COMINTERN AND AFRICAN NATIONALISM, 1921–1935

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Background

The purpose of the proposed project is to evaluate links between Comintern and African nationalist movements between the two world wars. There are two researchers involved. Docent Holger Weiss is currently employed at the Department of Asian and African studies, University of Helsinki. Ph.D Risto Marjomaa is a researcher in the "Sotasurma"-project for which he is writing an article evaluating from an international perspective the deaths caused by the Finnish civil war. He has also received a grant from Suomen Kulttuurirahasto in order to start working in the current project from July 2003 onwards. The funding applied from Suomen Akatemia is meant for the employment of Ph.D Risto Marjomaa for a three years period starting 2004.

The main source material for the project is the Comintern’s archive in Moscow. In addition, we shall try to locate the papers of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUC-NW) and the League Against Imperialism and for Colonial Independence (LAI). The Comintern archive has only recently been opened and has not been used in this context apart from the research conducted by Apollon Davidson.1 Both members of the project have wide experience on African history, especially during the colonial period. Marjomaa has also written articles of Finnish inter-war communists for the Finnish National Biography.

Relations between Comintern and African nationalism have so far received rather insufficient notice among scholars. The Comintern side of the picture has been thoroughly investigated by Edward Thomas Wilson in his book 'Russia and Black Africa before World War II'. However, his book was written already almost three decades ago and Wilson did not have access to Comintern papers in Moscow. Furthermore, his interest was mainly on Comintern’s organization and links to Africa, not the other way around. A more recent research on the same topic is Barbara Bush’s Imperialism, Race and Resistance. Africa and Britain, 1919-1945. Bush did not have access to Comintern papers either, nor does she concentrate in colonial Africa. Toyin Falola's investigation on nationalism and African intellectuals (2001) does not extend the matter any further as he has not used Comintern material. German scholars Bernhard Bayerlein and Horst Schumacher omit Africa almost completely in their extensive works on Comintern (see References).

As compared to these researchers we shall concentrate on the Africans themselves and how they were able to use Comintern for their own purposes. Who were those African nationalists who became involved with Comintern? What were their goals and how these were affected by communist ideology as perceived by the Comintern? What benefit did they get from their links to the Comintern and how it showed in their later careers? Did they form their own networks that continued to flourish after the Comintern period?

A definition of the importance of the research project

The subject of the current project is to analyse how the endeavours of the Comintern affected the future of the independence movements in colonial sub-Saharan Africa. The Third (Communist) International, Comintern for short, was formed in Moscow in 1919 as an association of national communist parties. Its purported aim was the promotion of world revolution, but in practice its chief organizers, the Russian revolutionaries, closely controlled it from the start. Lenin himself stressed the importance of canvassing support also among the masses in Asia and Africa (Lenin, 1965, 153-154). Africans were encouraged to combat the colonizers so as to widen the anti-imperialist front. As a consequence, Comintern sought to enter into consultation with African nationalists. At first, however, this was mainly restricted to forming contacts with Afro-American organizations in the United States. The only sub-Saharan delegate in the third congress appears to have been a white representative from the South African Communist Party.

As Comintern and its affiliated organizations found it difficult to get into direct contact with African nationalists, they chose to use Afro-American Pan-Africanists, such as WEB Du Bois and George Padmore, as well as European communist parties, especially the French Communist Party, to spread socialist ideas. Already in October 1921, the Executive Committee of the Third International called on the Politburo of the French Communist Party to set up speedily Communist Colonial Council to encourage anti-colonial activities in Africa and elsewhere. One of the first tasks of the Council was to conduct a survey of the geographical, ethnic, economic, political and social situation in all French colonies in Africa (Thiam and Mulira, 1999, 800).

It was only after the abandonment of the "united front" policy in 1923 that Africa began to raise more interest in the Comintern. It was argued that the colonial empires, facing problems back home and increasingly also in Asia and the Near East, were relying on sub-Saharan Africa to benefit from its economic exploitation and, if need be, even its military resources in the form of Black soldiers. Consequently the fifth Comintern congress led to the forming of the Negro Propaganda Commission (NPC) for promoting revolution in sub-Saharan Africa. The new
organization was to be established by the communist parties of the colonial powers Great Britain, France, and Belgium, and to have its headquarters in the neutral territory of Geneva.

In practice the NPC turned out to be rather ineffectual. It formed some contacts to the Pan-African movement organized by Afro-American interest groups, but on the main failed to create direct links to the African continent itself. This was not due to any lack of political initiative on the part of the Africans themselves. At the wake of the Versailles peace treaty in 1919 sub-Saharan Africa had experienced a virtual boom of native associations. The fledgling group of Western educated Africans formed most of these and they were mainly concerned with improving the lot of the African civil servant within the colonial system. However, some associations were already adopting more wide-ranging demands verging on independence, or at least some form of self-rule. Among these were the African National Congress (ANC), formed in South Africa already in 1912, the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) and Le Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre (LDRN). However, this relationship between African nationalistic movements and the Comintern was to be asymmetric and contradictory: none of the African movements were working-class movements, but movements led by an emergent national, sometimes radical, bourgeoisie. Only a few of the Africans involved, such as Lamine Senghor or Kouyate, were communists, although a quite substantial number of Africans were to be invited to the Soviet Union during the 1920s and early 1930s.2

The LDRN was established in 1924 with support from the French communist party. It was meant to cover the vast territory of the French West and Equatorial Africa, but in fact failed ignominiously already in its inaugural agitation program in Dahomey. Other half-hearted attempts to raise African support for the communists met with similar results. Partially the NPC’s failure to create links to African associations was due to the continuing vague attitude of the western communists towards colonialism. Neither the British nor the French communist party had clearly denounced colonial empires. Thus African nationalists could view them more as a part of the problem than as a source of allies.

