

A Cold War Cold Case: What Huldah Clark Can Teach Us about Teaching Soviet History

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In July 2020, I stumbled upon a remarkable photograph from 1961. It featured a Black American teenager named Huldah Clark who had recently arrived in Moscow to study on a scholarship directly offered to her by Nikita Khrushchev. Surrounded by white Soviet schoolgirls, Clark seemed to offer a cautious smile.¹ Who was Huldah Clark? What might her story reveal to us about race, Soviet history, and the Cold War?

In pursuit of answers to these questions, I conducted research constrained by the working conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. I scoured electronic databases and burned my eyes reading digital newsprint. I discovered a Cold War cold case that speaks powerfully to the ongoing struggle for racial justice and equality in the United States and especially to today’s Black Lives Matter movement. Huldah Clark’s story highlights how racial politics spilled over the Iron Curtain during the Cold War in sometimes unpredictable ways. It also shows how ordinary Black Americans found hope and even tangible support in Khrushchev’s Soviet Union as they struggled for civil rights at home and sought avenues for asserting Black power and anti-racist protest on the global stage.

The historiography on Black Americans who sojourned to the Soviet Union in search of the racial equality that the Bolsheviks promised has focused largely on the interwar period.² Scholars have suggested that in the late 1930s, the Soviet Union scaled back its antiracist messaging and its power to inspire American Blacks withered—at least until US racism became a Cold War focal point.³ Scholarship investigating Soviet efforts during the Cold War to demonstrate its anti-racist, anti-colonial bona fides in its cultivation of

1. “Black Youth Attending Russian School,” at gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/huldah-clark-the-14-year-old-negro-girl-from-newark-n-j-who-news-photo/515025336 (accessed April 28, 2021).

2. Allison Blakely, “Foreword: Contested Blackness in Red Russia,” *The Russian Review* 75 (July 2016): 359–67; Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington, D.C., 1986), chapters 7–8; Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2008); Woodford McClellan, “Africans and Black Americans in the Comintern Schools, 1925–1934,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 371–90; Maxim Matusevich, “Black in the USSR,” *Transition*, no. 100 (2008): 56–75; and Meredith L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928–1937* (Lincoln, NE, 2012). Kate A. Baldwin has argued that scholars must “interrogate the continued attraction of Soviet internationalism for African Americans through and beyond World War II.” See her *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963* (Durham, NC, 2002), 7.

3. Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, chapters 10–12; Maxim Matusevich, “Harlem Globe-Trotters’ Black Sojourners in Stalin’s Soviet Union,” in Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, ed., *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters* (Baltimore, 2010), especially 232–237; and Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow*.

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inter-racial transnational relationships has concentrated on African students who studied in the USSR.⁴ Despite its own homegrown racism, the USSR still served paradoxically as a beacon of antiracism for many abroad.⁵ The Cold War case of Huldah Clark shows how the avowed Soviet commitment to racial equality and global anti-racism still had the power to inspire ordinary Black Americans in their struggle against Jim Crow and in their global pursuit of Black liberation.

This article reconstructs the forgotten story of Huldah Clark—to the extent that it can be reconstructed given current research limitations. Using a source base comprised primarily of American press accounts, I will explain how two Black communists from Newark, New Jersey met with Khrushchev during his visit to the UN in 1960 and how this fateful encounter resulted in Huldah Clark's scandalous Cold War study abroad in Moscow. Huldah Clark's story offers an opportunity to bring Black Lives Matter into our classrooms when we teach Soviet history, American history, and the global history of the Cold War. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021 should remind us of the urgent need to fight against the white supremacy that has undergirded and undermined US democracy since its founding, no less than served as a hideous pretext for assaulting Black lives and bodies. Scholars of Russian and Soviet history have an important contribution to make to this struggle. White supremacy in the United States has never been solely a domestic concern. Especially as the United States began to multiply its efforts to model and export liberal democracy abroad during the Cold War, the white supremacy at the heart of American history, society, and culture became a geopolitical flashpoint—a measure of American hypocrisy and democratic failure. As the United States and the Soviet Union competed for the world's hearts and minds during the Cold War, policymakers and ordinary citizens on both sides of the Iron Curtain recognized the global significance of American racism.⁶ Revisiting how and why Huldah Clark's fate dramatically intersected with the Soviet Union's invites exploration of the complexities of

