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Our History

Did the Russian Revolution Matter for Africa? (Part I)

- Features -

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In the first of a two-part blogpost, Matt Swagler looks at the first years after the Russian revolution (1917-1935), he discusses the impact of the revolution on African liberation movements before World War II. In the second part he will consider the impact of the Soviet Union on African politics, development and activism in the decades after the war.

[T]he vanguard of the Russian workers and the national minorities, now set free from imperial oppression, are thinking seriously about the fate of the oppressed classes, the suppressed national and racial minorities in the rest of Europe, Asia, Africa and America. They feel themselves kin in spirit to these people. They want to help make them free.

âEuros" Claude McKay, *The Crisis*, December 1923

The Russian Revolution as an Anti-Imperial Revolution

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was a shocking event: elected councils of workers, soldiers, and peasants had taken state powerâEuros"without great violenceâEuros"in a major world empire. At the root of the revolution was opposition to the slaughter and privations caused by World War I. The war represented the explosion of the economic and imperial competition between European rivals that had fueled the colonization of Africa in the decades prior. Accordingly, GermanyâEuros"s colonies were divided as spoils among the Allied victors. Great Britain, France, Belgium, South Africa, and Portugal all gained territory in Africa, ostensibly under the supervision of the League of Nations.

The Bolshevik-led revolutionary government in Russia, however, had already moved in the opposite direction, immediately renouncing all claims to the former territories of the Russian empire, and four months later, fulfilling its promise to negotiate an end to the war with Germany. Following the subsequent defeat of Germany, areas of the former Russian empire under German occupation, such as the Baltic states, became independent.

The Allied powers were openly hostile to the goals of the revolution, and sent troops to join the reactionary forces in Russia that pushed the country into a five-year civil war. Although ultimately victorious, Bolshevik leaders argued that unless similar revolutions were victorious elsewhere in the world, any attempts to establish a socialist society in Russia would be strangled by the economic and military strength of the major capitalist powers. With social unrest sweeping across war-torn Europe, the possibility of further revolutions was real.

A Global Movement Against Colonialism and Capitalism: The Comintern

In 1919, a congress was held in Moscow to create a new body, the Comintern, which aimed to coordinate organizations around the globe that were committed to revolutionary socialism and anti-imperialism. [1]The following year, the Comintern congress agreed upon conditions for membership, one of which was directed at socialist organizationsâEuros"who now called themselves CommunistsâEuros"operating within the imperial metropolises. Such

parties had:

the obligation of exposing the dodges of its "own" imperialists in the colonies, of supporting every liberation movement in the colonies not only in words but in deeds, of demanding that their imperialist compatriots should be thrown out of the colonies, of cultivating in the hearts of the workers in their own country a truly fraternal relationship to the working population in the colonies and to the oppressed nations, and of carrying out systematic propaganda among their own country's troops against any oppression of colonial peoples.

This position was rooted in an agreement that imperial rule was critical to the survival and growth of capitalism in the metropolises. Thus, the major capitalist powers in Europe (as well as the United States) could be thrown into crisis not only by revolutionary movements at home, but also by mass struggles in the colonies. As Vladimir Lenin wrote, in preparation for the 1920 Comintern congress: "Without control of the vast fields of exploitation in the colonies, the capitalist powers of Europe cannot maintain their existence for even a short time." [2]

But should the Comintern adherents back all anti-colonial movements? While Lenin answered in the affirmative, the Indian Marxist M.N. Roy countered that such a position could lead to Communists giving cover to anti-colonial or nationalist leaders who were politically reactionary. Roy instead called for supporting worker and peasant movements in the colonies whose aims converged with socialist goals. Roy's position was adopted by the 1920 congress, and became an important guide for Communists organizing in colonial territories—even if, in practice, the distinction between "reactionary" and "revolutionary" anti-colonial movements was not always so stark.

The early Comintern debates were ultimately crucial to the development of anti-colonial currents in Africa. By the end of World War I, European countries controlled most of the African continent and the initial wave of African uprisings against colonial conquest had been largely repressed.

But the war spurred new African resistance to increased taxation, forced labor, and the conscription of more than half a million Africans into colonial armies. Although often effective, this resistance was generally very localized and ephemeral—in part due to harsh repression. In 1917 the South African International Socialist League was the only revolutionary socialist organization on the continent. [3] The League had opposed World War I and formed the first Black trade unions in the country, led by T.W. Thibedi, Johnny Gomas, and Hamilton Kraai.

