
Holger Weiss, Åbo Akademi University

The African dimension of the Comintern network underwent far-reaching alterations between the date when Padmore left Moscow in early 1933 and when Huiswoud sojourned in Antwerp and Amsterdam in 1934 and 1935. When Padmore wrote his 1931-32 Report, his network included contact persons in East, South and West Africa. At this point, all members of his African network were residing in Moscow and were enrolled at the KUTV. All of them were to receive special training as agent provocateurs and union activities and were to be sent back to their home countries to start mobilizing African toilers and peasants.

However, a problem was that only a few candidates perfectly matched the needed qualifications to become trustful and loyal agitators and activists. The ambitions of both the Negro Bureau and Padmore had been to pick up Africans with a working class background and to train them in Moscow, but only a few of them turned out to be perfect matches. The main critique in Moscow of the Africans was that few of them turned out to be sincere Communists never mind about their capacity to be turn into devoted Apparatchiks. Some of them, like Johnstone Kenyatta, never fully accepted the Bolshevik Gospel and were never even affiliated with a Communist Party. Others, such as I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, claimed to be Communists but rejected the uncompromising ‘class-against-class’ approach. A third group were persons like Holle Seleh Tamba who were more ambiguous. They were not Party members, but merely convinced union activists. Last, but not least, there were those who would articulate the anti-imperialist credo but were belittled by their teachers in Moscow for not having understood Marxism and Communism. But while the estimations and judgements of the KUTV personnel about the capacity of their African students are known,¹ the ambitions and visions of the Africans remain hazy and only a few of them articulated their motives for joining the Communists.

In practice, the objective to start work in Africa proved difficult to implement. Contacts with E.F. Small in the Gambia had been lost at an early stage, if they ever had developed into something more than a short flirt. Contacts with Sierra Leone, too, were aborted by 1932 for different reasons, most likely due to effective measures by the colonial

¹ See further the evaluation reports (in Russian) of the students in Section 9 of the KUTV, RGASPI 532/1/440.
government to curb Bolshevik agitation in the colony. The chaos in 1933 prevented Padmore from maintaining control of his African network. As he drifted away from the Comintern, the few links that existed were interrupted. The East African connection never materialized as Kenyatta fell out of the revolutionary circles and joined the ‘reformists’. The South African dimension was in crisis due to the internal squabbles and continuous fractional animosities, which left the CPSA with virtually no membership. On the other hand, there were four countries where agitation and mobilization was still possible: Liberia, the Gold Coast, Nigeria and Cameroon.

The RILU Negro Bureau started focusing on West Africa in 1933. At this stage the idea was to call for a “Congress of the West African People” to be organized somewhere legally in West Africa at the end of the year. A working group consisting of Safarov, Zusmanovich, Nasanov, Nzula, Holle Seleh Tamba and a certain Comrade Rast (unidentified) was nominated to start the preparations of the congress. The congress’ agenda was political in nature. It hoped to establish an independent platform for all anticolonial movements in the Gold Coast, Nigeria, Cameroon and Liberia and to connect it with the League Against Imperialism.² If the proposal was ever considered is not known and it is likely that the whole idea was soon dropped. However, the outline of the congress could indicate that the RILU Negro Bureau planned to make use of their Africans contact persons and create a legal platform for them to interact. Wallace-Johnson was already residing in Nigeria, Tamba, Nathan Varne Gray and Samuel Freeman were expected to return to Liberia, “Robert” to the Gold Coast and Joseph Bilé to Cameroon. Eventually, activities started only in the Gold Coast and in Liberia. The Cameroonian outreach was never realized since Bilé cut off his ties with the Communists and Wallace-Johnson’s activities in Lagos had come to an end already in late 1933. Nevertheless, he was able to transfer his activities to the Gold Coast.

1. The rise and fall of the Lagos connection

The first West African to leave Moscow was I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson. Although he had planned to stay for much longer, the Russian winter was too much for him and in January 1933 he asked for permission to return to Nigeria. On his way back he stopped in England where he stayed for a week, among others speaking under the auspices of the Negro Welfare Association. He thereafter continued his journey to West Africa and arrived at Freetown on 18

² Memorandum on work in West Africa (in Russian), no date, RGASPI 495/64/166, fol. 81.
February. Here he tried to agitate and propagate for the cause of the ITUCNW but was not successful. In an intercepted mail to Padmore, he criticized the employed workers for not being interested in the unemployed while the unemployed seemed not to care about their conditions. In the same month he left for Lagos where he arrived on 5 March.\(^3\)

Conditions in Lagos had deteriorated and there was even less space for political activities than before he left the country. The police authorities had declared the African Workers’ Union to be illegal and permission to hold meetings had been withdrawn. He believed himself to be a persona non grata in the eyes if the authorities and knew that the “political watchdogs” keenly watched his movements. In a letter he wrote to Moscow two weeks after his arrival, he claimed that he had already been called twice to the authorities that questioned him about his doings and his mission in Lagos. “It was good I had expected to meet these difficulties otherwise I would not be able to stem the tide of things.” Wallace-Johnson was certain that the authorities would deport him as soon as they had a chance or even arrest him “on some bogus charges.”\(^4\)

Wallace-Johnson had left England sometimes in mid-January,\(^5\) thus he was not aware of the Nazi crackdown on the ITUCNW and Padmore’s imprisonment. On the contrary, he expected to start working according to plans which – obviously – had been discussed in Moscow and while he was in England: “I spent a week in England during which I was able to do some work there towards the achievement of our plans.” It is certain that part of his mission was to recruit a new batch of African students to go to Moscow and that Padmore was to act as his middleman:

Re the securing of student, we have secured four students at present and I have by this mail written to comrade Padmore about them. They have started to arrange for their passports. as (sic) soon as arrangements could be completed for them to go over, you will please see that I am advised if it is

---

3 Report re Wallace-Johnson, Governor Douglas Jardine to Secretary of State Malcolm MacDonald, 30.6.1938, Gambia National Archive n.179-4/73, Colonial Secretary’s Office – ‘Wallace-Johnson and the activities of the IASB’. Wallace-Johnson’s arrival in Lagos can be established via information in his March-letter to ‘Dear Comrades’ (see below).

4 Handwritten letter by I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson to ‘Dear Comrade’, Lagos 17.3.1933, RGASPI 495/154/512, fol. 83. The recipient of the letter cannot be identified. It was not Padmore or Nzula as Wallace-Johnson refers to them in the letter. Most probably it was someone in Moscow as he sent greetings to “the comrades at the Komintern and the Kutv,” perhaps even one of the comrades at the RILU Negro Bureau – a person who had a wife and a daughter.

possible to despatch them in summer (sic) this year before the situation becomes graver, I think it would be good.  

The second part of the plan was to focus on rooting the labour union. Although not much existed of the African Workers’ Union of Nigeria at the time of Wallace-Johnson’s return, he was confident about future work – despite constraints put by the colonial authorities:

Re the Union we are still determined to carry through. We are now re-organising in another form and I presume there is success ahead of us.  

It is not known if Wallace-Johnson had any success in Nigeria. Not much is known about his activities for the next several months, although it is possible that he continued to be a staff member of the Nigerian Daily Times and Secretary to the Koffey African Universal Church Society in Lagos. On behalf of the NWA, however, he did institute a fund raising campaign for the Scottsboro boys. For the remainder of the year, his direct contacts with the Comintern apparatus were weak, if they existed at all. However, he must have had some contacts with Padmore, as the Padmore certainly informed him about the ITUCNW’s relocation to Paris and that letters were to be sent via Copenhagen. At least on this occasion, Padmore also utilized Wallace-Johnson as his intermediary to get in contact with someone in Sierra Leone.

There exists no further evidence of Wallace-Johnson’s direct communication with Moscow while he resided in Lagos. It is likely that he continued to be in touch with Padmore although the correspondence is (probably) lost. An indication of their contact is found in a message from Arnold Ward who informed some in Moscow that “Wallace Johnson has collected several young Negroes according to Padmore [sic] instruction and is awaiting news from him when they shall leave for USSR.”

