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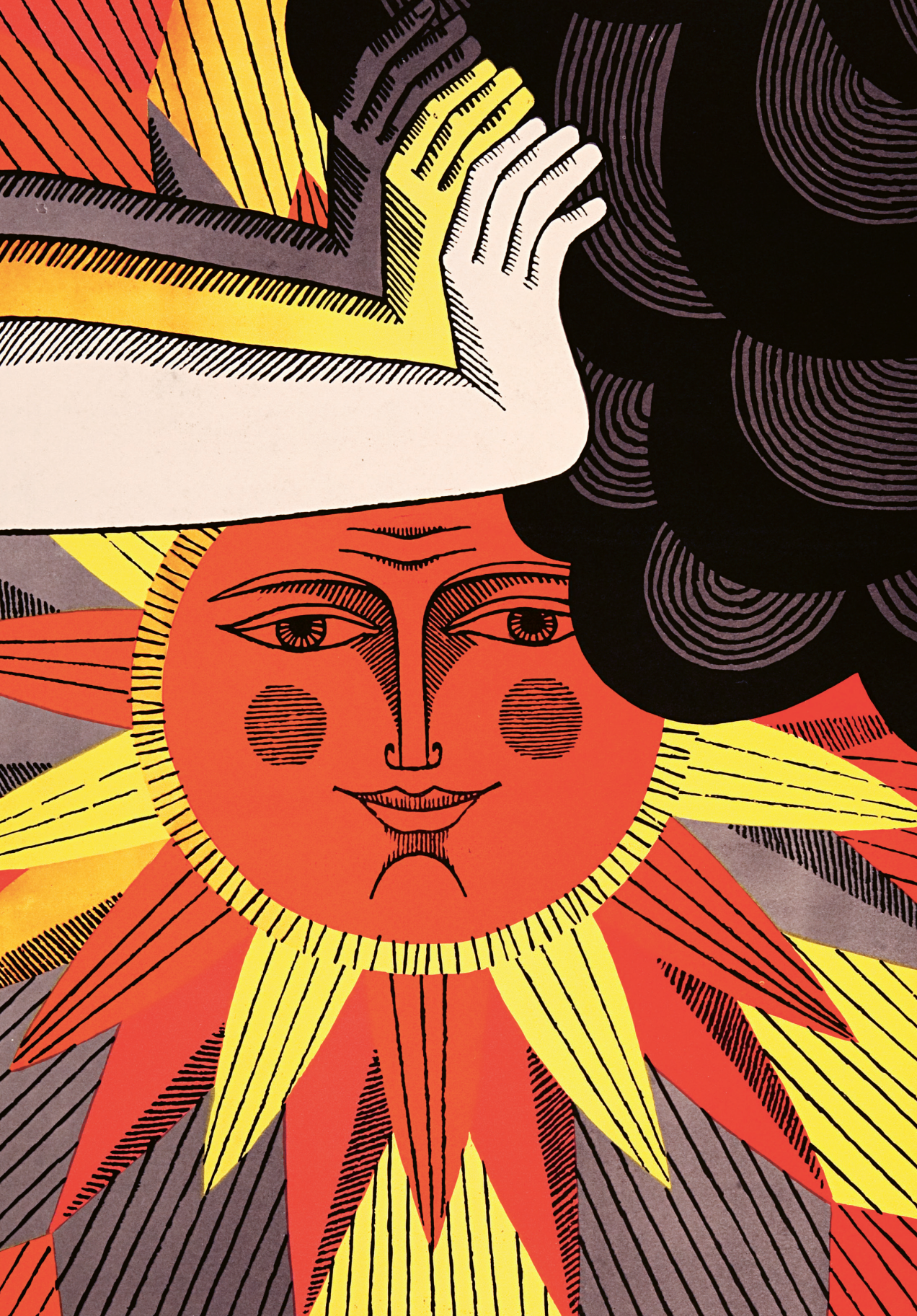
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The

