The LACO and the LAI: Willi Münzenberg and Africa

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The Communist International (Comintern for short) was established in 1919 as a political tool to help spread the revolution outside Russia. It was to co-ordinate and support revolutionary work anywhere in the world, from Western capitalist countries to their dependencies and colonies. Although the organisation’s headquarters were in Moscow, near the Kremlin, its purpose required it to be international in character. Many of its key officials came from outside Russia and much of the work was done in English, French, German or Spanish.¹

The Comintern was a creation of the Bolsheviks whose rise to power in Russia had been aided by the recently ended First World War. This cataclysmic conflict had gravely shaken the foundations of the white racial supremacy on which the prevailing world system was based on. Total war had caused unprecedented destruction and dislocation among its participants and left the leading imperial powers exhausted, economically and mentally. The war had also increased and strengthened demands by the colonised for better treatment and self-rule.²

While the Comintern focused first and foremost on raising the proletarian masses within the remaining imperial metropolises, it also realised the potential of the oppressed colonial peoples to undermine the imperialist system. Outside China, the largest non-white state that had so far managed to avoid colonisation, the Comintern’s main interest was directed towards India, where emerging popular native movements were already challenging British rule. Should India gain independence, under whatever regime, the British Empire would be fatally weakened.

Besides dislocating imperial economy and governance, the Great War had helped the spreading of revolutionary ideas by further polarising racial divisions. Huge human losses suffered during the war by the main protagonists raised fears in Europe and the United States that the white race could be engulfed under the rising tide of the coloured peoples. Influential writers envisioned world-wide conspiracies against the dominant and superior white culture that would lead to the deterioration of the human race. Conveniently, the Jews and the Bolsheviks were somehow bunched together as the natural leaders in this diabolic scheme.³

¹ This is also reflected in the archival records of the Comintern, which include a huge number of documents written in Western, sometimes even in non-European languages.
The usual salvation offered against all this was to increase the oppression of non-white peoples, to segregate them from any ‘contamination’ of the dominant race, and to firmly suppress Socialism and any calls for equality among the races. While such alarmist views were by no means shared by all, imperial regimes were forced to take them into account and they did sometimes suit well the demands of colonial rule. Socialism was rightly considered to pose a threat to the colonial empires and its suppression among the native subjects was thus indeed desirable.

On the other hand, tightening racial division meant that even those among the non-white peoples who had sought to accommodate with the dominant power and had acquired Western education increasingly felt that they would never gain equal treatment in a colonial world. This made them to seek for an alternative in the fledgling colonial independence movements. Faced by the blatant hostility of the Western world, some were ready to turn to Moscow as the only source for outside support. The Bolshevik connection of the ‘Coloured Peril’ had began to act as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**The Comintern and South Africa**

Sub-Saharan Africa was not high on the Comintern’s list of potential areas for colonial rebellion. It lacked strong popular movements that might challenge colonial rule and it did not have a proletariat or an intelligentsia that could readily adopt revolutionary views. However, Africa had suffered worse from the war than any other area outside Europe and the Middle East and resentment among the native populations was growing. They had been called to make great sacrifices in a war that had nothing to do with their interests. Hundreds of thousands had been killed or permanently injured and the rest faced severe economic hardship that continued long after the war. The Great War and its consequences had also undercut whatever development plans or promises had been made and it had generally strengthened the harsh, oppressive nature of colonial rule.\(^4\)

There was also one area in Sub-Saharan Africa where coloured political action, even with a socialist program, was possible. The Dominion of South Africa offered more political rights to its, mainly white, citizens than was the case in the actual colonies. A Labour Party had been formed there as soon as the dominion status had been achieved in 1910. As in many European countries, the First World War caused a split among the South African Socialists between those who favoured the war and a minority who stood for the principles of pacifism. The result was the creation of an independent radical organisation, The International Socialist League of South Africa (ISL).

While the war lasted the ISL faced government hostility and was unable to achieve much.  On hearing of the creation of the Comintern it sought to affiliate with it sending a message to that effect to the Second Comintern Congress in 1920. Here too its leaders were following the example of other radical split-away parties created in Europe during the war. After receiving a favourable answer the ISL decided to reorganise itself as the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in July 1921. Its delegates attended the Third Congress already during that same month.  