4. Blakely, *Russia and the Negro*, 129–141; Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, chapter 12; Julie Hessler, "Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics, and the Cold War," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 47, no. 1/2 (January–June 2006): 33–63; Constantin Katsakioris, "Burden or Allies?: Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 539–67; Maxim Matusevich, "An Exotic Subversive: Africa, Africans, and the Soviet Everyday," *Race and Class* 49, no. 4 (April 2008): 57–81; and Anika Walke, "Was Soviet Internationalism Anti-Racist? Toward a History of Foreign Others in the USSR," in David Rainbow, ed., *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context* (Montreal, 2019), 284–311.

5. See especially Alaina Lemon, *Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Postsocialism* (Durham, NC, 2000); Lemon, "Without a 'Concept'? Race as Discursive Practice," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 54–61; Brigid O'Keeffe, "The Racialization of Soviet Gypsies: Roma, Nationality Politics, and Socialist Transformation in Stalin's Soviet Union," in Rainbow, ed., *Ideologies of Race*, 132–59; and Jeff Sahadeo, *Voices from the Soviet Edge: Southern Migrants in Leningrad and Moscow* (Ithaca, NY, 2019).

6. See, for example, Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001) and Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2002).

Cold War racial politics and how ordinary people mobilized the superpowers' competing slogans in creative ways. In Clark's story, we can also recognize the American traditions of white supremacy, racist policing, and school segregation that still today threaten, demean, and destroy Black lives no less than make a mockery of the professed American ideals of freedom and democracy.

A Fateful Meeting with Khrushchev

William Clark, a factory worker in Newark, New Jersey, wanted better for his children than what he called "the Jim Crow type school within the Negro ghetto."⁷ He wanted his children to thrive in a United States free of "Jim Crowism and lynching."⁸ In October 1960, he chatted with Khrushchev in New York City about these dreams for his children.

In advance of Khrushchev's visit to the United Nations in October 1960, Clark sent a letter inviting Khrushchev to his home and imploring him to "liberate all dark-skinned people in the world."⁹ This prompted a Soviet invitation for Clark, his comrade Clarence Coggins, and Clark's thirteen-year-old daughter Huldah to meet with Khrushchev at the Manhattan headquarters of the Soviet delegation to the UN on October 8.¹⁰ For an hour, they discussed "the Negro people's struggle for freedom in America." During the meeting, Clark reported, Khrushchev promised a scholarship for Huldah to study in the USSR.¹¹

Clark and Coggins were Black radicals who had made headlines before. In 1958, the two men had attracted attention after being ejected from a House Un-American Activities subcommittee meeting at which Clark was said to have made "obscene gestures at the committee counsel."¹² Despite the flurry of press coverage about Khrushchev's meeting with Clark and Coggins, nothing else was heard in the press about the scholarship promised to Huldah for nearly a year. Then, in September 1961, Clark and Coggins formed a "Committee for the Promotion of the Education of Negroes in Russia" and announced that Huldah was headed to the Soviet Union to study on a full, multi-year scholarship. The Committee vowed to "promote the sending of Negro children to study in Russia, because of the Jim-Crow situation of American schools and because of the high cost of higher education in America makes it impossible for the average Negro child of working parents to achieve a college degree here in the U.S.A."¹³

7. John H. Lavin, "Plainfield Among N.J. Cities That May Face Bias Charges," *Courier-News* (Bridgewater, NJ), February 15, 1962, 5.