But the Russian Revolution and the actions of the Comintern soon drew the attention of more Black intellectuals and workers from Africa and across the African diaspora. The revolution cemented the importance of Marxist ideas in debates about colonial and racial liberation for decades to follow. The Comintern called for complete independence for Africa—a position raised only by two other international organizations at the time: W.E.B. Du Bois's Pan-African Congresses and Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Comintern leaders shared the Pan-African framework of these organizations, but uniquely posited that the fate of struggles to liberate Africa from colonial rule and struggles against capitalism in the imperial countries were integrally linked.

Communist Pan-Africanism: From Claude McKay to Lamine Senghor

The Comintern adopted a Pan-African perspective at its fourth congress in 1922. Two Black Marxists from the United States, Claude McKay and Otto Huiswoud, led the "Negro Commission" and Huiswoud likely drafted the "Thesis on the Negro Question" adopted by the congress delegates. The statement emphasized

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the centrality of colonialism and racism to the survival of capitalism, and therefore the critical need for the Communist movement to build links with Black struggles in the United States, the Caribbean, South America, and Africa. The Comintern also created a "EurosoeNegro Bureau," led by Huiswoud, to establish roots in sub-Saharan Africa and across the diaspora.

The Pan-African framework proposed by McKay and Huiswoud was partially a response to Du Bois's and Garvey's influence. But it equally fit with the Comintern's established position that colonialism and racism were intertwined on an international scale so had to be fought on such a scale. Black Communists from the United States played the most crucial roles in developing Comintern strategies. But some, like Lovett Fort-Whiteman, sought to develop contacts with African student and worker representatives in the mid-1920s, with the goal of organizing a pan-African conference. Despite Comintern support for the project, such a gathering was not realized in the 1920s. But in 1927, a group of German Communists led the organizing for the founding congress of the League Against Imperialism and for Colonial Independence (LAI), which drew 170 delegates to Brussels, including a small group of African activists from France and South Africa. At the congress, Lamine Senghor, a Senegalese Communist living in France, delivered a particularly scathing critique of colonialism, the mistreatment of African soldiers after the war, and the horrors of the French "civilizing" mission in Africa.

Senghor himself had fought in the French army during the war on the battlefields of Europe. He had returned to France in 1921, and like many African veterans of the war, felt betrayed by the French government. Disabled African soldiers received a small fraction of metropolitan soldiers' pensions, and the government hedged on many of their pledges to expand African soldiers' political rights. Senghor joined both the French Communist Party (PCF), and a closely linked organization of radicals from the French colonies, the Union Intercoloniale (UIC), in 1924. [4] Senghor soon began writing and speaking on behalf of the UIC and ran as a PCF candidate in Parisian municipal elections the following year.

However, Senghor and other Black PCF members often accused the party of paying too little attention to French colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa and ignoring Comintern behests to organize among Black workers. As a result, Senghor, alongside Caribbean Communists and another West African, Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, went on to form and lead the Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre (CDRN), and its successor organization, the Ligue de la Défense de la Race Nègre (LDRN). Both organizations were committed to ending French colonial rule and working for "the complete emancipation of the Negro race." [5] While the CDRN and LDRN's leaders hailed from the PCF, they attempted to maintain the new organizations' autonomy as they attracted hundreds of members in Paris and port cities across France. Through sympathetic African sailors, they were able to distribute their publications and establish contacts in West African ports cities, despite the banning of their newspaper in the colonies.

Yet even as Senghor and Kouyaté voiced their criticisms of the PCF, they remained open adherents of the Communist movement. As the historian iHakim Adi documents, in the 1920s, Black activists in the Communist parties of the United States, France, Great Britain, and South Africa often accused their national parties of insufficiently struggling against imperialism and anti-Black racism. [6] In many cases, Black Communists brought their grievances directly to Comintern leaders, who took their complaints seriously and regularly chastised national Communist party leaders for their "white chauvinism." At times, the efforts of Black Communists and Comintern officials did move parties like the PCF to focus more on sub-Saharan Africa. In 1929, the LDRN and the PCF launched a joint campaign in support of the Gbaya rebellion in the French colonies of central Africa, which had begun in response to forced labor. Thus, many Black and African Communists in the 1920s remained committed to the Comintern and to the importance of combating capitalism and imperialism in tandem. Speaking at the LAI congress in 1927, Senghor concluded:

The imperialist oppression which we call colonization at home and which here you term imperialism is one and the same thing. It all stems from capitalism! Therefore those who suffer under colonial oppression must join hands

and stand side by side with those who suffer under the imperialism of the leading countries. Fight with the same weapons and destroy the scourge of the earth, world imperialism! It must be destroyed and replaced by an alliance of the free peoples. Then there will be no more slavery. [7]

Senghor's speech was picked up by newspapers internationally, including in the United States, and he was arrested and imprisoned upon his return to France. Although soon released, Senghor who had been gassed during the war succumbed to tuberculosis that same year. [8] Despite his tragically short life, Senghor's experiences were similar to many other Black radicals of the era whose engagement with the Communist movement was both deeply inspiring and often frustrating.