As a white intellectual group firmly linked to European experiences the ISL/CPSA was hardly an ideal start for spreading revolution among the African masses. However, its leaders were aware of this handicap. T. William Thibedi, a black trade unionist, had joined the ISL already during the war and the party had taken an early interest in strikes among black miners and workers. Both of the delegates send to the Third Comintern Congress in 1921, David Ivon Jones and Sam Barlin, were white, but they presented a memorandum on the possibilities for extending communist recruitment throughout the southern part of the African continent, stating:

South Africa is the entrance to the great territories further north... The railway line runs right up for two thousand miles to the Belgian Congo. Members of the South African Communist movement are to be found there also, although no communist Group; and one member was recently expelled from the territory for Trade Union agitation.

Despite its white European background the CPSA appeared to be seeking to build on its African connections, at least while bolstering up its own importance in the eyes of its peers.

However, while Jones and Barlin used geography to stake an early claim for a leading role in revolutionary work in the southern part of the African continent, they at the same time shunned from taking full responsibility for it:

For this vast native population, however, the Communist movement can only draw on white sources for financial and other support. All natives are under the strictest passport control. The few educated natives are easily lured away by the enticements of social equality and and assured existence equivalent to their education.

This was an insightful analysis of some of the most serious challenges that would continue to hamper all Comintern activity in Africa. The two delegates admitted that the CPSA would not alone be up to the task of recruiting the black masses. In fact, their final conclusion was that the party

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5 For the creation of the CPSA see Davidson et al., I, pp. 5–6 and 11–13.  
6 ‘Statement of South African Delegation to Comintern, 16 July 1921’, copied in Davidson et al., I, pp. 74–77. Also pp. 11–12.  
7 Ibid. p. 75.  
8 Ibid. p. 75.
should for the time concentrate on white skilled labour and they even sought to shoulder the recruitment of blacks on the Comintern itself. "We consider that these conditions entitle us to urge upon the Comintern that the African Negroes, like the Indians, should come directly under its initiative." The CPSA would not be taking revolution to the black masses after all.

David Ivon Jones was chosen to the Comintern’s Executive Committee (ECCI) and thus remained in Moscow after the Third Congress dispersed and until his untimely death in 1924 at the age of 41. A year before his death he returned to the question of recruitment in Africa in a memorandum concerning a proposal to organise a Negro Congress in Moscow. In it he gave a rather bleak picture of the prospects of finding black African delegates and getting them to Soviet Russia. First he warned that a mere summons for Africans to attend would not suffice, but participants should be actively searched ‘on the spot’. He then contined to elaborate on the problems of transportation:

2. In South Africa, for example, where the native African Negroes are the most advanced industrially, the passport supervision of the negroes (sic) is very strict and underground work of shipping delegates would therefore be very difficult. I am inclined to think that a special All-Black route through Persia via Zanzibar would have to be organised for all or most African Negro delegates from the Congo Southwards. A Negro in Europe making for any Baltic port would be immediately marked.

3. Failing such plan however, the delegates could work their way on ship as seamen. In any case it is necessary to bear in mind that if the Congress is to bear a proletarian complexion the problem of bringing the delegates here is a serious one, requires many months of preparation.

In South Africa and Egypt (in case North Africa would be included in the Congress) the ground work could be left to local communist parties. Elsewhere the situation looked less promising:

11. There remain (sic) the other parts of Africa, such as Kenya, Uganda, and Portuguese Africa. In the last named region there exists a pro-negro Social Revolutionary Party which would undoubtedly help to organise the Congress, and line itself up with Moscow in the process. In the British East Africa (sic) colonies aforementioned we have no connections. The C.P. of South Africa has correspondents in the Belgian Congo with its fifteen million natives. But we have no connections with British Nigeria and the Gold Coast, nor with the French Congo, unless this can be worked through the French Communist Party.

