

# Was Civil Rights Icon Paul Robeson A Victim of CIA's MK-ULTRA?

According to the Book of His Son Paul Robeson, Jr.,

By [Jeremy Kuzmarov](#)

Global Research, March 04, 2024

[CovertAction Magazine](#) 25 February 2024

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Intelligence](#)

All Global Research articles can be read in 51 languages by activating the Translate Website button below the author's name (only available in desktop version).

To receive Global Research's Daily Newsletter (selected articles), [click here](#).

Click the share button above to email/forward this article to your friends and colleagues. Follow us on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and subscribe to our [Telegram Channel](#). Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

[Big Tech's Effort to Silence Truth-tellers: Global Research Online Referral Campaign](#)

\*\*\*

*A celebrity performer who devoted his life to social justice struggles, Paul Robeson is an icon of the civil rights movement who helped set the groundwork for the political awakening of the 1960s.*

However, during his lifetime, the FBI and CIA considered Robeson a dangerous subversive and used all kinds of dirty tricks attempting to neutralize him.

According to Paul Robeson, Jr., a lawyer and activist like his father, Robeson was a victim of the CIA's infamous Operation MK-ULTRA, which involved illegal drug testing and the injection of drugs in unwitting people in order to incapacitate them.

In his 2010 book, *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom 1939-1976* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), Robeson Jr. alleges that Richard Helms, then the CIA's chief of operations, poisoned Robeson with drugs to prevent his visit to Havana at the time of the Bay of Pigs landing.<sup>[1]</sup>

At the time of his drugging, Robeson Sr. was staying at the Sovietsky Hotel in Moscow, where he had gone after a trip to London in which he had visited Eastern European embassies and met with a top aide to Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first post-independence leader who was overthrown in a CIA-backed coup in 1966.

Helms gave the green light to widespread overseas operations under MK-ULTRA making use of the new hallucinatory drug LSD, lethal toxins, and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).

MK-ULTRA subproject 111 was headed by Professor Hans Jürgen Eysenck, the director of the psychology department of London's Maudsley Hospital, a staging point for European and African MK-ULTRA operations.

Robeson was targeted because his stature as an artist, combined with his increasingly radical political activities, made him a serious threat to the establishment. He was a leading light of anti-colonial movements in Africa, spoke out strongly against American wars like Vietnam and Korea, and urged Blacks to resist the draft.<sup>[2]</sup>

In August 1955, after being hauled before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and asked about a speech that he gave that allegedly lauded Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, Robeson replied that he

“wasn't here to talk about Stalin—a matter for the Soviet people”—and was not going to argue with “representatives of the people who in building America wasted 60 to 100 million lives of my people, black people drawn from Africa on the plantations. You are responsible, and your forebearers, for 60 to 100 million black people dying in the slave ships and on the plantations, and don't you ask me about anybody, please.”<sup>[3]</sup>

As early as 1935, officers of Britain's MI5 visited Robeson on the set of *Sanders of the River*, the first Hollywood film to feature a powerful Black male star. The FBI opened a file on Robeson in 1941.<sup>[4]</sup> At the end of World War II, his case was assigned to a special agent responsible for covert operations, and he nearly died subsequently after his vehicle was sabotaged.<sup>[5]</sup>

While attending a cocktail party in New York City, a Black member of the U.S. Mission to the United Nations told Robeson Jr. about an exchange that allegedly took place between Richard Helms and CIA Director Allen Dulles in the late 1950s.

Helms floated the idea to Dulles about “solving the Robeson problem,” though Dulles urged caution because he did not “want to create a martyr.” John Stockwell, chief of the CIA's Angolan Task Force, told Robeson Jr. that the CIA had viewed his father as a “dangerous badman.”<sup>[6]</sup>

Robeson Sr. felt anxiety during his time in Moscow because he knew the CIA was surveilling him. Robeson Jr. wrote that

“the CIA knew [his father] intended to visit Cuba from Moscow and it would seem likely that they would not want him there as they prepared for the [Bay of Pigs] invasion. All of this contributed to my belief that he had been subjected to a CIA ‘hit.’”<sup>[7]</sup>

On April 4, 1961, Robeson had a heart attack, a week after he was found lying on the bathroom floor of his hotel suite, semi-conscious, after having slashed his wrists.<sup>[8]</sup>

The night before the suicide attempt, a raucous party had been held in his suite lasting well

past midnight. Robeson Jr. was suspicious of the party because it was uncharacteristic, he said, for his father to expose himself to strangers in this manner. He felt that he was probably deceived into agreeing to the party by someone claiming to be a government official but who was in reality a Western intelligence agent.