8. Edith Evans Asbury, "Newark Girl, Back from Russia, Says Soviet Schools are Better; Home on Vacation, She Says She Was Put Back from Ninth to Sixth Grade," *New York Times*, December 24, 1961, 2.

9. "Yanks' 'Letters of Praise' Published by Russ Papers," *Arizona Daily Star*, October 2, 1960, 14.

10. Genrikh Borovik, "Vsegda nastupaet rassvet," *Ogonëk*, October 16, 1960, 4.

11. "Two Negroes Have Talk with K," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, October 10, 1960, 4.

12. "Can't Tut-Tut a Badge, Cleric Finds," *Daily News* (New York, NY), September 4, 1958, 531.

13. "Circular letter from Committee for the Promotion of the Education of Negroes in Russia to W.E.B Du Bois, ca. August 1961," W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special

Reporters soon descended upon the Clark family's public housing complex and raced to portray William Clark as a "bitter" and pathetic "Negro laborer" duped by Khrushchev's claim that "full racial equality" prevailed in the Soviet Union. Yet Clark explained clearly why he looked to the USSR with hope for his children. "My grandfather was lynched in Florida," Clark told reporters. "The misuse and abuse of my people prompted the advanced thinking Negro to think of Moscow."¹⁴ Huldah's mother Carrie Clark agreed. "We just don't think our kids can get as good an education in the states as they are getting over there," she said. "The Jim Crow type of schools in this country deprive our children of decent learning."¹⁵

On September 23, 1961 Huldah Clark boarded a plane and departed to study abroad in Moscow. She was fourteen years old. She did not speak Russian. She was at the center of a Cold War firestorm and headed to a country where she knew no one. Her father insisted, however, that "she has a friend in Nikita Khrushchev."¹⁶

The Debate about Huldah

Children were among the primary focal points of Cold War mythmaking. As Margaret Peacock has argued, the Soviet Union and the United States both deployed the trope of the imperiled child on the other side of the Iron Curtain in their bids for allegiance among domestic and international audiences. The United States peddled images of Soviet children doomed to rote learning in drab conditions of communist deprivation and numbed conformity. The Soviet Union pitied the American child steeped in the moral and cultural bankruptcy of capitalism. The USSR highlighted Black American children's suffering of American racism and racial segregation in schools in particular.¹⁷ As reports of violent white supremacist opposition to desegregation flooded the international media in the years following the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, policymakers in both the United States and the Soviet Union understood that the denial of equal educations to Black American children served as an indictment of the United States.¹⁸ In the fall of 1961, young Huldah Clark became a global symbol of American racism and the cruel inequities of racially segregated schooling.

Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, at credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b153-i068 (accessed April 28, 2021).

14. "Bitter Dad Sends Girl to Russia," *Courier-Post* (Camden, NJ), September 23, 1961, 3.

15. Walter K. Lindemann, "Self-Styled Great Thinker Sending Daughter to Moscow," *The Herald-News* (Passaic, NJ), September 23, 1961, 22.

16. "Bitter Dad," *Courier-Post*.

17. Margaret Peacock, *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, 2014), especially Chapter 2.

18. Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line*, chapter 3; Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, especially chapters 3–4; Cary Fraser, "Crossing the Color Line in Little Rock: The Eisenhower Administration and the Dilemma of Race for U.S. Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 2 (April 2000): 233–64; and Rósa Magnúsdóttir, *Enemy Number One: The United States of America in Soviet Ideology and Propaganda, 1945–1959* (New York, 2018), 33–37.

In the early press accounts of Huldah's sojourn to Moscow, William Clark bore the brunt of the American press's ire. Reporters treated Huldah with at least some measure of limp sympathy. She was described in one account as "bright, shy, and a bit apprehensive."¹⁹ Others portrayed Huldah as an unwilling participant in and pitiable victim of her father's propaganda campaign on behalf of the Soviet Union.