Wallace-Johnson acted as Padmore’s West African intermediary and it was perhaps in this position he established a connection with two political activists in the Gold Coast, namely Bankole Awoonor Renner and Benjamin Wuta-Ofei. It is not known who made the first step and who had supplied the information about the existence of radicals in Accra and in Lagos.

---

6 Wallace-Johnson to ‘Dear Comrade’, Lagos 17.3.1933, RGASPI 495/154/512, fol. 83.
7 Wallace-Johnson to ‘Dear Comrade’, Lagos 17.3.1933, RGASPI 495/154/512, fol. 83.
8 See Asante 1971, p. 50; LaRay Denzer, “Wallace-Johnson and the Sierra Leone Labor Crisis of 1939,” African Studies Review 25:2/3, 1982, p. 165. Asante and Denzer refer to Governor Jardine’s letter to MacDonald as their source. However, the Governor’s information deals with his activities before he left Nigeria in 1932 and is therefore an extremely weak source for establishing his activities in 19333.
10 Letter from Padmore to ‘Dear Comrades’, 6.3.1933, RGASPI 534/3/895, fol. 130.
Padmore had been corresponding with Wuta-Ofei in 1932; perhaps he had supplied Wallace-Johnson with his address? Or was it the other way round? Nevertheless, Awoonor Renner visited Lagos – for the first time, according to himself – in April 1933 and commemorated this visit in his poem “This beautiful island”:

> Your Marina deceives, but not your heart
> This beautiful Island Lagos one sees from apart.\(^\text{12}\)

It is likely that Awoonor Renner met Wallace-Johnson during this visit. Perhaps it was via the connection to Awoonor Renner that Wallace-Johnson got in touch with Wuta-Ofei – the latter belonged to Awoonor Renner’s circle in the Gold Coast. Anticipating further troubles with the colonial authorities in Nigeria, Wallace-Johnson had written to Wuta-Ofei and asked for assistance. In reply, Wuta-Ofei suggested that he come to the Gold Coast.\(^\text{13}\)

Apart from being engaged in trade union activities, Wallace-Johnson created a Scottsboro Defense Group and tried his best to distribute the *Negro Worker*. The journal’s distribution ultimately turned into a cat and mouse game. The Nigerian authorities had prohibited the journal’s circulation in addition to other Communist, socialist and Black radical publications in the colonies.\(^\text{14}\) Wallace-Johnson certainly knew the risks he was taking. In October 1933, the Nigerian authorities made their final move and raided his office and subsequently deported him for his political activities.\(^\text{15}\) Making use of his Gold Coast contacts, he left Lagos in November and settled in Accra.\(^\text{16}\) He notified the LAI that the police had confiscated all his papers and Bridgeman was able to get his case discussed in the House of Commons. Eventually, his papers were returned.\(^\text{17}\)

---


\(^\text{16}\) Governor Douglas Jardine to Secretary of State Malcolm MacDonald, 30.6.1938, Gambia National Archive n.179-4/73.

\(^\text{17}\) Derrick 2008, p. 294.
With Wallace-Johnson’s departure from Nigeria, the ITUCNW lost its only contact person in the country. The reorganization of the African Workers’ Union never materialized and neither Padmore nor Huiswoud were able to find a replacement in Lagos. The anticipated transfer of Nigerian students also never occurred. Nigeria became a closed territory for Huiswoud and the ITUCNW. There were no connections to the colony were listed in his 1934-1935 report.

2. The Liberian cell

Liberia had emerged as a key area of interest for the ITUCNW already during Padmore’s days. He started to write articles about the conditions in Liberia in 1931 and heavily criticised American imperialism in the country. In addition, he devoted an entire chapter in his pamphlet *The Lives and Struggles of the Negro Toiler* (1931) to the Liberian cause. His texts were hailed by some progressive Liberians and thereafter corresponded with several Liberian journalists. In addition, he had also been able to establish small cells in the country. By 1932, however, political activities had become increasingly difficult and Padmore made an effort to get some of his local contacts, such as Holle Seleh Tamba, out of the country. Tamba was subsequently enrolled under the alias, Martin Nelson, at the KUTV where he joined two other Liberians, Samuel Freeman alias Charles Lafayette or Charlie (Charley) and Nathan Varne Grey alias Smith.

At the end of their term in Moscow, the KUTV prepared a critical assessment of the three Liberians’ political potential and suitability. All of them were branded as ‘troublemakers’ and had caused disturbance in the classes, one report stated, and warned to assign them collective operations. However, the individual evaluation was more promising for Nelson. Much hope was put on his capability for organising anti-imperialist actions as well as his capacity for labour union work. He was an ambiguous figure, portrayed as an energetic and enterprising chap but in the same vein criticized for being a careerist. Charley, on the other hand, was depicted as being a frivolous and obstinate egoist who never grasped the

---

18 It is likely that Wallace-Johnson was the author of two unsigned articles on Nigeria that were published in the *Negro Worker* (“A Voice from the Colonies,” III:8-9, 1933; “Regime of Terror in Nigeria,” IV:3, 1934). The last full article on Nigeria was written by him (under his alias Wal. Daniels), “Nigeria Again – Another Wave of Atrocity,” *The Negro Worker* IV:6-7, 1934.


inner meaning of revolutionary activism. Not much was to be expected from him and the assessment anticipated that he would leave the movement as soon as possible. Smith’s case was a more challenging one. The assessment concluded that he was certainly useful but one should be very careful with him.\textsuperscript{21}

It is likely that the praise of Nelson’s capacities were also based on his activities at the RILU Negro Bureau. He might not have occupied an official post at the Bureau but one finds references to him as someone at least engaged in Negro work. In 1932 he belonged to the commission for the preparation of the (aborted) West African Negro Congress, and in 1933 he was sending letters to Liberia.\textsuperscript{22}

I am not certain when Charlie and Smith returned to Liberia. Nelson, at least, was to return in 1934. On his way back, he called at Antwerp in July where he met Otto Huiswoud and received further instructions concerning the activities at his destination.\textsuperscript{23} One of his first obligations must certainly have been the dissemination of the \textit{Open Letter to Liberia}, which Huiswoud had published as a pamphlet.\textsuperscript{24}

Nelson immediately ran into trouble upon his arrival in Monrovia in August 1934. Someone was spreading rumours that he had been in contact with Padmore and as Padmore had contacts with the Soviet Union, it was also claimed that Nelson had been to Russia. This was a serious blow to his planned activities as his sojourn in and links to the Communist world were not to be uncovered. “Everybody I meet asks me about the S.U. and of course I answer just what you may guess. […] I flatly refused any such connection.”\textsuperscript{25}

Nelson’s training for clandestine missions paid off. Not only was he devoted to the Cause, but remained suspicious about anyone whom he could not trust. This was especially true concerning a certain Mr. Saint Just who originated from Haiti and claimed to be a Communist. When Nelson arrived in Liberia some people told him to contact Saint Just who was allegedly to the country by the Soviet Government “to create some root of organization or effect a certain arrangement.” Nelson mistrusted such claims as he had not heard anything about these plans in Moscow and avoided him, as he believed him to be a spy. He further alerted Huiswoud in the hopes to launch an investigation about his activities and credentials:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Assessment reports on Liberians (in Russian), no date, RGASPI 495/279/69, fol. 4-5.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Letter from Padmore to NN, 6.3.1933, RGASPI 534/3/895, fol. 130fp.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Letter from Edward to ‘Dear Friends’, 26.7.1934, RGASPI 534/3/986, fol. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Letter from Edward to ‘Dear Comrades’, 23.8.1934, RGASPI 534/3/986, fol. 9. The call was also published as ITUCNW, “To the Workers and Peasants of Liberia,” \textit{The Negro Worker} IV:1, 1934.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Nelson to ‘Sir’, 12.8.1934, RGASPI 534/3/986, fol. 11. The letter had been sent to Huiswoud as is evident from an attached note; see Edward to ‘Dear Friend Suzanne’, 7.9.1934, RGASPI 534/3/986, fol. 10.
\end{itemize}
This matter, unless investigated and stopped immediately is liable to create serious international complications; because the youngmen [i.e., people who belonged to Saint Just’s retinue] are publishing everywhere they go. He has even gone so far, as I am informed, as suggest that the government give him 75 boys to be sent to the S[oviet] U[nion] for training. I do not wish to see the S.U., the only fatherland of the oppressed peoples of the earth[,] in international disputes, which are likely to block the way for ambitious workers.26

