

## FEATURED REVIEWS

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***Chronicle of the Left Hand: An American Black Family's Story from Slavery to Russia's Hollywood.*** By James Lloydovich Patterson. Trans. Jennifer E. Sunseri. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2022. x, 178 pp. Notes. Photographs, \$24.00, Paper.  
doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.176

In the 1920s and 30s, hundreds of Black Americans decided to try out the Soviet experiment. Frustrated by endless impediments to the pursuit of happiness in the US, they were attracted to the Soviets' promise of a non-racial society. The 1920s impulse was to learn tools to help make their home societies more equitable. The 1930s impulse was spurred by the Great Depression and an exposure to politicization in urban workplaces. For many, the promise of "going North" had proved short-lived. Even those with special skills were denied the opportunity to use them. Blacks were relegated to servile jobs. And, with the Depression, limited jobs were now taken by desperate white workers. Conversely, the Soviets accepted people of goodwill who would help construct their new society—no matter their color. In the early 1930s, these Black pioneers, together with thousands of white workers, signed one- to three-year contracts to work in the Soviet Union. In an interesting contradiction of capitalism and opportunism, some of the biggest companies that had closed plants in the US such as Ford, DuPont, and General Electric, were opening projects in the USSR.<sup>1</sup> Even the US government seemed to turn a blind-eye to this recruiting, probably considering that the Soviets would syphon off the most discontented workers. The Soviets opened bank accounts in major US cities like New York, and workers were able to deposit one-half of their salaries there for their families. Black workers also looked forward to putting their skills to work in a country that welcomed them. James Patterson's father, Lloyd, and his paternal grandmother, Margaret Glascoe, took up the opportunity. His grandmother stayed a few years, but his father went, married, and had three sons, never returning to the US.<sup>2</sup>

*Chronicle of the Left Hand* follows Margaret Glascoe and her ancestors from slavery in the US, through the 1930s, and then the Lloyd Patterson branch in the USSR from the 1930s into the mid-1990s. The core, Glascoe's memoir, was originally published in 1937 as *Dvoinoe iarmo* [Double Yoke], after she was in the Soviet Union as a shock worker in an auto parts plant. The title referenced her family's struggles under the double yoke of racism and economic oppression in the US (10). The manuscript was reprised almost thirty years later, in the 1960s, when James Patterson published it under his name and title, *Chronicle of the Left Hand*. With commentary and poetry, he presented it in his

1. Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

2. James, Lloyd Jr., and Tom. Lloyd Jr. died prematurely in an auto accident in 1960. Tom, a retired TV cameraman, still lives in Russia.

portfolio for admission into the prestigious Soviet Writers' Union. It appears now, in 2022, as an English translation of that 1964 edition and subtitled, *An American Black Family's Story From Slavery to Russia's Hollywood*. Included are the last letters from James Patterson's father, photos, an introduction to the publication's English-language provenance by Amy Ballard, foreword by Allison Blakely, and essay by Rimgaila Salys.<sup>3</sup> These pieces offer much-needed context.

Glascoc's memoir is difficult. We witness the unrelenting travails of a Black family navigating the privations of sharecropping and odd jobs at the hands of a merciless South. We see resilience and determination, but the odds seem so resolutely stacked against this family through the generations, we wonder how they find the strength. Yet, they do. Arriving in New York in the 1920s, Glascoe eventually finds solidarity with communist comrades: "I heard ideas that touched me to my core. . . . (94)." As her political sensitivities grew, so did her impatience in organizing and for going to the Soviet Union, "I kept trying to get them to . . . feel the same electrifying light that had changed my perception of the future. . . (96)." ". . . I asked my comrades and the organization to help me and they promised they would (97)." Glascoe's politicization also inspired her son who, after great effort, had managed to enroll in college in Virginia, "You've probably heard about the strike. . . we're protesting against the [Hampton] administration's recent refusal to hire Black teachers (91)." Patterson's college career abruptly ended in his senior year, but he found a life line when he joined a group being organized to make a film in the Soviet Union (93). Glascoe was thrilled, "My son discovered a new homeland (97)." Three years later, in 1935, she managed to go as well. She reflected, "Having lived in the Soviet Union for two years, I'd grown accustomed to my independence. I'd become a new person (101)."