Wayland Rudd

Exploring Racial Imaginaries in Soviet Visual Culture

Collection

The Wayland Rudd Collection: An Introduction

YEVGENIY FIKS

IN THE SUMMER OF 2010, I was reading about the connection between Soviet Socialist Realist aesthetics and W.E.B. Du Bois's writing.¹ I had recently completed a series of projects focused on the history of the Communist Party in the United States, through which I discovered overlaps in the histories of American Communists and African American communities. There had been many African Americans in the rank and file of the party. They were leaders and fellow travelers of the American Communist movement and its program of anti-racism and worker solidarity across the racial divide. This was a programmatic feature of activism for American communists, and integral to the work of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). Among them were such emblematic figures as Harry Haywood (1898–1985), the son of formerly enslaved people, who became a leading member of the CPUSA and a pioneering theoretician of the Black struggle; William L. Patterson (1891–1980) a leader in the CPUSA and head of the International Labor Defense, an organization that offered legal representation in cases involving issues of political or racial persecution; Claudia Jones (1915–1964), a feminist leader within the CPUSA; and the towering figure of W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) himself, who after decades of sympathizing with the Soviet experiment formally joined the CPUSA in 1961, at the age of 93.

As I learned this history, the intersections of Soviet, American Communist, and African American narratives became increasingly important in my art and research. I began to gather a collection of representations of Black Africans and African Americans in Soviet art and media—from sculpture, painting, movie stills, book illustrations, and posters, to advertisements, newspaper cartoons, postcards, postage stamps, product labels, and figurines—produced in the Soviet Union between the 1920s and the 1980s. With the help of my research associate Daria Atlas, I collected images from books, magazines, and what could be found online, and also purchased some physical objects. The collection now holds more than three hundred items and is approximately 80 percent digital-only and 20 percent physical.

1 Lily Wiatrowski Phillips, "W. E. B. Du Bois and Soviet Communism: *The Black Flame* as Socialist Realism," in *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (Duke UP, 1997), 257–281.

By 2012, about a year into the project, I decided to name this alternative archive of Soviet history in honor of Wayland Rudd (1900–1952), an African American actor who expatriated to the USSR in the 1930s. Rudd began his career at the Hedgerow Theater in Rose Valley, Pennsylvania, under the direction of Jasper Deeter, where he received critical acclaim for his performance in Eugene O’Neill’s *Emperor Jones*. Frustrated by the racism he experienced in the entertainment industry, Rudd moved to the Soviet Union, where he began a career in Soviet theater and film, working with the famed director Vsevolod Meyerhold, among others. He received a degree from the Theatrical Art Institute in Moscow and went on to work at the Stanislavski Opera and Drama Theater. Rudd died in Moscow in 1952.

During his twenty-year career in the Soviet Union, Rudd appeared in numerous films and theatrical performances, defining in many respects the image of the “Negro” for generations of Soviet people. He also frequently posed as a model for paintings, drawings, and propaganda posters. Although only a small section of the images assembled in the Wayland Rudd Collection are *of* Wayland Rudd, it is named in commemoration of his personal story as an American Soviet actor. That story provides an entry point for the complex intersection of twentieth century American and Soviet narratives.

By 2013, I felt that I could not unpack the multiple layers of this complex archive of Soviet history on my own. I had the tools offered by my post-Soviet, Russian, and Soviet Jewish experience and optics, but I needed to bring in African American and post-colonial perspectives. So, the Wayland Rudd Collection evolved into a collaborative project that would reflect upon and problematize the Soviet promise of universal equality through an investigation of representations of race in Soviet visual culture. The project now consists of the collection itself as well as contemporary artworks, several related salons, events, and installations, and the commissioned essays gathered in this volume. The book includes a sampling from the larger archive focused on media images that would have been widely disseminated through print in their time. (The essays refer to images in the Collection by their “WRC” number, and most of those referenced can be found in full color in the index at the end of the book.)

The body of work by contemporary artists, writers, and scholars who took up my invitation to respond to the Collection—through this book, and through the earlier exhibits²—brings to light contradictory aspects in the Communist promise of

2 The Wayland Rudd Collection has been presented in 2014 at Winkleman Gallery in New York City and at First Floor Gallery in Harare, Zimbabwe. In 2016–2017, the archival part of the WRC (without contemporary artworks), was shown in several group exhibitions, including “RED AFRICA: Things Fall Apart” at Calvert 22 Gallery, London, and “Russian Revolution: A Contested Legacy,” International Print Center New York, New York (curated by Masha Chlenova), as well as shows at Iwalewahaus (Bayreuth, Germany), Galeria Avenida da Índia (Lisbon), and Galeria Centralis, Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives (Budapest) in an exhibit curated by Mark Nash.

internationalism. The participatory aspect of this project endows it with personal and contemporary dimensions, offering a foothold with which to approach this dense historical legacy. It is my hope that this book—and the larger project which it frames and culminates—can also serve as a lens through which to analyze the rise of xenophobia and racism in Russia and other post-Soviet spaces.