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9 Ibid. p. 76.
10 A letter from D. I. Jones to ECCI, 8th Jan. 1923, ‘Remarks on proposal to call a Negro Congress at Moscow’. Davidson et al., I, pp. 118–120.
11 Ibid. p. 118.
12 Ibid. p. 120.
The sole Sub-Saharan organisation outside South Africa with which the Comintern had made contact by 1923 appears thus to have been the obscure Social Revolutionary Party in an unnamed Portuguese colony. Most likely this was just a communist cell created among Mozambiquan migrant workers in South Africa. At least Jones did not include it among local parties that could organise the sending of delegates on their own. The ‘correspondents’ in the Belgian Congo were probably South Africans, perhaps whites, working in the Katanga mines.

Jones seems to have had no more faith over the prospects of mass recruiting among black Africans:

Our experience here in South Africa is that as soon as a Negro attains any measure of education he becomes spoilt as a proletarian and loses (sic) touch with the negro working masses, because he is immediately snatched up to be a lawyer’s or agent’s tout, or to be a parson. Hence great care will have to be exercised to select working-class delegates in touch with the labouring masses.’

In another letter written a few months later Jones had turned against the whole idea of a Negro Congress having decided that time was not opportune for it. A congress based on race would only alienate the masses from class struggle and thus serve capitalist interests. Jones regretted the lack of funds for revolutionary ground work, such as creating communist newspapers for blacks, and feared that ‘the newly formed native Unions are in danger of being pocketed by bourgeois agents’. With such doubts it is hardly surprising that Jones and his comrades in the CPSA wished to keep their distance from taking a lead in an African revolution. The Comintern would have to look elsewhere for that.

The Afro-American connection

While still supporting the proposed Negro Congress, David Ivon Jones had mentioned the United States as a possible intermediary for spreading revolutionary views to Africa. He also stressed the benefits African delegates would gain by meeting “the best proletarian Negroes of America, such as the leaders of the African Blood Brotherhood”.

Alone among the major imperial powers the United States had no colonies in Africa. However, it had still been deeply affected by black racial upheavals during the First World War.

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13 Ibid. p. 120.  
15 A letter from D. I. Jones to ECCI, 8th Jan. 1923, ‘Remarks on proposal to call a Negro Congress at Moscow’. Davidson et al., I, p. 119.
The requirements of war industry and the recruitment of hundreds of thousands of skilled factory workers to the army had opened new jobs in the country’s industrial north. This had accelerated the exodus of rural southern blacks to northern cities alarming the racist prejudices of their white residents. Thousands of blacks had also joined the army hoping thus to improve their standing in the American society, although they mainly only managed to frighten the white majority even more with their newly acquired skills for the use of violence.\footnote{Morrow, 2004, pp. 227–230, Mullen, 2003, pp. 221–222.}

Heightened racial tensions among the whites led to a spread of lynching and race riots in the United States during the final years of the war and into the 1920’s.\footnote{Morrow, 2004, pp. 302–304.} This in turn caused further embitterment among the blacks who began to form their own violently radical organisations. One of them was the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) mentioned by David Ivon Jones in his letter. It was a New York based clandestine organisation created in 1919 by Cyril Briggs, a journalist born in the Caribbean island of Nevis. The ABB boasted its own newspaper, *The Crusader*, and perhaps up to a thousand active members.

Briggs belonged to a group of black West Indian emigrant intellectuals who were soon drawn into the orbit of the recently formed Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). Two of them, Jamaican poet Claude McKay and Otto Huiswood from Dutch Guyana, took part in the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922.\footnote{Mullen, 2003, pp. 228–230.} During it they sought to raise interest in black racial issues in the United States and elsewhere, including Africa. In all likelihood Jones was thinking of them when he spoke of ‘the best proletarian Negroes of America’.