Huiswoud, in his turn, identified the Haitian to be a certain Dr. Saint Just who had been a physician in Paris and had formerly edited a magazine called “The Review of the Black World” and was certainly a highly suspect person. He was a close acquaintance of Padmore and Kouyaté. Not surprisingly, therefore, Huiswoud warned Nelson to be on his guard and to keep an eye on the Haitian’s undertakings in Liberia.27

Nelson also informed Huiswoud that he should not send any material, including the Open letter-pamphlet for the moment, as he was certain that the Liberian authorities were watching his steps. Instead, he planned to maintain a low profile and to concentrate on “studying the movement of things and people.”28

Nevertheless, the initial problems and challenges were soon overcome and Nelson evolved as the leading figure of the ‘cell’ in Liberia. In early January 1935 he informed Zusmanovich that although “nothing organisationally tangible has been put into operation” due to “certain adverse circumstances,” he had succeeded in getting five young man interested and had established a small study group with them. This group, he proposed, could perhaps even send to Moscow:

They have become so interested that they wish to know whether there were possibilities for them to go away for further study. I told them that perhaps the chance [might] arise one day, but that I could not tell; in the meanwhile I wrote to Editor touching upon that question, but he too could not say definitively s he was planning “to go on a trip”.29

The ‘Editor’ to whom Nelson referred to was certainly Huiswoud30. Nelson also noted in the letter that he had sent two dispatches to Moscow, one from Antwerp and the other from

30 Nelson also informed Zusmanovich that he had received a letter from “the Editor” dated 10 December 1934. This indicates that Nelson must have been aware of the arrest of Huiswoud and the relocation of activities to Amsterdam.
Lisbon on his way to Liberia but had only in January received a letter from Zusmanovich. “I am very happy to note that you and the rest of our friends have not forgotten about me,” he declared. Work in Liberia proved to be much more challenging than he had anticipated: “Conditions for my work are not yet favourable, or as favourable as I expected they should be, or as I left them two years ago.” He had written a lengthy analysis about the Liberian political and economic conditions and informed Zusmanovich that two copies of it were to be dispatched in a supplement delivery, one via London, the other via a certain “James”.  

Nelson’s report eventually reached Moscow in late February 1935 as is evident in Zusmanovich’ February 1935 letter to Huiswoud. A comparison between the date when Nelson’s letter arrived in Moscow, on 20 February 1935, and Zusmanovich instructions to Huiswoud on 21 February 1935 indicates that Moscow had been eagerly waiting for any news from Liberia. Nelson’s report was considered to be especially valuable:

> Send him greetings from the Russian comrades and tell him that they fully support him in his work. As for his report, we have translated it and in particular we are noting it in some publications, excepting the Negro Worker.

Eventually, Nelson’s analysis about the conditions in Liberia was published in three parts in the Negro Worker. However, it is possible that the final version of the article was a compilation of Nelson’s and some other texts. I have not yet been able to locate the original dispatches but a short note from Smith to Zusmanovich seems to indicate the possibility. Smith and Charlie, who at this point also had started their work in Liberia, formed part of the inner cell although, as will be discussed further below, Nelson did not consider much of their capabilities for subversive agitation. On the other hand, Smith, who had gone to the Firestone rubber plantation, had made some initial progress. About the time when Nelson was writing his letter to Zusmanovich, Smith visited Monrovia and wrote a few lines to Zusmanovich which reached Moscow in the same dispatch as Nelson’s:

> Just a few lines to inform you that upon my arrival here I made it my special duty to go up to the Rubber plantation here. After a four-month stay up thee, I came down yesterday in order that I may submit Tamba [i.e., Nelson, HW] my report. I shall ask him to send you a copy.

34 (Original) letter from Varney Gray Cullam (signed) [i.e., Smith], Monrovia, 8.1.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 20. The recipient of the letter was most likely Zusmanovich.
Only an analysis of the two reports – provided that Smith ever wrote one and it was received in Moscow – can therefore clarify the authorship of the articles in the *Negro Worker*.

Smith’s report was perhaps never written. At least Nelson was highly sceptical about the potentials of his colleague for subversive activities on the rubber plantations: “I personally thought that C[omrade] S[mith] would have been the man to this, but to my surprise this fellow came yesterday from Firestone P[lantation] with many facts, which I have told him to put in writing.” The good news was that he had been able to form a group of three persons – or at least claimed such a success.\(^{35}\)

Charlie’s activities were even more disappointing and in Nelson’s mind had not achieved anything. Instead, he behaved as if he had not learned anything about how to conduct clandestine missions in Moscow:

> I regret to state that C[omrade] Ch[arlie] has not been what I expected he should have been. He pays no attention to me, but simply delights in telling people that he has been in the U.S.S.R. etc! and but for the fact that our people here Kno, [do not know] “very much” about the CCCP., things would have been very fatal at this end.\(^{36}\)

Although Smith and Charlie were potential troublemakers, Zusmanovich did not consider this to be a major challenge for the moment. Much more interesting was the prospect of recruiting a new batch of students for the KUTV and instructed Huiswoud to get in touch with Nelson about the matter:

> He should send three or four people from his country to study. We should strike the iron while it is hot, but set him the condition that he must absolutely send industrial or agricultural workers from the Firestone plantations. It seems to me that there are possibilities there, so put pressure on and reply to this letter without fail.\(^{37}\)

Unfortunately, Huiswoud’s instructions to Nelson have not been found. He certainly communicated with Nelson about the matter as it resurfaced the discussion a few months later.

In the meanwhile Moscow finally received information about Charlie’s activities. Early in April 1935, he had sent a letter to Zusmanovich, informing him about his local

political engagement. It seems as if Charlie was planning to organize a kind of May Day demonstration or, as he called it, a “Grand World Proletarian Demonstration.” Calling on the moral support of Zusmanovich, he declared: ‘remember ‘Africa’ on the Great May 1, when we together with you shall rejoice and continue to stretch forth our daring fists to decaying capitalism.’\(^{38}\)

However, it is likely that there never was any demonstration. The news that Huiswoud was to receive from Liberia was not promising at all with regards to the activity of the three comrades and the prospect for agitation in the plantations:

I have just received a communication from Nelson, who is apparently doing his best to gather up some forces to start some activities. While Charlie [Charlie Lafayette] is not cooperating in any way, Smith [Hilton Smith alias Nathan Varne Gray/Grey] on the other hand had been working for some time on the plantations and is now preparing, together with N. [Nelson] a report which I expect to receive very soon. Nelson reports that it is possible to get three persons – two of them from his home, and one from Sierra Leone. He is now working on this question and of course we have to make the necessary arrangements.\(^{39}\)

Whereas Huiswoud tried to keep in touch with Nelson, contacts with the two others seemed to have been lost by 1935. Charlie’s inability to cooperate must not have come as a surprise to Moscow; his credentials had never been very high in the eyes of the KUTV.

Huiswoud sincerely believed in Nelson’s success in his negotiations with the prospective students. However, in his June letter to Moscow, Huiswoud was already pessimistic about the Liberia-connection:

In so far as Liberia is concerned, we have not heard anything from our friend Nel[son], who used to write regularly, for the last 3 months. We nevertheless, sent another letter of inquiry. We fear that something amiss[?]\(^{40}\)

Finally, in July 1935 Huiswoud received a new letter from Nelson. Much to Huiswoud’s regret, Nelson had not been able to establish anything.\(^{41}\) Nelson told him that he had been sick for some time and had experienced his second attack of malaria. He seemed to have mistrusted Charlie and told Huiswoud that he had not wanted to engage the former in writing

---

\(^{38}\) (Copy) letter from ‘Charlie’ to COM-ZYC [Zusmanovich], Monrovia, 20.4.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 7.

\(^{39}\) Letter from Edward to ‘Dear Comrades’, 11.4.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 5.