During the sixth Comintern congress in 1925 the NPC received criticism for being ineffectual and ideologically unsound. It was argued that the potential for canvassing support among the Africans was real, if it could only be tapped. Partly due to an internal power struggle within the Soviet leadership the initiative in such secondary areas as Africa was still mainly left in the hands of the communist delegates from the West. The Comintern’s president, Grigory Zinovyev, was under rising pressure from Stalin who finally forced his resignation in 1926. This meant a

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2 For example, Jomo Kenyatta, who became the general secretary of the KCA in 1928, frequently visited Moscow during the late 1920s and early 1930s.
return to the policy of united fronts with moderate socialist parties and revolutionary aspirations in Africa were relegated to the background.

The German communists who in 1926 formed the League Against Colonial Oppression (LACO) now took up the lead in Asian and African matters. This new organization soon proved its superiority to the lethargic NPC. Already in February 1927 the LACO organized in Brussels a “World Anti-Colonial Conference”, which was to become a turning point in communist activity outside Europe. Besides several future Asian nationalist leaders, such as Nehru and Ho Chi Minh, important delegates from all over sub-Saharan Africa attended the Brussels conference. Among them were Lamine Senghor, delegate for the LDRN, and J.T. Gumede, the President of the ANC. Comintern was not officially among the conference organizers, but it took openly part in its proceeding and formed its first significant contacts with African nationalists. Some delegates were invited to visit Soviet Union and others, such as Johnstone Kamau, future Jomo Kenyatta, came later to study in Moscow. A base for future revolutionary work in Africa had finally been laid.

After the Brussels conference the LACO was replaced with a more permanent organization, The League Against Imperialism and for Colonial Independence (LAI). This marked the beginning of a period of active Comintern interest in colonial territories, including Africa. The LAI was also based in Germany, which suited an anti-colonial organization well as it had already lost its own colonies. Branch associations were established in different parts of the world, including North Africa, but sub-Saharan Africa remained mainly under the responsibility of the European branches in Paris and London. From now on the LAI was to form the main link between the Comintern and those Africans who aspired its help in their anti-colonial struggle.

Power struggle in Soviet Union continued and after having crushed his left-wing rivals Stalin turned against the moderates enforcing the sixth Comintern congress in 1928 to once more denounce socialists and social democrats. No longer was there to be any ambiguousness in Comintern's views towards colonialism. The broad lines for future conduct were outlined by the Finnish delegate O.V. Kuusinen in his "Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in Colonial and Semi-Colonial Countries”, which was now adopted as Comintern’s official policy. All pretensions of benevolent colonialism were firmly renounced and the only acceptable goal for communist parties was to be total independence for all colonial populations.

Having thus formed its future strategy in clear terms Comintern proceeded to give its active support to anti-colonial movements all around the world. Power within Comintern itself had by now concentrated on the hands of its executive committee, controlled by the Soviets, and there was not be another general congress for seven years. A more centralized command structure allowed the organization also to concentrate its resources better. So far Comintern’s trade union
wing, the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), also known as Profintern, had showed only marginal interest towards Africa. Now it created the International Negro Workers Information Bureau (INWIB) and laid the foundations for an international Negro Workers Conference to be held in Hamburg in July 1930.

The Hamburg conference turned out to be another landmark in Comintern’s relations with sub-Saharan Africa. It was attended by several important African activists, such as George Padmore, the secretary of the INWIB, E.F. Small from Gambia, I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson from Sierra Leone, Johnstone Kamau from British East Africa (Kenya) and Herbert Macaulay from Nigeria. Most of the delegates from French colonies, especially Garan Kouyaté who had replaced the deceased Lamine Senghour as the leader of the LDRN, were prevented from arriving by the French authorities. Nevertheless, several of those present were to be important in the creation of the future national movements in their countries. Johnstone Kamau, who later changed his name to Jomo Kenyatta, even became the first head of state in Kenya.

The main achievement of the Hamburg conference was a decision to reform the INWIB as the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUC-NW). The new organization finally provided the Comintern a practical tool with which to gain influence in Africa. The Executive Committee of the ITUC-NW, with Padmore still its secretary, aimed to work out a coherent policy, which would unite African masses behind the communist labour union and thus undermine colonial control in Africa. Popular support was to be canvassed through the union’s newspaper, *Negro Worker*, and other publications sponsored by the LAI, which was also stepping up its support for African anti-colonialist movements. The LDRN, under the leadership of Kouyaté, and the British Negro Welfare Association (NWA), headed by Wallace-Johnson, provided additional links in an increasingly complicated system of communist networks.