Whereas Comintern’s attempts to form contacts in Sub-Saharan Africa were in part motivated by a wish to weaken Great Britain and France, two of the most important imperialist powers, the Afro-American connection could be used against a third. Thus black organisations in the United States were never regarded in Moscow mainly as a conduit to Africa, but as a means to help bring about American revolution. The two goals were, however, supplementary and the Fifth Comintern Congress in 1924 saw the birth of a special Negro Propaganda Commission to deal with both continents. New York was for a while regarded as a possible alternative location for a Negro Congress and the CPUSA was urged to step up recruitment among black workers. Obligingly, it formed the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC) in 1925.\footnote{For the discussion concerning the Negro Congress see documents in Davidson et al., I, pp. 118–133.}

This plan soon backfired, though. The Fifth Comintern Congress had decided to make away with organisations affiliated to communist parties but independent of them. The ABB was
accordingly absorbed by the newly formed ANLC. Cyril Briggs and most of the Brotherhood’s leaders had by now already joined the Party, but the bulk of their followers declined to follow them. Shunned by the other trade unions, the ANLC was left with a very small following. Although its leaders went on to form some international ties to West Africa and elsewhere, they were never to have the resources necessary to achieve much in this respect. The Afro-American connection had failed as well, at least for the time being.

The birth of the LACO

Besides the organised Communist parties of various countries the Comintern also used more covert operations to spread revolutionary views hiding itself behind nationalist, civil rights and humanitarian groups and associations. Perhaps the most innovative Comintern operative to create such affiliate organisations was Willi Münzenberg, an influential member of the German Party (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD) and a deputy of the Reichstag. In 1923 he had been the key figure in the creation of the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (IAH), a humanitarian association ostensibly formed to help the Soviet Union survive a severe famine, but at the same time also an important propaganda network in the service of the Comintern.20

With the help of the IAH and large financial support from Moscow Münzenberg was able in a few years to launch a large assortment of associations, newspapers, publishing companies, and even a film studio. Nor was his network confined to Germany, but it covered most West European countries as well as the United States, which had its own IAH section. However, with the passing of the famine Münzenberg had to find new humanitarian issues behind which to work on. He chose anti-imperialism, which could be used as a platform both for decrying Western militarism against the Soviet Union and also for demanding national liberation in the colonies.

Münzenberg had again read the signs right. His initiative was favourably responded to in the Comintern, which was still looking for a way to contact potential revolutionary masses in the colonies. An ostensibly independent association under the wings of a humanitarian organisation like the IAH would not be so obviously tied to Moscow in the minds of Western intellectuals and other potential supporters of anti-colonialism. Thus it could be used to unwittingly bring such people into contact with Comintern ideas. Also, it might turn out to be an ideal tool in creating links to revolutionary spheres within the colonies themselves.

20 For the career of Münzenberg and the IAH see McMeekin, pp. 103–251. Also Buber-Neumann, pp. 195–199. For the creation of the LACO see Haikal, pp. 141–143.
The organising conference of the League against Colonial Oppression (LACO) was held on a Winter evening on 10th February 1926 inside the warmth of the Berliner Rathauskeller. Münzenberg was present as the secretary of the IAH, modestly listed only as one of the organising groups. It was a fairly large meeting and had indeed managed to draw also people from the colonies. Among the 43 listed participants most non-Europeans came from Asia. Together with a few North Africans there were two delegates from Sub-Saharan Africa; a certain Makube from Cameroon and Munimi who was said to represent West Africa.21

Somewhat surprisingly no-one sat in for South Africa. David Ivon Jones was dead by now, but Emil Solomon (Solly) Sachs, a young Lithuanian born trade unionist and a member of the South African party, was currently in Moscow taking part in Comintern work. However, the CPSA continued to live a rather excluded existence and kept only spurious contacts with Moscow.22 Münzenberg and his associates had probably just not found anyone to invite. At least Sachs would presumably have seen little point in travelling to Berlin to be present in the creation of this obscure new organisation as he already had all the connections he needed in Moscow.

There would in fact have been one obvious choice to represent the CPSA in the Rathauenkeller. Julius First was a white Johannesburg businessman and one of the early leaders of the South African communists. He was also a member of the IAH and thus he should have been within a reach of contact. That he showed interested towards the new organisation is proven by the fact that he was listed as its future correspondent for South Africa. Apparently he was just not available for the long journey to Europe, logistics being a major problem that would continue to haunt Comintern’s attempts to create links with Sub-Saharan Africa.