In one interview, Huldah's mother offered journalists insight into the private drama that had played out prior to Huldah's departure. "She didn't want to go, and I didn't want her to go," Carrie Clark confessed. Her husband had also suffered "last-minute misgivings about sending Huldah to Moscow." Carrie Clark insisted that her husband was not a communist. "But," she explained, "he's got these grievances and he blows his top."²⁰

Despite any sympathy that reporters may have felt toward Huldah, the American press portrayed her as a pawn in "the Kremlin's Cold War propaganda strategy."²¹ One newspaper warned Black Americans not to follow in the Clarks' wrong-footed path and urged all Americans to remember "real Red Russia's treatment" of Hungarians and East Berliners.²² An angry letter to the editor scoffed that William Clark had sacrificed his daughter to the Soviets' "big lie" of racial equality. "It isn't that they like the Negro race so well," the reader surmised. "They are using them."²³

William Clark was emboldened by the public's outcry. He told one reporter, "They call me a Communist, but I'd rather be called that than a nigger. They don't lynch Communists."²⁴ Until the United States could provide Huldah with a quality education equal to that afforded her white peers, Clark insisted that "I'd rather send my daughter to school in Moscow than to Mississippi."²⁵

As debate raged in the United States, Huldah arrived to some confusion at Boarding School 12 in Moscow. Her Soviet teachers had "expected an African who spoke fluent French." Their original plan to enroll her in classes designed for French-speaking students was scuttled upon the realization that Huldah was an American whose only language was English. One Soviet teacher told reporters that Huldah was teary-eyed with homesickness. School officials scrambled to organize a curriculum for Huldah that prioritized teaching her the Russian language.²⁶ She received one-on-one instruction and roomed with three Soviet teenagers.²⁷ *Pravda* reported that Clark had arrived with a

19. "Bitter Dad," *Courier-Post*.

20. "Mother Says Girl Opposed to Red School," *The Times* (Shreveport, LA), October 2, 1961, 20.

21. "RACE: She's Integrated in an All-Red School," *Daily News* (New York, NY), October 1, 1961, 504.

22. "In the Day's News," *The News* (Paterson, NJ), September 23, 1961, 18.

23. Mary Emma Weidner, "Russians Slow to Pay Except with Big Lies," *Dayton Daily News*, January 9, 1962, 14.

24. "Daddy's Little Girl," *Newsweek*, January 8, 1962, 40.

25. "RACE: She's Integrated," *Daily News*.

26. Robert J. Korengold, "Bewildered American Girl Begins Studies in Russ Boarding School," *Terre Haute Star*, September 27, 1961, 8.

27. "Negro Girl will Return to Russia," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, October 4, 1962, 3.

letter from her father addressed to the Soviet people. “Teach my daughter” Clark wrote, “how to make this world a better place for all people.”²⁸

A Cold War Lightening Rod

When Huldah returned to New Jersey for winter break in December 1961, the American press pounced. *Newsweek* reported that “Huldah, as usual, was content to let her father do the talking.” And talk he did. “For 400 years,” he lectured, “we Negroes have been robbed of education and we’re still not getting it yet. My grandfather was lynched...so my father had to go to work when he was just a boy. He was unlearned and I’m unlearned. When will it stop?” Clark turned the mirror back onto the Americans who criticized him. “If race tension and Jim Crow were easy things to bear, do you think I’d send my only daughter to Russia?” he asked. America spat upon his children. Khrushchev, however, “was kind enough...to take my poor black child and hug and embrace her.”²⁹

As Huldah studied in Moscow, her father had trouble finding work. Reporters mocked Clark’s reliance on “borrowed money and on unemployment checks.”³⁰ Americans sent the Clarks hate mail and called for them to be deported.³¹ In the spring of 1962, William Clark told reporters that he was prepared to voluntarily renounce his citizenship. In a letter to President Kennedy, he wrote, “I and my family would like very much to join my daughter in the Soviet Union so we, too, can escape Jim Crow and injustice.” The USSR beckoned as a haven from the pervasive racism of the United States, no less than the harassment his family now faced from the public and the FBI.³² “I want to get out of this country,” he insisted.³³