A New Pan-African Initiative: The ITUCNW

In 1928, the Comintern responded to the criticisms made by Black Communists about the work of their national parties by creating a new body: the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW). The ITUCNW's explicit orientation toward Black *workers* was a response to the growing demographic and economic weight of the Black working class in the United States and South Africa, as well the outbreak of strikes in the Caribbean and West Africa after World War I. Although African trade unions were banned by colonial administrations at the time, strikes by miners, rails workers and others still broke out in present-day Senegal, Ghana, The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and South Africa in the decade following the end of the war.

The ITUCNW was based in Europe, but was led by a series of Black Communists from the United States: James Ford, George Padmore, and Otto and Hermina Huiswoud. [9] Along with another Black US Communist, William Patterson, they were the primary organizers of the First International Conference of Negro Workers in Hamburg in 1930. The conference ultimately drew seventeen delegates from West Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and the United States. Attendance was hampered by the logistical challenges of bringing together delegates from across the world, particularly during the onset of the global economic depression. But in many cases, would-be participants were prohibited from travelling because of their political activities—as was the case with the African delegates from South Africa.

Perhaps more important than the conference itself were the extensive travels undertaken beforehand by Ford, Patterson, Padmore, and the Huiswoud's as they tried to reach labor activists in Africa and across the African diaspora. In 1929, a labor activist in the capital city of The Gambia, E.F. Small, led a successful strike that resulted in the legalization of trade unions in the British colony. The strike had received extensive solidarity from Communist and Black activists in the UK and Patterson was able to meet with Small in London. Starting with Small's contacts in West Africa, Padmore then travelled through Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Liberia, and the Gold Coast (Ghana) developing direct connections for the ITUCNW, its publications, and the Comintern.

From 1931 to 1933, Padmore was at the helm of the ITUCNW, tirelessly corresponding with contacts in Africa and the Caribbean and writing extensively on the struggles of Black workers across the world. During this time, the ITUCNW coordinated solidarity protests and media coverage in support of the Scottsboro Boys as well as a tour through Europe of the mother of two of the accused boys. [10] The ITUCNW's paper, *The Negro Worker* was distributed by sympathizers and Communists in West Africa and South Africa, often under conditions of illegality. However, Padmore's work was cut short with the rise of the Nazi party and his expulsion from the ITUCNW's base in Germany in 1933. In the aftermath, Padmore had a public falling out with the Comintern. The specific circumstances that led to Padmore's break are complicated and disputed, but were undergirded by the changes that had taken place in the Comintern since the end of the 1920s.

After Stalin: The Re-Orienting of the Comintern and the Example of South Africa

By the late 1920s, the workers' revolutions that had swept Europe and China following the Russian Revolution had gone down in defeat. The Soviet Union had been left isolated, just as the early leaders of the Comintern had feared.

By the end of the 1920s, the bureaucracy around Joseph Stalin had taken control of the Soviet state, and eliminated their opponents—most importantly that of Trotsky and the Left Opposition. Following Lenin's death in early 1924, Nicolai Bukharin (head of the Comintern in 1926) upheld the basic principles that underlay the activities of the Comintern. Whereas Lenin and Trotsky had founded the Comintern on the premise that it was impossible to create a socialist society within the bounds of one country, Bukharin and Stalin adopted precisely the opposite position: that the Soviet Union could be an island of socialism in a sea of capitalism. Thus, from the mid-1920s onward, the Comintern's activities became oriented on a) ousting Trotskyists and other oppositionists from the leadership of Communist parties around the globe and b) establishing a secure international diplomatic environment for the new Soviet ruling bureaucracy.