The majority of the items and images in the Collection were produced by Soviet artists commissioned by the Soviet state over four distinct time periods. The 1920s are represented by dynamic compositions that make use of avant-garde and constructivist styles, and also by commercial advertisements, many of which were produced for Western firms during the “New Economic Policy.” These advertisements maintained the stereotypical, racist depictions of Black people that were common in Western advertising at the time. The 1930s to 1950s are represented largely by more visually static, “arrested” yet more ideologically purist Stalinist imagery; some of the earlier work of this period employs experimental photo-montage methods. Works from the 1960s display a return to greater flexibility in formal exploration of color and composition, echoing the period’s enthusiastic Communist ideological renewal. The images from the “stagnation” era of the 1970s and 1980s show greater variety in terms of visual style, with ideological rhetoric appearing to take the back seat in relation to formal artistic exploration and the fragmentation of “Soviet” style.

As an image archive, the Collection presents us with a mixed bag of ideological tools used for constructing both identity and otherness—a collage of internationalism, solidarity, humanism, communism, exoticism, racism, and hypocrisy. Yet, however politically motivated, muddled, and at times uninformed the origins and production of these images might have been, they offer a strikingly uncompromising and consistent statement against racial oppression.

The political media in the Wayland Rudd Collection also suggests that militant anti-racism in the twentieth century was an international phenomenon which transcended internal, national conversations. American racism and colonialism in Africa were consistently and militantly called out by the Soviets as an international issue, putting American racism, as well as European colonialism and South African apartheid, in the glaring spotlight of the World stage.

Since 2014, the year of the project’s two exhibitions, historical narratives that seemed unassailable—such as the stability of the neoliberal “end of history,” the tacit American victory in the Cold War, and any progress of the United States in the area of racial equality—have been put in question. The Russian-Ukrainian military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the Russiagate controversy during and after the US presidential campaign of 2016, and the war in Syria, among other conflicts, have led to a situation some have called

a hybrid Cold War 2.0 that sets different factions of American and Russian societies in opposition. The world has witnessed a level of geopolitical conflict unseen for decades, including between Russia and the West, the refugee crisis, friction within the European Union, political and religious radicalization, and a rise of nationalist-leaning populism around the globe. In the summer of 2020, as the book was nearing completion, Black Lives Matter protests in the US and internationally moved many of the contributors to revise their essays to more explicitly address the moment, while also pushing us to define more clearly the book's conceptual framing.

What can a book on Soviet representations of race in visual culture and propaganda contribute to the understanding of our times? Why should the American public care about what the Soviet state thought of American racial inequality or colonialism in Africa?

In 2013, poet Rashidah Ismaili invited me to present the Wayland Rudd Collection at her "Salon d'Afrique" in Harlem. The audience consisted mostly of the African American intelligentsia of an older generation. I presented the images and shared my conflicted feelings. I spoke of how I wanted to believe these images and these artists, but could not let Soviet hypocrisy in the treatment of its own Soviet national minorities go unremarked. This is a particularly pertinent issue for me as a Soviet Jew. Nor could I close my eyes to the likely opportunism of Soviet artists who were generously compensated by the state for creating this anti-racist propaganda. As I expressed my relationship to these images, the Soviet believer in me was at odds with both the Soviet Jew in me and with the distrustful post-Soviet in me. In the audience that evening, there was an older African American gentleman—a photographer, I believe—who commented after I spoke. "It doesn't matter," he said, "*who* produced these images and *how*. It does not matter if the Soviets were hypocritical. And it does not matter if the artists who made these images were well paid. Good for them! These images were strong and dignified and when we saw them in the 1960s in Harlem they meant a lot to us. They meant a lot to us *here*."