Not everyone in the United States demonized the Clarks. During Huldah’s visits home, she was celebrated as a guest of honor at meetings of Black activists.³⁴ At a pro-integration rally in August 1962, Huldah received a “big ovation.” One activist at the event invoked the Cold War competition for technological supremacy when he noted that “Russians are going to the moon and America is keeping Negroes from going to the public library.” White supremacists protested at the event, raising signs that read “Keep America White.”³⁵

Meanwhile, Huldah seemed to thrive in Moscow. She learned Russian and helped her classmates learn English.³⁶ She earned school medals for her

28. “Kholda Klark—vospitanitsa moskovskoi shkoly-internata,” *Pravda*, September 28, 1961, 6.

29. “Daddy’s Little Girl,” *Newsweek*.

30. “Strange Case,” *Courier-News* (Bridgewater, NJ), October 5, 1962, 22.

31. “U.S. Student in Russia Writes Home,” *Miami News*, February 26, 1963, 12C and Larry Smith, “The Furor Over Huldah Clark,” *The Militant*, October 9, 1961, 2.

32. “Clarks to Move to Russia,” *Morning News* (Wilmington, DE), April 12, 1962, 2.

33. Robert McDonald, “Jim Crow Foe Now Seeks to Live in Russia,” *Daily News* (New York), April 12, 1962, 259.

34. See for example, “Huldah Clark,” *Lansing State Journal*, July 9, 1962, 3.

35. “Integration Leader Denounced by Englewood Mayor,” *The Scrantonian*, August 19, 1962, 4.

36. “Girl Home from Moscow Hails Russia Schooling,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, January 6, 1962, 3.

achievements in math and science.³⁷ Her principal said of Huldah: “She is a good girl and we all love her.” Huldah wrote home about dancing and singing with her classmates.³⁸ She told reporters that while in Moscow, the only thing she missed back home was her family.³⁹ Huldah intended to complete her education in the Soviet Union, she said, and aimed to become a physician.⁴⁰

Huldah also settled into her role as a Cold War international celebrity. She caught attention in 1963 when she wrote an open letter to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “On television here in Moscow I saw them taking you to jail again,” she wrote. “That’s one reason why I’ve decided to write to you. You see, I’m a fighter for freedom and so is my father.” Huldah wanted to help King in his fight for racial justice. She volunteered to make use of her “large correspondence with people all over the world.”⁴¹

In April 1964, the *Moscow News* reported that Huldah was “very much at her ease” and now spoke Russian fluently. She enjoyed studying biology and mathematics in her Soviet school’s well-lit classrooms. She delighted in her access to music, theatre, and cinema in Moscow. Boarding School 12, Huldah said, had become a “second home.” Upon graduation, she hoped to enroll in Moscow’s Patrice Lumumba Friendship University to study medicine. She dreamed of working as a doctor “in Africa, the land of my forefathers.” She wanted, she said, to help the people of Africa just “as the Soviet country is helping me.”⁴²

Yet while home visiting her family in the summer of 1964, Huldah Clark’s dreams were caught in the violent undertow of the waves of racial injustice whipping against what her father called “these Jim Crow shores.”⁴³ On June 23, 1964 Newark police arrested Huldah and two of her younger brothers—aged 9 and 14 years old—near her family’s home. All three Clark children were charged with disorderly conduct and branded as juvenile delinquents. According to the charging officers, Huldah’s brothers were “picked up for throwing firecrackers” and Huldah had attempted “to pull the boys out of a police car.”⁴⁴

Huldah denied the police officers’ accusations. “I only asked them to wait and let me call my father downstairs,” she protested. She was trying to protect her younger brothers. Huldah told the press that “the officers insulted her and cast racial slurs.” They also “accused her of speaking in Russian and refusing to speak English.”⁴⁵ Huldah, it seems, understood that she was arrested that night for daring as a Black American to demand a quality education, let alone

37. “Negro Girl Will Return to Soviets for School,” *Chicago Defender*, October 6, 1962, 3.