Bukharin's and Stalin's abandonment of the Comintern's early principles pushed away activists like Padmore. These changes also had a profound impact on the fledgling Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). Aside from the United States, the most intensive discussions in the Comintern about racism and Black liberation concerned South Africa. Despite the CPSA's early roots in organizing Black workers, the party was initially focused on the struggles of white workers. Over the course of the 1920s this shifted, taking a lead from the Comintern's 1922 *Thesis on the Negro Question* and the arguments of leading Black Communists in South Africa as well as those from the US. During the 1920s, the Black working class was growing quickly in the mines and in the urban areas of South Africa. Many were pushed into wage labor because of the implementation of the Native Lands Act, whereby the majority of the indigenous population was only allowed to own or lease land in *Native Reserves* which covered just 7 percent of the country's land area. As a result, the number of Africans living in South African towns doubled in the period between 1921 and 1936.

In this context, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) quickly grew to become the first mass nationwide trade union for Black workers, and the Communist Party became closely involved, with two *Coloured* Communists, James La Guma and John Gomas, acting as leaders in both organizations. La Guma and other Communists were expelled from the ICU in 1926, but nevertheless continued to work with the growing African National Congress (ANC). By 1928, the CPSA had 1600 African members, composing a majority of the membership and an increasing share of the leadership, including the election of Albert Nzula as General Secretary in 1929.

It was in 1927, however, that a Comintern decision split the CPSA with dire results. Following a visit by La Guma to Moscow, Bukharin and the Comintern executive committee directed the CPSA to raise the demand of *an independent black South African Republic as a stage towards a Workers and Peasants' Republic with full autonomy for all minorities.* [\[11\]](#) The *Native* or *Black Republic* thesis was supported by Black US Communists in the Comintern, but was initially rejected by most Black and white CPSA leaders. Supporters claimed it would force the CPSA to address lingering *white chauvinism* and to refocus their organizing on the massive Black rural population resisting forced resettlement into the Native Reserves. [\[12\]](#)

While some of the accusations directed at the CPSA leadership were accurate, the *Native Republic* thesis was controversial for understandable reasons. First, land theft through the Native Lands Act was driving much of the proletarianization of the African population by creating a landless population that found work in mines and

urban areas. Thus, some South African Communists argued that the elimination of racial discrimination would be driven by the increasingly black-led working class fighting for a socialist revolution.

Moreover, the "Native Republic" was conceived as a "stage" of development that had to be achieved before socialism became possible. By the late 1920s, Soviet leaders increasingly dictated to Communists in Africa and other parts of the colonized world similar "two-stage" perspectives. The idea that South Africa (and other colonies) had to first pass through a period of capitalist development (albeit as a "Black-led republic") ran directly counter to the positions laid out by Lenin and Trotsky at the earlier meetings of the Comintern.

In practice, the new line from Moscow resulted in Communists submitting to the leadership of more conservative nationalist organizations as occurred in China in 1925²⁷ with disastrous results for the Chinese working class. In this context, the "Native Republic" thesis (although officially dropped by the Comintern in 1935) later became the basis for the CPSA's long-running alliance with the ANC, under the banner of replacing apartheid with black majority rule in South Africa. Such a victory did occur when the first multiracial elections took place in 1994. But aside from a small population of Black elites who have benefited immensely from the transition, over the past twenty-three years, economic inequality along racial lines in South Africa has only grown deeper.

Whatever the long-term impact of the Comintern's intervention in the CPSA in the late 1920s, its immediate impact was to plunge the party into factionalism. While on the one hand the CPSA was to put forth the slogan of a "Native Republic" as a first "stage" the Comintern leadership also pushed the party toward sectarianism, resulting in attempt to form their own Black trade unions. The project was a failure that isolated the CPSA from the ranks of the Black working class, despite their involvement in strikes and pass burning demonstrations in the early 1930s. A wave of expulsions of both Black and white leaders supported by the Comintern reduced the party membership in 1933 to roughly one-tenth of what it had been just five years prior. [\[13\]](#) However, the decline of the party had other causes: South African Prime Minister J.B.M. Hertzog launched an anti-communist campaign in the late 1920s that linked "Bolshevism" to the increase in Black rebellions. [\[14\]](#) The resulting arrests and imprisonment of African Communist leaders also devastated the CPSA.

Ethiopia and the Opening of a New World War

Despite the degeneration of the Comintern, there were still important campaigns led by Communist movement activists on the continent in the 1930s. Nineteen thirty-five marked the beginning of World War II in Africa, with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The brutal occupation, which eventually took the lives of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians, immediately provoked an international outcry. Communists from the US and Europe joined solidarity efforts alongside other Pan-African, anti-colonial, and anti-fascist activists, from Harlem to Accra. Dock workers in Cape Town and Durban refused to load ships with food destined for the Italian army. The action followed a CPSA appeal to Black port workers arguing that any blow to the Italian occupation in Ethiopia was also a blow to white rule in South Africa.