\(^{40}\) Letter from Edward to ‘Dear Friends’, 24.6.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 9.

\(^{41}\) Letter from Edward to ‘Dear Friends’, 17.7.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 12.
a letter to the latter “since I do not wish him to know the address for the reason I wrote you once.” The political situation had – once again – changed in Liberia. Nelson had backed the opposition in the presidential election, but they had lost:

Political campaign is now over with Barclay again in the mansion. I rendered assistance to the opposition particularly because I got them to put into their platform or “program” the repeal of the famous Sedition law. But due to actual force applied by the government, the opposition was defeated.  

Interestingly, Nelson’s engagement in Liberian party politics could have been part of the assignment he had received in Moscow. Already in April 1933 he had outlined a letter to be sent to the National Party of Liberia, raising the call for mass agitation in Liberia against American imperialism and to work for the toilers in the country:

[---] The Party must be up and doing something for the cause of the subjected millions of the country. […] With the interest of the country at heart in relation to the freedom of the huge masses of aborigines, I have been thinking seriously as to how freedom can be secured. Consequently, I have discovered that if you the leaders of the toilers will abandon all superficial activity and exert yourself, the aborigined [sic] of Liberia will eventually conquer in their struggle for social-economic and political emancipation.

This letter was drafted in Moscow. In fact, the letter gives a very interesting outline of Nelson’s political ambitions, bringing forward a political programme for the National Party in Liberia:

You should draw up a concrete program for the National Party of Liberia. In it the interest of the masses should be the central idea [Nelson’s underlining]. Declare in it the right of Liberia to unconditional self-determination, i.e. that Liberia ought to be an independent country, not only in theory but also in practice, without being a protectorate of any imperialistic state, e.g. as the United State.

Not surprisingly, Nelson stressed the need to establish a link to the Comintern. Even more so, an affiliation with the Comintern and the Soviet Union would result in concrete political and

---

42 Letter from Nelson to NN [Huiswoud], 10.6.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 16.
43 Letter from Nelson to NN [Huiswoud], 10.6.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 16. Edwin Barclay (1882-1955) was President of Liberia from 1930 to 1944.
45 Letter from Holle Seleh Tamba/Nelson to P.G. Wolo, 1.4.1933, RGASPI 534/6/23, fol. 83.
economic backing:

Then I should emphatically suggest that the leaders of the Party despatch a memorandum to the Communist International [...] expressing their desire to affiliate with it: Needless to say that this is a powerful institution with an international significance for all oppressed nationalities. [...] If the aborigines would organise an anti-imperialist-national liberation [sic] movement with a view to liquidating the present exploiting system of government, and throwing off the present detestable yoke of American imperialism they may, if they so desire, find it possible to enter negotiations with the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, with an eye single to obtaining material and moral support from the latter.46

In addition, the party should make preparations of sending young workers to get a free education in the Soviet Union, Nelson declared, “for you will admit that it is quite impossible for you to send students to any American or British institution without paying heavy of money.” Cleverly, Nelson underlined that the party did not need to take a communist character for it to be affiliated with the Comintern: “This does not in any way presuppose that the movement must necessarily be of a communist character.”47

However, it is not known whether or not the letter ever was sent to Liberia. Whatever the case, Nelson seemed to have tried to work for his goals in 1935, but had failed. In his June letter to Huiswoud, Nelson was rather pessimistic about future activities. Even worse, he and his peers’ situations were not glorious:

Smith is not here. He has gone to Sinoe, got a quasi job, and is being exploited, for there is no pay in it. At the present I am without job. My only salvation is the typewriter I brought. At times, I get typing jobs where whereby I earn few shillings to keep me from dying. Ch[arlie] is also unemployed. If anything could be done for us, it would be appreciated. […] I am greatly in need of rain boots (rubber or water-proof leather boots); but there is as yet no way to get it; if you could assist in this direction I shall be very thankful.48

Neither had there been any success in attracting African students. Due to his illness, he had not been able to give the two prospective students any further education in “T.U. work.” The biggest problem, however, was that he felt that he had little backing and no local support:

46 Letter from Holle Seleh Tamba/Nelson to P.G. Wolo, 1.4.1933, RGASPI 534/6/23, fol. 83.
47 Letter from Holle Seleh Tamba/Nelson to P.G. Wolo, 1.4.1933, RGASPI 534/6/23, fol. 84.
48 Letter from Nelson to NN [Huiswoud], 10.6.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 16.
“The lack of trained cadres is hindering execution of our plans; for as things are, I am practically ALONE.”

Thus ended the second letter by Nelson to Huiswoud that I have been able to locate in the Comintern Archives. However, both Huiswoud and Zusmanovich made reference to several letters that they had received from Nelson in 1934 and 1935. Unfortunately, the whereabouts of their correspondence remains unknown. Neither is it known if and when Huiswoud and Nelson lost contact with each other: did it continue after June 1935? The last reference to Liberia is found in Huiswoud’s report on the activities of the ITUCNW for 1934-1935 where he listed an obscure Workers’ Progressive[sic] Association in Liberia. The Association, which was claimed to have 1,000 members, was one of the “small groups, groups of workers in varied forms of organizations and individuals” with was claimed to have links to the ITUCNW. Was this perhaps an organization Holle Seleh Tamba had been able to create?

3. Calling the Toilers in the Gold Coast

1933 had been planned to be the big breakthrough for the ITUNCW’s operations in Africa. The plan was twofold: local contact persons were to start the mobilization of the toilers and peasants and were to be followed by Moscow-trained instructors, namely the African students at the KUTV. Local grassroots mobilization was to be initiated and/or directed through the dissemination of Open Letters as had been done during the previous years (the Open letters to British Guiana and to Sierra Leone). The Kenyan letter of 1933 has already been referred to: most likely it had been drafted while Kenyatta was still in Moscow. Perhaps the idea was to have it circulated in Kenya before his return to the colony. However, due to Kenyatta’s rift with or departure from the Communists, the instructions remained a dead letter.

Apart from the Kenyan letter, the RILU Negro Bureau also drafted a similar declaration on the Gold Coast. In aim of the letter was to infuse fresh life into the formation and mobilization of labour unions in the colony. Although there had been a promising start in 1930, not much had been achieved. News about the economic and political conditions in the

49 Letter from Nelson to NN [Huiswoud], 10.6.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 16.
50 Interestingly, a certain K. Sallie Tamba is listed among the executive committee members of the International African Service Bureau (IASB). This organization had been founded by Padmore and others in London in 1937. Spitzer and Denzer 1973, p. 447 fn. 109. Was this Nelson? After all, he had kept some contact with Padmore, for which he had been criticized by Huiswoud.
52 “To the Workers of Acra! To the Toilers of the Gold Coast,” RGASPI 534/6/23, fol. 135-140.
Gold Coast, on the other hand, painted a grim picture of an increased plight and exploitation of the workers and peasants in the colony. Local newspapers as well as official colonial publications available in Moscow depicted the crises in the cocoa industry and the plight of the cocoa farmers and other workers in the colony due to the drop of the cocoa price and the huge slump in the export of the crop. Blame is put on ‘British imperialism’ for the misery:

Thousands and hundreds of thousands of small peasant producers of cocoa have been and are being reduced to utter ruin. The workers on the railways, harbours and in transport who handled the huge cocoa crop as a consequence of the diminishing trade, find themselves suffering of wage-cuts, longer and intenser [sic] hours, unemployment and starvation. The mining companies are not only reducing wages but are dismissing whole batches of workers. Whereas in former periods the cry of the employers and Government was about a “shortage of labour” now there is a glut on the labour market, and the employers and the Government are taking advantage of this circumstance to drive down the living conditions and wages of the workers. There is such vast poverty in the whole country that the majority of the people are compelled to starve or wander begging to find something to support life.53

The time was right for the radicalization of the downtrodden but the comrades in Moscow could not identify the slightest attempt for grassroots agitation and mobilization. The challenge, the analysis in Moscow concluded, was the need for a new class-conscious movement and leadership; thus the need for a call to the toilers.

