and how US and Soviet officials ignored, for Cold War ends, the similarity between the claims of Soviet dissidents and the Black Panthers. It also devotes less attention to the contributions of women to the Black Panther Party than it does to Soviet dissidents such as Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Larisa Bogoraz. Overall, through her comparative approach, Roman challenges us to think about Soviet dissidents and the Black Panthers in new and productive ways.

**Sarah B. Snyder** teaches at American University's School of International Service and is the author of two award-winning books, *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2018) and *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). She is the executive editor, with Darren Dochuk, of *Modern American History* and founding editor, with Jay Sexton, of the *Global America* book series with Columbia University Press.

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<sup>4</sup> On the Soviet Union, see, for example, Tamara J. Walker, *Beyond the Shores: A History of African Americans Abroad* (Crown, 2023); Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (Rutgers University Press, 2008); Julia L. Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream* (University of Chicago Press, 2017); Yelena Khanga with Susan Jacoby, *Soul to Soul: A Black Russian Jewish Woman's Search for Her Roots* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1992); Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Liberator Press, 1978). On China, see, for example, Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003); Dayo F. Gore, "'A Common Rallying Call': Vicki Garvin in China and the Making of US Third World Solidarity Politics," in Keisha N. Blain and Tiffany M. Gill, eds. *To Turn the World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (University of Illinois Press, 2019); Anne-Marie Brady, "Red and Expert: China's 'Foreign Friends' in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, 1966-1969," in Woei Lien Chong, ed. *China's Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002); Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* (Duke University Press, 2015); and Gao Yunxiang, *Arise, Africa! Roar, China!* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021).