James Lloydovich Patterson's story is the other end of the family continuum and the subsequent sections of the English edition focus on this. Glascoe's son, Lloyd, remained when the majority of the abortive "Black and White" film project group returned to the US later in 1932.<sup>4</sup> He was known in the theatre and for broadcasts. But his life and contributions were cut short in 1942. It was Glascoe's grandson, James, who would reap the full rewards of hers and her son's sacrifices. Tapped as a three-year-old to act in the 1936 film *Tsirk* (Circus)," James "Jimmy" Patterson's fame shaped the rest of his life. He was probably selected because his parents worked in the theatre community and their mixed-race family was already being held up as a prime example of Soviet internationalism. Noted Salys, "Lloyd and Vera [Lloyd's Russian wife]. . . were a poster couple for the Soviet government's policy of racial

3. Amy Ballard, Emerita Senior Historic Preservation Specialist with the Smithsonian Museum; Dr. Allison Blakely, Professor Emeritus of European and Comparative History from Boston University; and Dr. Rimgaila Salys, Professor Emerita of Russian Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder.

4. The "Black and White" film project was dropped by the Soviets when its anti-racist stance appeared to threaten the growing US-Russian development projects.

tolerance (116).” The film itself was to be the “cinematic ideal of racial tolerance under High Stalinism (120).” Jimmy played a mixed-race child whose white American mother had been persecuted for having given birth to him, but who was later adopted, along with the child, by a Russian circus troupe. People recognized Patterson long after childhood, “[He] gave poetry readings all over the USSR . . . but they really wanted him to tell stories about the filming of *Circus*. . . (124).” Even Premier Stalin knew of him: “Stalin recognized James marching with Nakhimov cadets and pointed to him (124).” “[This] protected him from everyday racism and provided him with the opportunity for self-actualization . . . [and] a successful literary career (125).” Adds Allison Blakely, “The content of [Chronicle] probably helped ensure their safety in a period when even false whispers might lead to government agents paying . . . a visit (11).” Patterson, as well as his father and grandmother, willingly served as examples of Soviet validation in opposition to denigrating US policies. And, in the 1970s, Patterson frequently traveled with the Soviet Friendship societies sent to African countries.

But, with the collapse of the USSR in the late 1980s, anti-racism was pushed aside. In post-Soviet Russia, there was no room for what Salys calls “establishment intellectuals (20)” who embodied aspects of this commitment. Patterson and his mother left Russia in 1995 to build a new life in the US, where they not only faced linguistic and cultural differences, but also US racism. We have no accounts of Margaret Glascoe’s experiences when she returned to the US in the late 1930s, but she, too, must have chafed at the realization of being Black and back in the US.

This work relates to the current discussions on race in Russian and Slavic Studies. It provides a backdrop to some of the simmering disappointment that has surfaced with the horrific killings of Black people in recent years. The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others, over the past three years brought thousands of young—and not-so young—people out in the streets in the US and abroad. In announcing “Black Lives Matter,” they have called for racial justice in our society at large and in our institutions. Many of these protestors have been our students. Many of us in Academe have begun to reflect on our roles in maintaining the status quo and how, in our cloistered settings, we have perpetuated the divides in our society. How can we address questions of race and ethnicity in our areas of study to help our students “see” and begin to understand the impact of marginalization? What can we do to help our students appreciate the great wealth inherent in diverse experiences and perspectives? Finally, what can our field do to embrace rather than discourage the work of diverse students and scholars?

Slavic Studies need stories such as *Chronicle of the Left Hand* to develop a more nuanced understanding of the Soviet experiment’s appeal to Blacks and other people of color, and how the allure of what Blakeley terms, a “Soviet culture at the climax of its ideological dream phase . . . (11)” inspired a number of marginalized people to become agents of their own destinies.

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