

To be free . . . that dream which we have held so long in our hearts is today the destiny that we hold in our hands.

Raising funds for the Republican defenders Robeson said: "The artist must elect to fight for Freedom or for Slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative. The history of this era is characterized by the degradation of my people—dispoiled of their lands, their culture destroyed, denied equal protection of the law, and deprived of their rightful place in respect to their fellows."

"Not through blind faith or coercion, but conscious of my course, I take my place with you in unalterable support of the lawful government of Spain, duly and regularly chosen by its sons and daughters."

He went to Spain in 1938, and it was a turning point in his life. "There I saw that it was the working men and women of Spain who were heroically giving 'their last full measure of devotion' to the cause of democracy in that bloody conflict, and that it was the upper class—the landed gentry, the bankers and industrialists—who had unleashed the fascist beast on their own people."

There he sang for the workers who had come from other countries. 'My heart was filled with admiration and love for these white Americans, and there was a sense of great pride in my own people when I saw there were Negroes, too, in the ranks of the Lincoln men in Spain.'

Returning to London he worked with the Labor Party and learned about the hardships of the workers in the cotton mills of Manchester and the mines of Wales. "The Welsh miners, and other workers I met throughout England and Scotland, made it clear that there was a closer bond between us than the general struggle to preserve democracy from its fascist foes. At the heart of that conflict, they pointed out, was a class division, and although I was famous and wealthy, the fact was I came from a working-class people like themselves and therefore, they said, my place was with them in the ranks of Labor."

Return to the United States

In the years before World War II Robeson toured western Europe, his concerts becoming massive rallies against Nazism. In 1939, he, his wife, and their son Paul, returned to the United States.

"Having helped on many fronts, I feel that it is now time for me to return to the place of my origin—to those roots which, though embedded in Negro life, are essentially American and are so regarded by the people of most other countries."

Soon after he returned he sang "Ballad for Americans"—an eleven-minute ballad—on CBS. An immediate hit, a recording sold 30,000 copies in the first year. During the war years Robeson performed to enormous crowds throughout the nation, lent his talents to the war effort, and was the first major artist to perform in prisons. He joined Dr. W.E.B. DuBois as co-chairman of the Council on African Affairs—dedicated to African liberation.

From 1942 to 1945 he played "Othello" in the U.S. and set a record run on Broadway.

"Shakespeare's play has a deep social meaning today," he said. "Shakespeare saw his era in human terms, an era of change from feudal to higher forms of social relationships. In Othello, he anticipated the rape of Africa and some of the subsequent social problems."

Robeson's Othello was seen by more than half a million people; he reached the peak of his profession and was hailed as a model for America's youth.

Robeson refused to let his public acceptance as an artist make him forget the suffering of his people. "I refuse to let my personal success, as part of a fraction of one percent of the Negro people, to explain away the injustices



Workers' concert on Oakland dock, 1942

to fourteen million of my people; because with all the energy at my command, I fight for the right of the Negro people and other oppressed labor-driven Americans to have decent homes, decent jobs, and the dignity that belongs to every human being!"

Official Harassment

Following the end of World War II the social and political atmosphere began to change. The philosophy of the New Deal became the philosophy and the reality of the cold war.

Black soldiers returning from the war found a wave of lynchings and beatings sweeping the nation.

Paul Robeson was at the peak of his career—he was warmly welcomed and acclaimed during concert tours throughout the North—he never would appear where audiences were segregated.

In the fall of 1946, Robeson met with President Harry Truman to ask his help in curbing lynching. It was a stormy session with Robeson saying that if the President didn't do something "Negroes would." Truman interpreted this as a threat. When Robeson left the meeting he was barraged by a hostile press asking, "Are you a communist?" "I label myself violently anti-fascist," he answered.

Another reporter asked if he believed in turning the other cheek. "If someone hit me on one cheek I'd tear his head off before he could hit me on the other one," he replied.

Less than a month later Robeson was subpoenaed by the California Legislative committee on Un-American Activities, the "Tenney Committee." Battered with questions about his political beliefs, Robeson said he was not and had never been a member of the Communist Party. He refused to agree to the Committee's position that communism was a threat to the nation or to discuss his associates.



Civil Rights Congress pickets White House, 1948

"Fight no one! Fight for peace, for jobs, good wages, and shorter hours, for the right to vote in the South—for the futures of your children. That is the road to real emancipation at the dawning of the second half of the 20th century."



With workers and union leaders, Poland, 1949

Carter Goodwin Woodson (1875-1950)

Born in Canton, Virginia, educated at Berea College, Kentucky, he earned his B.A. in 1907 and his M.A., from the University of Chicago, in 1908. After receiving his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1912, he became a college professor and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Howard University, in 1921. In 1910 he organized the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. He initiated the Annual February observance of Negro History Week in 1926, and wrote and published 16 outstanding books on Black History. He received the Spingarn Medal in 1926.



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ONE STOP SHOPPING CENTERS