38. “U.S. Student in Russia Writes Home,” *Miami News*, February 26, 1963, 12C.

39. “K’s Co-ed ‘Protegee’ Returns to N.J., Likes Soviet School,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, June 23, 1962, 6.

40. “She Continues Red Education,” *The Record* (Hackensack, NJ), October 4, 1962, 30.

41. “Negro in Russia Offers Help,” *Southern Christian Leadership Conference Newsletter* 2, no. 1 (October 1963), 12.

42. Boris Efetov, “A Visit to A Boarding-School,” *The Moscow News*, April 11, 1964, 50–51.

43. “American Girl Glad to Be Back in USSR,” *Bridgeport Post* (Bridgeport, CT), January 14, 1962, 53.

44. “Arrest Huldah Clark,” *Kansas City Star* (Kansas City, MO), June 24, 1964, 32.

45. “Arrest Huldah Clark,” *Kansas City Star*.

for “conspiring” with the Soviet Union in order to get one. The alleged lighting of firecrackers was, it appears, convenient pretext to put Huldah and her family “in their place” and to reaffirm white supremacy by means of policing.

In the primary sources currently available to me, Huldah Clark’s voice is only heard one more time in the press following her arrest. In late August 1964, a local New Jersey newspaper reported on a so-called “Negro rally” at which Huldah “spoke nervously from a prepared text.” She urged her audience to “be wise, organize. Use your vote.” She said that she intended to soon resume her studies in Moscow. Huldah explained why she had gone to the Soviet Union to study and pursue her dream of becoming a physician. “As young as I am,” she said, “I have felt the misuse put on my people by the ruling class of the United States.”⁴⁶

Black Lives Matter in Soviet History

What happened to Huldah Clark? Was she able to return to Moscow to resume her education? Did her arrest foreclose her dream of studying medicine in the Soviet Union? For now, these and many other burning questions cannot be answered. Much awaits the reopening of archives and the resumption of international research.

In the meantime, however, Huldah Clark offers a powerful lesson for the teaching of Soviet history, American history, and the history of the Cold War more broadly. After William Clark’s meeting with Khrushchev in 1960, *The Birmingham News* warned “responsible Negro Americans” not to applaud his “shenanigans” and the threat he posed to the nation.⁴⁷ For William Clark, however, it was the “nation”—with its irrepressible white supremacy—that endangered him and his family. The Cold War context seemed to offer not only a Soviet scholarship for his daughter, but also the possibility of flipping the script—of showing how the United States embarrassed and endangered *itself* with its own despicable foundation of white supremacy. Until his children were assured an education equal to that offered white American children, and until his children were assured a nation cleansed of “Jim Crowism and lynching,” it only made sense to William Clark to look to Moscow—to a superpower that insisted, unlike his own, that Black lives mattered.⁴⁸ William Clark told *Newsweek* in 1962, “I love America. I want to see a better America.” Yet it was Khrushchev’s Soviet Union that promised his child a quality education.⁴⁹ Clark insisted that Black lives matter—that his children’s lives mattered. Only the Soviet Union seemed to agree.

It is Huldah Clark’s voice that remains—for now, at least—relatively muted, obscured. Hers is a Cold War cold case, but one that burns with contemporary relevance as Black Lives Matter activists and their allies struggle against white supremacy in the United States and across the globe. Say her name.

46. “‘We Want Our Share of Town,’ Elizabeth Negro Rally Told,” *The Record* (Hackensack, NJ), August 26, 1964, 3.

47. “A Disservice to American Negroes,” *The Birmingham News*, October 13, 1960, 16.

48. Asbury, “Newark Girl, Back from Russia,” *New York Times*.

49. “Daddy’s Little Girl,” *Newsweek*.