FIG. 1

The Wayland Rudd Collection

ONE OF THE IMAGES in the collection assembled by Yevgeniy Fiks is a poster depicting a Black man holding a rifle in his right hand. The shackle on his wrist trails behind it the links of a broken chain (WRC-104, FIG. 1).⁴ It is a terrifying image for those who demand passive blackness. The gun—a weapon of death—reminds of the hypocrisy of a country in which white supremacists walk with weapons in the open under the protection of the Second Amendment, while police shoot people of African descent at the mere suspicion of possessing a gun. The right to bear arms doesn't apply to people of the night. For them, there is the problem of illicit appearance. Their evidence of criminality is the problem of their appearance, which, as Du Bois observed more than a century ago,⁵ amounts to being considered problems instead of people who face problems. Viewed as a problem, the danger the unshackled figure poses isn't actually the gun but the broken chain. It is what no doubt enables him to secure his gun. Note as well his face. His mouth is open, calling to brothers and sisters behind him as he charges forward, and coherent with the stylistics of Soviet art, where heroic workers rush forth into a progressive future. Such images are strong, resolute, and courageous to the point of caricature. Human beings,

4 For complete information on images with WRC numbers, including translations of slogans, titles, and artist credits, please see the Index of Selected Images from the Wayland Rudd Collection at the back of the book.

5 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2008), Originally published in 1903.

after all, always suffer ambivalence, and courage without fear loses its meaning and could become rash. Yet there is a different resonance with a Black figure. Slave revolts, we should remember, were against a world of near-global enslavement. They were fought under circumstances of seemingly impossible odds, and those women and men had no way of knowing the outcome of their actions. They fought out of commitment to things greater than themselves, under circumstances that assured their demise. As many of us know today, they didn't get to the Promised Land, but they enabled many of us to see a better, albeit imperfect, one.

In that better place which is democracy, one expects to see multiracial organization. The worker, understood as a member of a multiracial coalition, is evident in the group portrait of East Asian, Arabic, African, and European women and men marching hand in hand (WRC-023, FIG. 2). The blond white man, clad in white clothing, suggests that European-romanticized Aryanism didn't entirely lose sway. There are so many subtleties here. The white woman and East Asian man are both looking at the blond man who is looking forward. There are only a few others looking forward, all of whom stand behind him: a Black (possibly African), an Arab, another blond white man, and a possible Latin American. The eyes of all the women are upon the blond man at the head. This gendered element brings to the fore an additional dimension to the intersection of race and class, since neither can be lived without gender or sexuality.

We come to an important problem that affects political art and much political thought: the view that somewhere out there is a group of people who, by virtue of their identity, get "it"—whatever "it" is—right, and that the affirmation of that group or individuals is marked by the size of the crowd they attract. Follow them and the overwhelming masses will find the way. These are difficult fallacies to overcome. They lead to idolatrous investments in charismatic leaders and a search for moral purity that collapses into moralism. In the images collected here, as moving as they may be, there also resides a kernel of what plagues left-wing movements. The search for moral purity elides political reality, and the

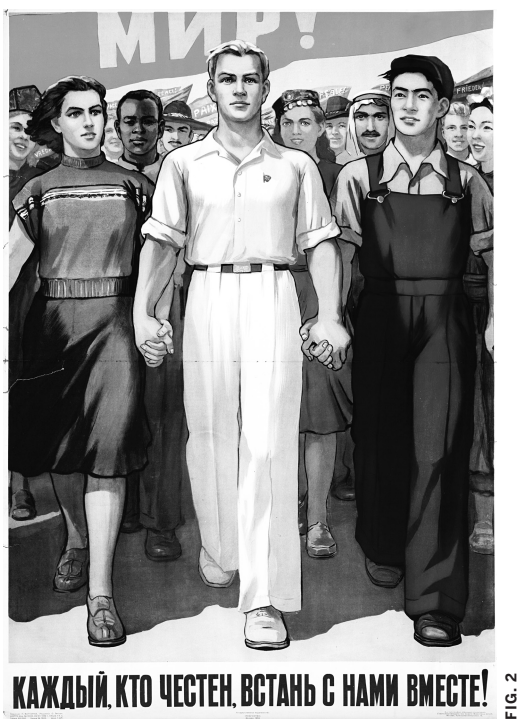


FIG. 2