Robeson Jr. believed that, in the environment of the party, it would have been possible to drug his father.<sup>[9]</sup> Robeson's symptoms were identical to those produced by BZ (3-Quinuclidinyl Benzilate), a mind-altering drug developed by the intelligence agencies in Britain and in the U.S. for use in MK-ULTRA. They included "paranoiac psychosis" with depressive symptoms thought to have been caused by acute anxiety.

Robeson Jr. said that, after he visited his father the day after the suicide attempt, Robeson Sr. said that he had felt trapped in a real life "James Bond nightmare." The walls were always closing around him. He shut himself in his bedroom, suffering extreme depression and feelings of utter worthlessness—all symptoms induced by hallucinogenic drugs that were given to him.

Shortly after he left Moscow, Robeson was admitted to the Priory Hospital in London. Within 36 hours of his arrival, and against the advice of Soviet doctors, Robeson was subjected to the first of 54 electro-convulsive shock therapy sessions.

The drug therapy left Robeson in a debilitating state, from which he never really recovered (he died in 1976 at age 77).

Robeson Jr. said that the shock therapy sessions, combined with the prescription of antidepressants, resembled the "mind depatterning" treatment funded by the MK-ULTRA project, which consisted of "intensive electroshocks usually combined with prolonged, drug-induced sleep."<sup>[10]</sup>

Robeson Jr. found out that at least three doctors who treated his father in London and in New York had links to MK-ULTRA.

The doctors were

- a) Nathan Kline, a researcher regarded as ["the father of psychopharmacology,"](#) who made a name for himself promoting use of antidepressants and administering drugs in mental hospitals;
- b) Brian Ackner, of the Maudsley Institute, a [pioneer in the development of drug treatments for schizophrenia](#); and
- c) Kline's associate, Ari Kiev, a specialist in [depression and suicide prevention](#), who was attached to the Maudsley Institute of Psychiatry and Harvard, Cornell Medical College and Johns Hopkins Hospital, all of which had psychological research programs directed by contractors for the CIA's MK-ULTRA project and funded by the CIA through a study group called the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology.

Dr. Kiev had also worked at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas from 1962 to 1964, where he served as a captain and was attached to Wilford Hall Medical Center, the site of secret MK-ULTRA research conducted by psychologist Frank Barron.<sup>[11]</sup>

Mike Minnicino, an MK-ULTRA historian with close contacts in American intelligence, said that the allegations that Paul Robeson was really targeted by the CIA were “entirely plausible.”

Between April and June 1961, the FBI kept a dossier and a “status of health” file on Robeson, which reveals that plans were already made to prevent the world communist movement from exploiting Robeson’s “imminent” death.

“The fact that such a file was opened at all, is very sinister in itself,” Robeson Jr. said. “This indicates a degree of prior knowledge that something was about to happen to my father.”

\*

Note to readers: Please click the share button above. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter and subscribe to our Telegram Channel. Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

*Jeremy Kuzmarov is Managing Editor of CovertAction Magazine. He is the author of five books on U.S. foreign policy, including Obama’s Unending Wars (Clarity Press, 2019), The Russians Are Coming, Again, with John Marciano (Monthly Review Press, 2018), and Warmonger. How Clinton’s Malign Foreign Policy Launched the U.S. Trajectory From Bush II to Biden (Clarity Press, 2023). He can be reached at: [jkuzmarov2@gmail.com](mailto:jkuzmarov2@gmail.com).*

## Notes

1. The CIA in the Bay of Pigs sent counter-revolutionaries to try to sabotage Fidel Castro’s revolutionary government.
2. Jordan Goodman, *Paul Robeson: A Watched Man* (London: Verso, 2013), 154.
3. Goodman, *Paul Robeson*, 240.
4. Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom 1939-1976* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 24.
5. Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 330.
6. Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 309.
7. Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 317.
8. Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 311.
9. Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 311, 312.
10. Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 326.
11. Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 355, 356.

*Featured image is from the Public Domain*

The original source of this article is [CovertAction Magazine](#)  
Copyright © [Jeremy Kuzmarov](#), [CovertAction Magazine](#), 2024

---

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

## **Become a Member of Global Research**

Articles by: [Jeremy Kuzmarov](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)

[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)