A first draft version of the declaration had been drafted by Zusmanovich, Nzula and Losowsky in July 1933 and was presented to the RILU Secretariat. A second, corrected draft was sent to Losowsky at the end of July.54

The declaration was written in a typical ‘class-against-class’ manner and did not leave any room for a rapprochement with nationalist or reformist leaders. The chiefs and the ‘educated classes’ were accused for having become the agents of the British colonial authorities and to divert the attention of the masses from the struggle against their exploitation. The disappointment about the actions of the intelligentsia, especially the Aboriginal Rights Protection Society (ARPS), is evident and was criticized. Further, the inactivity of the Gold Coast labour unions is lamented. A call for collective action was made, to get organized and to struggle for one’s right, but nothing had been done:

53 “To the Workers of Accra! To the Toilers of the Gold Coast,” RGASPI 534/6/23, fol. 135.
54 Protocol No. 122 of the meeting of the RILU Secretariat, 20.7.1933, RGASPI 534/3/86, fol. 87. The protocol lists Zusmanovich, Jackson (i.e., Nzula) and Lozovsky. The draft version of the Open letter to the workers in Accra is in Russian, filed in RGASPI 534/3/86, fol. 102-106.
This is the only way that the workers in every country must push forward along by the organization of their own untied power, which is capable of overcoming all obstacles and creating their own militant organization to lead the struggle against their exploiters. In this respect we have some pertinent question to the Gold Coast Drivers’ and Mechanics’ Union and also the Carpenters’ Union. These two Unions had delegates at the First International Conference of Negro Workers, held in Hamburg, Germany, in July 1930, and know of our programme of struggle which was drawn up at this Conference. In view of this fact, we are surprised that these unions and their leaders are remaining passive in the face of the most unparalleled [sic] attacks in the history of the Gold Coast on all sections of the workers.55

These two unions were warned that inactivity will lead to collapse and that the workers’ struggle was being lead into the wrong channels. Instead, the two unions were urged to immediately reorganize themselves to become the spearheads of the struggle in the Gold Coast. What follows was a twelve-point list of demands similar to that in the Open letter to the Sierra Leone Railway Workers Union or the Open letter to Kenya, including the demand of “independence of the Gold Coast from British oppression and domination.”56 Was this perhaps the first call for national independence?

Further, a call was made to build up a miners’ union in the Gold Coast. Outlining the inhumane working conditions in the mines as well as the ‘starvation payment’ they receive, the Declaration urged the need for collective action:

(T)he weakness of the miners in the Gold Coast is that they are not organized. They have no trade unions of their own, in every pit and mine there should be trade union groups of miners which will be unified into miners trade unions, to lead the struggle of the miners against slave conditions. Therefore the immediate task that faces the miners is that of organizing their own trade union.57

In addition to the miners, the railroad and harbour workers were also called to action and to form unions: “Humble petitions and deputations to the Administration will never bring you any improvement in your conditions. Only by your organized might and power can you compel the employers and Government to listen to you.”58

Special emphasize was also put on the conditions of the unemployed. The Government was criticized for doing nothing to support them and to bring them relief. This, it was claimed, was to become a central task of the Drivers’ and Mechanics’ Union and the Carpenters’

55 “To the Workers of Acra! To the Toilers of the Gold Coast,” RGASPI 534/6/23, fol. 136.
56 “To the Workers of Acra! To the Toilers of the Gold Coast,” RGASPI 534/6/23, fol. 136-137.
57 “To the Workers of Acra! To the Toilers of the Gold Coast,” RGASPI 534/6/23, fol. 137.
Union: to call for a meeting in Accra and to elect a Committee of Action. The task of the Committee was to discuss the following ‘list of demands’:

1. Regular financial relief for the unemployed and their families by the Government. The fund for relief to be provided by a special tax on the enterprises of the natives and especially European capitalists, and by substantial cuts in the high salaries and total withdrawal of special allowances and privileges of the huge European bureaucracy in the civil service.
2. No rent to be paid by the unemployed.
3. Free food, clothing and medical aid for the children of the unemployed.
4. The right to organize and demonstrate. 59

Last, but not least, similar to the Sierra Leone ‘Open letter’ a call was made to engage the peasants in the ‘struggle’. The Declaration listed the demand of free land, non-payment of taxes and tribal dues, the abolition of forced labour and the cancellation of debts as the constitution of the core issues of a program of action. The last demand was: “Against British imperialism, for national independence.” 60

The Declaration ended with a lengthy attack on the ARPS and “other traitors of the working class:”

Out of their own mouths the Aborigines’ Rights Protection Society proclaim themselves agents of British imperialism and simultaneously have the audacity to claim that they protect the rights of the Gold Coast people. The workers and peasants will not be deceived, by these double dealers. The working class movement in all countries is faced with the problem of these wolves in sheeps’ [sic] clothing. Don’t listen to them, on the contrary, a relentless struggle must be waged against them, as the main support of your enslavers.61

The attack against the ARPS paralleled the hardened line of the CPUSA’s Negro work and rejection of cooperation with African American reformist leaders. If Padmore’s plan had been to collaborate with the radical Gold Coast intelligentsia and engage them in a mutual cause, the Declaration marked a break in this policy.

However, the Open letter to the toilers of the Gold Coast was never published in 1933 or even in 1934 but only as late as 1935.62 One reason for the delay was perhaps that there was no suitable African to be sent back as an agent provocateur to the Gold Coast in 1933.

59 “To the Workers of Acra! To the Toilers of the Gold Coast,” RGASPI 534/6/23, fol. 138.
60 “To the Workers of Acra! To the Toilers of the Gold Coast,” RGASPI 534/6/23, fol. 139.
61 “To the Workers of Acra! To the Toilers of the Gold Coast,” RGASPI 534/6/23, fol. 139.
62 ITUCNW, “To the Gold Coast Trade Unions,” The Negro Worker V:6, June 1935, 3-5.
Padmore and Kouyaté had managed to get at least one seamen who originated from the colony to Moscow, Comrade Robert, yet he was to return to the colony in 1934. Another reason for the delay could be the chaotic state of affairs in Paris during autumn 1933 and the reorganization of Negro work in Moscow. Perhaps it was planned to have the declaration published in the *Negro Worker*, but that plan had to be shelved as the publication of the journal had been suspended. Nevertheless, the possibility of reactivating the Gold Coast-connection certainly improved with Wallace-Johnson’s advent on the scene in Accra in late 1933. Robert joined him one year later.

4. Collaborating with Comrade Wallace-Johnson

The general picture of the emergence of radical political movements in the Gold Coast is already well known. Partly as a consequence of local political agitation, partly due to the impact of Wallace-Johnson, a new, radical platform was formed in 1934 – the West African Youth League (WAYL). Wallace-Johnson held a key position among the radical intellectuals in the Gold Coast until he was forced by the colonial authorities to leave the colony in 1937. British intelligence was well informed of his links to various organizations, especially those to Reginald Bridgeman and the LAI, and to Arnold Ward and the NWA. So, too, were his personal contacts to local intellectuals and politicians, such as Bankole Awoonor Renner, Benjamin Wuta-Ofei, Kojo Thompson and Kobina Sekyi, and other West Africans resident at that time in the Gold Coast, especially Nnamdi Azikiwe.63

Wallace-Johnson is claimed to have retained his affiliation with the Comintern after 1934.64 He was affiliated to the editorial board of the *Negro Worker*, although never officially but only as Walter Daniels, and even published in his own name a programmatic article about the WAYL as late as 1937.65 But what was Wallace-Johnson’s alias Walter Daniels’ position in the Gold Coast during the mid-1930s? Was he a ‘renegade’, i.e., tied to Padmore and those who had broken with the Comintern in 1933-1934, or was he a ‘loyalist’? Or was he a double-player, a person who did not fit easily into any one classification and who, as argues Denzer, believed that Marxism-Leninism offered a set of viable strategies that Africans could use to free themselves from colonialism?66 And what about the local Gold Coast radical intellectuals

---

who were still around and were Wallace-Johnson’s closest allies in 1933, notably Awoonor Renner and Benjamin Wuta-Ofei?