In the Gold Coast, I.T.A Wallace-Johnson and Bankole Awooner-Renner, Comintern adherents who had both studied in Moscow, created the West African Youth League (WAYL) in 1934. The year prior, Wallace-Johnson had organized a Scottsboro Boys solidarity committee in Accra. In 1935, the WAYL organized a rally of a thousand people in Accra against the invasion of Ethiopia; raised funds for Ethiopian resistance; and Wallace-Johnson challenged colonial laws and wrote copiously about the crimes of European colonialism, leading to his arrest and the passing of anti-Communist legislation in British West Africa.

The "Hands of Abyssinia" committees organized by Communists, much like the solidarity actions with the Scottsboro Boys, were important displays of the Communist movement's ability to organize truly global campaigns on the basis of anti-racism and Pan-African solidarity in the 1930s. By this time, Garvey's UNIA was in steep decline and the Pan-African Congresses were in suspension. Thus, for much of the interwar period, the Comintern represented the only truly international movement that was continually trying to link Black radicals in Africa to those in the African diaspora. [15] Despite the challenges faced by Black Communists—whether state repression or the "white chauvinism" of their comrades—they played a critical role in raising the demand for African independence both on and off of the African continent.

Stalinism, Diplomacy and Imperialism

But by the mid-1930s, Stalin's regime was entrenched. Anticipating the coming war with Germany, Stalin sought an alliance with the French and British governments in the name of combatting fascism. As the Comintern now served Stalin's diplomatic needs, Communist parties in France and Great Britain, as well as in their empires, were directed to suppress demands for colonial independence so as to not affront the USSR's would-be allies. In 1939, when Stalin feared that reconciliation with France and Great Britain was a lost cause, he abruptly signed a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany, throwing the Communist movement into crisis. Only when Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941 did Stalin reverse positions again and join the Allies. This time, the Comintern itself was disposed of entirely (1943), as a further gesture of reconciliation with the major capitalist powers that had once sought to destroy the Russian Revolution [16]

The end of the Comintern and the absurd twists and turns of Stalin's foreign policy during the 1930s caused many Black activists to abandon the Communist movement. Worse, some, like Lovett Fort-Whiteman and possibly Albert Nzula, fell victim to Stalin's deadly purges of his opponents in the USSR.

But the eventual role of Communists and other Marxists in fighting fascism during World War II, and the subsequent popularity of left-wing parties immediately afterward, attracted the attention of a new generation of African radicals. As African anti-colonial movements grew in the decades following the war, Marxism, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Revolution would become even wider reference points on the African continent.

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[1] This grouping was referred to as the Communist International or the Third International.

[2] Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919–1939* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013). I am incredibly grateful for Adi's work on this topic and refer to his research throughout this article, even if I do not share all of his conclusions.

[3] In 1920, the Communist Party of Egypt became the second such party on the continent.

[4] As Adi argues, the Union Intercoloniale was itself the product of Comintern pressures on the PCF to put greater attention on anti-colonial activity and work among those who hailed from parts of the French empire residing in France. See Adi, 206-7.

[5] Adi 212

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[6] Adi points out that while party leaders in these countries were accused of "white chauvinism" it was also the case these newly formed Communist parties were still struggling to function as unified organizations during the early 1920s. Thus, it was not simply the case that there was a concerted effort to downplay the importance of anti-colonial and anti-racist work. The young Communist Parties struggled in many arenas.

[7] Adi, 212

[8] For more on Senghor and his associates see Adi, Chapter 6, as well the work of Brett Hayes Edwards, David Murphy, and Babacar "Baye".

[9] Although based in the US, Padmore hailed from Trinidad and Hermina Huiswoud was from British Guiana.

[10] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott...>

[11] "Autonomy" was later replaced with "equal rights."

[12] Comintern leaders argued that the "Black peasantry" was the "moving force of the revolution." See Adi, 72-74.

[13] For more on this critique see the work of Baruch Hirson.

[14] See Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 87.

[15] As Adi argues, George Padmore would go on to use the connections he made when leading the ITUCNW in the 1930s to later build the 1945 Pan-African Congress.

[16] For more on the twists and turns of the late Comintern, see Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2008.)