There were now active operations also within sub-Saharan Africa itself. Communist cells were formed at least in Madagascar, South Africa, British East Africa (Kenya), Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and various parts of French West and Equatorial African territories. A number of associations and societies were formed, some of them by Wallace-Johnston personally, although most did not survive long under the pressure of colonial authorities. A communist party was established in Madagascar and E.F. Small organized a general strike in Gambia. There were even abortive armed revolts in the French Congo in 1929 and in Cameroon in 1931, both linked to the increasingly radical LDRN. In Basutoland, the Lekhotla la Bafo or "League of the Poor" was to be closely linked to the Communist Party of South Africa from 1928 and was seen by the British colonial administration seen as "an instrument of Moscow" (Roux 1964). Comintern’s role was restricted to forming organizational links and especially to funding African anti-colonial operations.
After only a few years of hectic action the Comintern’s African venture nevertheless came to a sudden halt. While concentrating on its anti-colonial and anti-social democrat policy the Soviet Union had seriously underestimated the danger presented to it by the rising fascism in Europe. World revolution had once more been seen as imminent, at least in official propaganda, and subversive actions had been conducted with scant interest on maintaining links to potential allies. It was only Hitler’s brutal actions towards German communists after he gained power in spring 1933 that alerted Stalin to the danger. The Comintern was now tightly under Soviet rule and it was made to sacrifice world revolution for the benefit of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. At the Comintern’s seventh and last congress in 1935 Stalin enforced yet another policy shift. "Popular fronts" with western moderate socialist and liberal groups were to be formed against fascism and this goal was not to be threatened by any subversive actions in the colonies.

By then Comintern and the African nationalists had in fact already faced a breakdown. The ITUC-NW and the LAI had both been based in Germany and they were forced to relocate after Hitler came to power. Comintern stopped its all-important funding around the same time and the organizations it had helped to create crashed down in a few years. By the time the Second World War began there was almost nothing left of the communist front in Africa. This, however, did not mean that the Africans involved in it would also have disappeared. Many of them continued to play a part in the post-war struggle for independence and the resulting independent African states. How far did they maintain the networks created under the auspices of the Comintern and how much did it help them in their future careers remains unknown and is one of the main goals of our project.

**Research objectives**

The key question of the research project concerns African intellectuals and nationalist movements and their relation to various organizations attached to the Comintern.

The main goal is to investigate to what extent did Marxism influence African intellectuals and what were their relations to communist organizations during the interwar period. How did this effect later African nationalists movements? What kind of networks did Africans connected to the Comintern form among themselves and how did this affect the future of African independence movements and, indeed, the independent African states to this day?

The research project involves the following subsidiary questions:
1. To what extent did European communist parties and other organizations take part in African anti-imperialist struggles?
2. What expectations African nationalists had concerning their relationship with the Comintern?
3. What kind of material is located in the Moscow Comintern archives and among the LAI papers concerning Africa and how could they be used for historical research?

**Source material, working method and timetable**

The main source material for our project shall be the Comintern archive in Moscow. This material shall be complemented with other archive material, mainly the archives of communist parties from Germany, France, and Great Britain. The languages needed in our project are German, French and English, all of them accessible to us. Comintern papers are mainly written in German, the working language of Comintern until 1935, or in French or English, which were used by most African nationalists in their reports. If need be, an assistant shall translate any relevant Russian text. According to the preliminary research already done on the matter, there should not be much material written in Russian. The actual results of our project, articles and a monograph, shall be written in English.

The LAI- and ITUC-NW-papers will also be checked in the Bundesarchiv in Berlin. In addition, the archives of the German Communist Party, which played a key role in the formation of the LAI and ITUC-NW, can also be found at the Bundesarchiv.

In addition to the above-mentioned archives, the Public Records Office in Kew Gardens (London) and Rhodes House (Oxford) as well as the Centre des Archives d'Outre-mer (Aix-en-Provence) will be consulted.

While working in Moscow we shall expect to co-operate with the University of Moscow. Since the 1990s, Finnish researchers have been working in the Comintern archives, especially focusing on Finnish and Soviet relationship. Further, Docent Jussi Pakkasvirta has been able to locate material concerning Latin American nationalist movements. Thus, there exists a working link between our research project and the accumulated expertise of other Finnish researchers. We have been in contact with Docent Kimmo Rentola (Faculty of Social Science, Department of Political History, University of Helsinki), who has promised to help us with the research environment in Moscow and shall provide us with a recommendation. We shall also engage a local research assistant to assist us in practical matters.
The timetable of the project covers three and a half year starting from July 2003. Marjomaa has already received funding (EUR 14,000) from the Finnish Cultural Foundation (Suomen Kulttuurirahasto) in order to finance the early stages of the project. During 2003 and 2004 we shall go through most of the material in Moscow and additional literature. In 2005 this work is extended to also archives in Germany, France, and Great Britain. Year 2006 is reserved mainly for writing the actual monograph and attending the American African Studies Association (ASA) conference in the United States.

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