Wallace-Johnson arrived in the Gold Coast in late 1933 at a moment when the colony was undergoing tremendous political turmoil. The colonial economy was still shaken by the effects of the World Depression. The Colonial government was making plans to introduce propositions for two major reforms: the Criminal (Amendment) Code Ordinance or Sedition Bill and the Waterworks Bill. Whereas the former bill was believed to introduce press control measures, the latter one was an attempt to raise revenue by introducing direct taxation of the municipalities of Accra, Cape Coast and Sekondi. Both these bills sparked off intensive political agitation; the members of the elite were ever alert to any attempt by the government to limit their freedom of expression while the populace resisted any attempt by the colonial authorities to levy direct taxes. Key actors were members of the well-established opposition: Kobina Sekyi and his ARPS, but also younger radicals such as Awoonor Renner and his friends. Mass meetings were called, resolutions passed, and finally two delegations were dispatched to England. Awoonor Renner formulated his critique in a poem, ‘Sedition Bill 1934’, where he summarized the feelings of the opposition:

[---] 3. Silence!!/ Don’t you tell too much/ White folks fear you learn too quick,/ They can’t rob you as they wish.

4. You Coast of Gold –/ Silence!/ Nay, I’ll go on, and/ Fight and fight and fight.

It seems to me that Awoonor Renner’s position was as crucial as that of Wallace-Johnson in the further development of events in the Gold Coast. Whenever there was some kind of political movement in the country, he had been part of it or at least been linked to it. However, Awoonor Renner was never the ITUCNW contact person in the Gold Coast. Until 1933 there are no indications that he was involved in labour union activities. Instead, his main emphasis had been the infiltration of the elite and the press.

Wallace-Johnson rather then Awoonor Renner emerged as the new organizer of the Gold Coast workers. Spitzer and Denzer noted that Wallace-Johnson’s first engagement in the Gold Coast was not with political organizations but with local labour unions. Apart from assisting existing local trade unions, in December 1933 he established the Gold Coast Motor

---

68 Awoonor Renner 1943, p. 37.
69 Spitzer and Denzer 1973, p. 424.
Car Union and the Gold Coast Workers’ Protection Association. According to Adu Boahen, the latter was a kind of an umbrella organization, aiming at achieving unity and cooperation among members of the working class and had branches in all parts of the Gold Coast.\textsuperscript{70}

Wallace-Johnson’s interest in labour conditions was not limited to reactivating existing labour unions. Mining conditions, in particular, were to be closely watched by him. His political moment came in June 1934 when a tunnel collapsed in the Prestea mines, killing forty-one men. This event spurred him to take action. He made first-hand inquiries about the disaster and the hazardous conditions in the mining industry. He supplied his findings to the ARPS as well as sent his reports to the LAI and the NWA in London, urging Bridgeman and Ward to bring the issue to the knowledge of the Colonial Office as well as to launch appeals to both the Colonial Office as well as the Gold Coast Government to pass legislation which would impose compensation laws and improve working conditions.\textsuperscript{71}

At the same time as Wallace-Johnson was engaged in labour union issues and the conditions of the working class in the Gold Coast, opposition to the two Bills gained momentum. At this point Awoonor Renner, Wuta-Ofei and Wallace-Johnson joined forces and founded the first radical mass movement, the West African Youth League (WAYL).\textsuperscript{72} Awoonor Renner was elected as the first president of the WAYL, Wallace-Johnson became its secretary-general and Wuta-Ofei was an executive member. It is not known whose original initiative it was to form the WAYL. Clearly both Awoonor Renner and Wallace-Johnson had during previous years either tried to establish similar movements (Awoonor Renner: The African Academy) or been in charge of mass movements (Wallace-Johnson); both men could make use of the organizational training they had received in Moscow.

The cooperation between Wallace-Johnson and Awoonor Renner came as no surprise. British intelligence noted that the two of them had been continually in each other’s company during these years. It was further noted that these two men often held discussions together.


\textsuperscript{71} Spitzer and Denzer 1973, p. 429.

with Wuta-Ofei and J. Ocansey in the *Gold Coast Spectator* offices.\(^{73}\) Wuta-Ofei, at least, had by that time emerged as their close associate, if not almost a presumptive ‘fellow traveller’. Even the British were highly suspicious of him and regarded him to be a communist:

[Wuta-Ofei] had in peace time the following views – Communist, anti Government, anti European – i.e., Africa for the Africans, colour consciousness, and intensely bitter criticism of European minority […]\(^{74}\)

Earlier in 1934, Awoonor Renner established another political platform, the Friends of Ashanti Freedom Society.\(^{75}\) The society, of which he was President, had been created to protest against plans to restore the Ashanti Confederacy and was the rival of the Asante Kotoko Society. Their argument was that the restoration, which was the aim of the Asante Kotoko Society\(^{76}\), would perpetuate the indirect rule system and prevent educated young men from Asante from having any voice in decision-making.\(^{77}\) Making use of Wallace-Johnson’s contacts, he even wrote (in 1934) to the LAI and the Secretary of State for the Colonies protesting against the reestablishment of the Ashanti Confederacy.\(^{78}\)

Such a move must have brought him into collision with J.B. Danquah, Nana Ofori Atta and other influential members of the Gold Coast elite. The formation of the WAYL further challenged their position as Awoonor Renner and Wallace-Johnson started to cooperate with Kobina Sekyi and the ARPS in opposing the Sedition Bill. The League was anxious to help the ARPS, especially in attacking the Provincial Councils and the Paramount Chiefs.\(^{79}\) Wallace-Johnson worked in conjunction with the ARPS and helped to organize protests. Although in terms of political tactics Wallace-Johnson questioned the dispatch of a delegation to London, which the ARPS had suggested.\(^{80}\) Two delegations were eventually sent to London in 1934, one by the Provincial Council of Chiefs, \(^{81}\) the other by the ARPS.\(^{82}\)

\(^{73}\) Extract from Gold Coast Police Report re the West African National Secretariat mentioning Renner, 13.2.1947, TNA KV2/1840.
\(^{74}\) Memorandum dated 22.8.1943, TNA KV2/1847.
\(^{75}\) Danquah 1943, p. 11.
\(^{76}\) The Asante Kotoko Union Society had been formed in 1916 and was the mouthpiece of the Asante traditional elite and their supporters. See further Wiladard Tordoff, *Ashanti under the Prempehs 1888-1935*, London: Oxford University Press 1965, pp. 175-176.
\(^{77}\) Rhodie 1965, p. 401; Spitzer and Denzer 1973, p. 431.
\(^{78}\) Governor to Secretary of State, letter dated 2.11.1942, TNA KV2/1840.
\(^{79}\) Rhodie 1965, p. 401.
\(^{80}\) Spitzer and Denzer 1973, p. 428.
\(^{81}\) The delegation included Nana Ofori Atta as leader as well as Dr J.B. Danquah, Dr F.V. Nanka Bruce, Hon. K.A. Korsah, Akilagpa Sawyerr, James Mercer, Asofo Adjaye, I.K. Agyeman (President of the Asante Kotoko Society).
Awoonor Renner wrote to James Maxton, British M.P. (ILP), in an attempt to enlist his aid, while Wallace-Johnson asked his friends at the LAI and the NWA to assist the ARPS delegation.\(^{83}\)

Interestingly, a British Intelligence report also noted that Awoonor Renner corresponded with George Padmore trying to enlist his assistance for the ARPS delegation.\(^{84}\) However, this claim is somewhat dubious. Although it is possible that he had addressed the letter to Padmore, there are reasons to believe that Padmore never received it. At the time when the ARPS delegation was nominated, i.e., in May 1934, news about Padmore’s expulsion from the Comintern had not yet reached the Gold Coast. Awoonor Renner, who probably got Padmore’s address from Wallace-Johnson, could have addressed the letter to the ITUCNW office believing that Padmore was still in charge of it or to the editor of the *Negro Worker*. Whatever the case, the letter was intercepted by the British Intelligence but most likely not destroyed by them. Thus someone received it – but to whom was it sent? There are reasons to believe that it was not Padmore but Huiswoud. Huiswoud had tried to reconnect with Padmore’s old contacts in Africa although, as previously stated, he had faced some drawbacks since Padmore had not handed over his address list and had to wait for a copy of the catalogue to be sent from Moscow. It took Huiswoud several months to establish contact with the Gold Coast and not until July was he able to inform Moscow that he had been successful. Although he did not specify with whom, there are only two likely candidates: Wallace-Johnson and Wuta-Ofei. In addition, he informed the comrades at the ECCI Negro Bureau that “it is likely that within the near future, we will have at least two guests to come over.”\(^{85}\)

While it is possible that Huiswoud refers to two agents, one could argue that he refers to the ARPS delegation. If he had received Awoonor Renner’s letter then he certainly was aware about the activities in the Gold Coast. Perhaps he even replied to him and suggested to meet the delegation? But such a meeting never took place – Huiswoud never referred to it in his subsequent correspondence with Moscow.

5. Comrade Robert and the activities in the Gold Coast

---

\(^{82}\) The ARPS delegation included two members, Tufohene George Moore and Samuel Wood. It arrived one month after their rivals. See further Rhodie 1965, pp. 399-402; Shaloff 1972b, pp. 27-28.

\(^{83}\) Governor to Secretary of State, letter dated 2.11.1942, TNA KV2/1840; Rhodie 1965, p. 402; Asante 1971, pp. 49-51.

\(^{84}\) Extract from Gold Coast Police Report re the West African National Secretariat mentioning Renner, 13.2.1947, TNA KV2/1840.

\(^{85}\) Letter from Edward to ‘Dear Friends’, 26.7.1934, RGASPI 534/3/986, fol. 3.
While Wallace-Johnson was agitating in the Gold Coast and trying to mobilize the labour unions, Comrade Robert had finished his training at the KUTV in Moscow and was ready to return to his home country. Not much is known about the fellow. Among the Negro Students in the KUTV in late 1932, one Pierre Kalmek, alias Robert, is listed. McClellan claims that he was a sailor from one of the French African colonies who had been “every where”. However, according to the personal file of ‘Robert’, this was not the case. Born in the Gold Coast into a family of poor peasants in 1911, he had left the country when he was thirteen and thereafter worked as a seaman and steward. Before ending up in France, he had called at ports in Nigeria, Ivory Coast (Grand Bassam), Sierra Leone (Freetown), Italy and Spain. In Marseilles he had met Garan Kouyaté and Comrade Ferroni, seemingly while he visited the Club international du marin, and joined the French Communist Party in Algeria in 1929 and the CGTU. After that he was entrusted to perform propaganda work in military camps in Senegal. Back in France, he was distributing leaflets in the streets of Marseilles. In September 1932 he was enlisted in the KUTV. Unfortunately, Robert did not reveal his name in his autobiography.

Robert left Moscow together with Comrade Nelson (Holle Seleh Tamba) and both of them met Huiswoud in Antwerp. While Tamba was able to return without many problems, Huiswoud vaguely reported that there had been “difficulties” with Robert, “part of which he brought with himself.” One problem was his return trip: he wanted to straighten out “certain important business” before leaving for the Gold Coast.

Partly due to poor communications, partly due to other reasons, nothing was heard from Robert until early 1935. At this point his first letter had reached Zusmanovich. He had arrived safely and started to work among the unions according to a previously outlined plan:

---

86 List of students in group 9 section A (Negro Section), 20.11.1932, RGASPI 532/1/439, fol. 6.
87 McClellan 1993, p. 384.
88 According to his testimony, he had to support his mother and his eight younger sisters and brothers.
89 Information sheet, RGASPI 495/279/44, fol. 3.
91 The identification of the letter proved to be rather difficult: it had no sender and no receiver. There was only an address given: PO Box 214, Station Road, Gold Coast, Accva [sic], James Town. Was this the address of the author? The filed copy had been stamped in Moscow (date: 2 Jan. 1935) which meant that the letter had reached the Comintern sometimes in January 1935. Further, someone had in handwriting added: Zusmanovich – was he the original receiver of the letter? The letter was written in rather poor English, with a few phrases in French inserted. My claim that Robert was the author of the letter is based on a reference in Zusmanovich letter to Huiswoud, dated 21.2.1935 (RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 2), where he refers to Robert’s previous letter and summarizes its content. The summary matches the previous letter.
I am gaining very much influence among our fellows here; nobody will dare to deny that. I have already been able to put on the sound basis all the trade unions and centralised them into a federated instead of scattered, by means of a small conference and unanimous vote of the delegates.\footnote{NN [Robert] to ‘Dear Friends’, no date but filed 2.1.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 1.}

It seems as if his mission was to follow up the 1933 call to the workers in the Gold Coast. This could be one interpretation of the sentence: “I shall never fail in accomplishing my historical tasks due to me, neither capitulating to any other ideology besides the general line.”\footnote{NN [Robert] to ‘Dear Friends’, no date but filed 2.1.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 1.} But who was he? A letter by Zusmanovich to Huiswoud provides a clue to the author’s identity. In a discussion about work in West Africa, Zusmanovich noted that one Robert had started to work in the trade unions:

> You know the last letter of Robert where he writes that he began to work in the trade unions and recognises his mistakes which he made here.\footnote{[Zusmanovich] to Otto [Huiswoud], 21.2.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 2.}

However, the situation in the Gold Coast was more complicated than Robert, and presumably Moscow, had expected. Robert himself lacked both funding and contacts to strengthen his position. In fact, he soon found himself marginalized:

> I have been studying the conditions, I am still going on, but due to difficulties in getting my daily bread and lodging is important and needs consideration in facts here is my home land but nobody to help me and parents are in the small village; if I go there it means isolat [sic] from the main bodies, but there is no hope of getting employed at all even as none skilled worker is anywhere.\footnote{NN [Robert] to ‘Dear Friends’, no date but filed 2.1.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 1.}

Even worse, he either seems to have quarrelled with Wallace-Johnson or did not trust him as he regarded him as Padmore’s friend. This was not surprising at all. Wallace-Johnson had never cut off his connections with Padmore, which perhaps was also known in Moscow. Robert was highly critical about Wallace-Johnson’s potentials in organizing the workers:

> My friend I came met here/is doing nothing, only on the paper that everything exists as for I have studied. Do not entrust him with anything, he is disorganising under the influence of the renegades (George) [i.e., George Padmore, HW], he was trying to get me too but he is small for me, I shall never
stop in dealing with them at all as as [sic] on every of us that man here do not want send the (two) those ought fitting, but he is utilising the resources for himself concerning [h]is own news paper. 96

The second part of the quote, which is somewhat difficult to decode, dealt with the question of sending Africans to Europe. Robert informed Zusmanovich that he had been able to enlist two or three seamen who he had equipped with the necessary papers for “en haut”, promising that they would “become like myself best elements promise to come back and help us.” 97

However, Zusmanovich was not convinced about Robert’s capability to succeed in the task and was not inclined at this point to cut the connections with Wallace-Johnson. Instead, he warned Huiswoud not to fully trust Robert, and concluded: “It should be better for you to maintain contact with each one separately.” Regarding Wallace-Johnson, Zusmanovich noted:

You know quite well what he is. In connection with the struggle between them you should as quickly as possible take advantage of every possibility to obtain live people from Gold Coast and Nigeria who are not yet contaminated by the struggle of these two “leaders” without armies. 98

Thus, Zusmanovich urged Huiswoud to entrust Wallace-Johnson/Daniels the task of enlisting the prospective students:

On the question of obtaining people, you must not fail to orientate yourself on Daniels. If he could quickly send you three people from each of the colonies, i.e. Gold Coast and Nigeria, that would be a great achievement. 99

Huiswoud agreed with Zusmanovich in keeping Robert at a distance and to side with Wallace-Johnson: “Regarding Roberts, I am not keeping any contact with him for I think he is quite unreliable and his actions are not trustworthy.” 100 He was not the only one who was suspicious of Robert’s commitment. In an evaluation by someone at the KUTV, Robert was described as being a gifted and intelligent person but who had not made enough efforts to develop himself. He held ‘Pan-African’ ideas, claiming that Africa had to be seen as one entity instead of consisting of many local nations. Even worse, he was rather stubborn and the evaluator suspected that Robert never really rejected his wrong ideas. 101

96 NN [Robert] to ‘Dear Friends’, no date but filed 2.1.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 1.
98 NN [Zusmanovich] to Otto [Huiswoud], 21.2.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 2.
100 Letter from Edward to ‘Dear Comrades’, 11.4.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 4.
101 Statement regarding Robert, RGASPI 495/279/44, fol. 1.
Nothing more, it seems, was ever heard from Robert. Communications with Wallace-Johnson, on the other hand, continued during 1935. In April 1935, Huiswoud informed Moscow that he had been in contact with Daniels about the issue of enlisting African students, although not much had happened:

> We have been negotiating for a long time with our friend Daniels, but I fear that there is little to be hoped from that section. While we have made all the necessary arrangements, he has, up to date, not secured any, and it seems to me that nothing much can be looked forward from him.102

Huiswoud, too, became nervous about Daniels other engagements – perhaps the organization of the WAYL activities, see below – and inability to proceed with the assigned tasks:

> Besides this, he is so confused and apparently dabbling in all kinds of schemes which makes one question his future usefulness and reliability. Despite this, we are still trying to see what can be got out of him.103

However, the project eventually ended in a total failure. Wallace-Johnson informed Bridgeman in March about the problems of selecting suitable candidates for Moscow:

> We propose to send one along within two months from date. It would have been despatched right away but there are some preliminary arrangements necessary to be made which will take a little bit of time to accomplish, and this we are going about with caution. We would ask you to furnish us with information of a safe medium through which we can send the necessary particulars to get into the hands of the dealers in time so that they will be able to study the nature of the stuff before it gets into their hands.104

There is no doubt that he asked for instructions about the logistics of getting the students to Moscow. However, Bridgeman was slow in reacting and informed Huiswoud about Wallace-Johnson’s request only in mid-May adding that his contacts in London, presumably Ward, believed that Wallace-Johnson had become involved in some compromising situation, which had prevented him from sending the promised “despatch.” All efforts, Ward assured, were still being made “to secure a good supply.”105

---

104 Quotation of letter from W.J. (Daniels), dated 16.3.1935, in: Letter (handwritten add on page: From England), 11.5.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 13. The author of the letter is identified as Reginald Bridgeman, the recipient was almost certainly Otto Huiswoud.
Until July 1935, Huiswoud was led to believe that Wallace-Johnson in one way or the other was capable of sending some Africans to Moscow. But then he lost hope of the realization of the whole project:

Subsequently, he [Wallace-Johnson] informed us, after receiving all facilities and after a great deal of time lost on our part, that the arrangements could not get through. Because of our illness, we had to conduct further negotiations with him through the LAI, and from them we learned that he was making arrangements to replace those. Still later, we learned that one eventually would come. Then quite suddenly, the LAI people sent us a mysterious note about a month ago that it is likely that everything is off but no details. Although we have repeatedly asked for information on this question up to now, our inquiries have been completely ignored. We must tell you frankly that we put very little confidence in Daniels, not only because of this, but because of other things.\textsuperscript{106}

But no ‘supplies’ were ever forthcoming. Whatever connections or contacts that had existed between Huiswoud and Wallace-Johnson, by mid-1935 they seemed to have been cut off, although it is not known why and when – if at all?

However, although Huiswoud and Moscow had lost contact with the activists in the Gold Coast, this was not the case with the contacts between Wallace-Johnson and Bridgeman. In fact, in one of his dispatches to either Huiswoud or to Moscow, Bridgeman – presumably – had enclosed two letters by Wallace-Johnson as well as the protocol of the general meeting of the WAYL, held at the Accra Palladium on 4 July 1935.\textsuperscript{107} The minutes had been enclosed in a letter that Wallace-Johnson had sent to the Executive of the Youth Front against War and Fascism.\textsuperscript{108} This was a communist front organization and one can assume that Wallace-Johnson’s dispatch was forwarded to Bridgeman who subsequently sent it to the ECCI Negro Bureau. However, the Bureau at this point barely functioning, as will be outlined in the next chapter. Neither the WAYL’s foundation in 1934 nor its general meeting were noticed in Moscow lest commented upon. In fact, a copy of the draft constitution of the West African Youth League is filed in the Comintern Archives without a single comment or addition.\textsuperscript{109} One assumption is that Moscow was not really prepared to discuss the content of the

\textsuperscript{107} Minutes of a general meeting of the West African Youth League, held at the Palladium, Accra, Thursday 4 July 1935, signed K. Bankole-Awoonor Renner (President), Wallace Johnson (Secretary to the Executive, RGASPI 495/155/101, fol. 1-5; (copy) letter from Wallace-Johnson (Accra, 10.7.1935), and letter from Wallace-Johnson to ‘The Executive, Youth Front against War and Fascism, London’ (Accra, 11.7.1935), RGASPI 495/155/101, fol. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{109} Draft Constitution of the West African Youth League, no date, RGASPI 533/10/245, fol. 1-11.
documents. Perhaps the WAYL’s existence had perplexed the comrades in Moscow as it had not been part of their plans or orders given to Wallace-Johnson? Besides, at least the constitution of the WAYL hardly outlined a revolutionary mass-organization but rather a radical transnational (nationalistic) West African platform.

6. “Nevertheless, the high level of struggle developed in many recent strikes in the African colonies must be noted”

Huiswoud had started with no contacts in Africa in April 1934. One year later it seemed as if he had been able to rebuild the ITUCNW network and even expand its activities. However, a few months later most of the African orientation of the ITUCNW and the solidification of grass-roots movements and cells proved to be a chimera. Nelson was handicapped in Liberia, Charlie and Smith had disappeared. Robert had disappeared in the Gold Coast, Wallace-Johnson was as unreliable as ever. On the top of everything, he was hardly capable of influencing and directing the activities in West Africa. News about political mobilization in West, East and South Africa all told the same message: by autumn 1935 other movements and ideas had become the driving force and few, if anybody, rallied behind the calls to form radical mass-movements.

A tone of fatigue runs between the lines of the Annual Report that Huiswoud wrote in October 1935. He had tried his best in directing and influencing trade unions and other organizations in the colonies but without much success. He stated, perhaps somewhat superficially, that he had been in contact with individuals, small groups and groups of workers in varied forms of organizations but had to admit that direct contacts with African organizations had remained limited. In reality, the ITUCNW had only connections with unions in Sierra Leone (“mostly railwaymen”), Gambia (“mostly dockers”), Liberia (the Workers’ Progressive Association), the Gold Coast (“railwaymen, firemen, building trades etc.”) and South Africa (the Cape Town Stevedores Union and the illegal Dockworkers’ Union in Durban) in addition to “individual contacts” in Mombasa. In effect, however, his impact had been a limited one: “(T)he Committee has not yet succeeded to gain any extensive results [to] consolidate the scattered trade unions and other groups and to weld them into effective organs of struggle. Nevertheless, the high level of struggle developed in many recent strikes in the African, as well as West Indian colonies, must be noted.”

Huiswoud was highly critical about the contradictory position of the ITUCNW and limited capacity of the organization. The Ethiopian crisis rather than the Scottsboro Campaign served as a unifying platform and vehicle for Black mobilization and radicalization. Committees and organs were mushrooming throughout the African Atlantic but the ITUCNW was incapable to take a leading role let to emerge as its vanguard or leading organization. It could not as it had never been projected to become a mass organization or even a Black International. On the top of it was the illegality of the unit. In effect, therefore, the ITUCNW was hardly visible anymore:

The Committee has practically functioned merely as a narrow propaganda organisation without the possibility of actively drawing into its daily work any of its adherents or supporters. Another fundamental weakness and one, which leaves an indelible stamp on its work, is its complete political isolation, preventing participation and collaboration with the organs of the CI and RILU. Because of this, there is the tendency of lagging behind the rapidly developing mass struggles and movements of the Negro toilers and a too slow orientation to the swiftly changing situation.111

What was needed was a thorough reorganization of work. Huiswoud ended his report by including a list of five points proposing a total revision of the guidelines for the ITUCNW to be discussed in Moscow. But was the Comintern at all capable to reinvent the ITUCNW a third time?