The two black Africans present in the conference, Makube and Munimi, do not appear to have represented any existing organisation. Nor are they heard of again after this preliminary meeting. Munimi can in fact well have been another Cameroonian, as this would explain his rather vague mandate. With only two Sub-Saharan Africans present in this purportedly world-wide conference it would not have hurt to hide the fact that they both came from the same colony.

The opening speech was held by Otto Lehmann-Russbüldt, the leader of the Deutsche Liga für Menschenrechte, which was one of the junior organising groups and closely tied to both the IAH and the Comintern.23 Makube also gave a speech on the enslavement of West Africans under British, French and German rule, probably drawing mainly from Cameroonian experiences. At the end of the meeting that lasted from half past seven until nine in the evening Münzenberg sketched a

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21 Copy of a conference protocol, no date (in German). Comintern archives, fond 542 opis 1/4, pp. 2–6.
22 See Davidson et al., I, pp. 11–12.
23 The office of Lehmann-Russbüldt’s organisation was later to share a corridor with the LAI secretariat, the successor of the LACO, in the same building in Berlin. Buber-Neumann, pp. 110.
list for the division of seats in the future League committee. The thirteen members included in it were probably not meant as a final composition, but reflected the initiative of those present at the meeting. There were to be two North African representatives, an Egyptian and a Rif Kabyl, but only one for the whole Sub-Saharan continent. He was to represent West Africa, which was undoubtedly due to the influence of Makube and Munimi.24

Before the Berlin Conference dissolved, the organisers compiled a list of postal addresses for future contact. These included names and organisations that had not actually taken part in the meeting.25 The Sudanese delegation was to be reached via Sudan-Egyptian Union in Khartoum. The East African correspondents were a certain A. Benebilla of Djibouti and Mr. E. Bammelle, Mombasa, Kenya. As already noted, the South African contact was Julius First from Johannesburg.

West Africa had again the most impressive Sub-Saharan representation. For the independent state of Liberia there was Chash Sidi Affaril who was credited with the high-sounding title ‘High Constable of Mecca (Pan Islam)’. Not surprisingly this apparent Pan-Islamist religious revivalist soon parted company with a secular Western organisation like the LACO and no more appears to have been heard of him.

Two other West African addresses were more promising. Both of them were in the British colony of Gold Coast. R. S. Wood from Axim was said to be the ‘General Congress Secretary’ of the ‘Negro Nationalists’. This rather obscure title referred to the National Congress of the British West Africa (NCBWA), a native association which covered all the British colonies in the area.

The NCBWA was the creation of a small group of Western educated Africans, mainly entrepreneurs and civil servants, who had been inspired by the Indian National Congress (INC). Their ultimate aim was to create a common West African nationhood within the local British colonies, just as Gandhi and his associates were striving for an Indian consciousness among the countless peoples of the subcontinent. In practical terms the NCBWA mostly concentrated on defending and expanding the rights of the emerging black middle-class within the colonial state. It demanded representation for the native elites in the colonial legislative councils.

The founding conference of the NCBWA had been held in March 1920 in Accra, Gold Coast, and it had separate sections, called Committees, in all four British West African colonies; Gold Coast, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Gambia.26 After the violently oppressive war years the

24 Copy of a conference protocol, no date (in German). Comintern archives, fond 542 opis 1/4, pp. 2–6. See also ‘Liga gegen koloniale Unterdrückung und antikolonialer Kongress in Brüssel’. Comintern archives, fond 542 opis 1/9 p. 72.
25 An unnamed and undated compilation of the addresses of potential members (mostly in German). Comintern archives, fond 542 opis 1/4, p. 46
26 For the NCBWA and especially its section in Gambia see the article by Langley, pp. 382–395.
fledgling native intelligentsia in many African colonies had experienced a period of flurry activity in organising social, recreational and political associations of various kinds. Thus they had been able to vent some of their frustrations over having been taught Western education, but without being allowed any responsible tasks in which to benefit from it.

However, as was the case with most other native organisations of its kind, by 1926 the NCBWA was already in decline. Despite its moderate agenda it had been harshly dealt with by the colonial authorities who saw all native political activity as inherently diversionary. Also, its elitist nature was hardly liable to appeal mass support among the native masses. Frustration and persecution had began to deplete the organisation’s ranks, especially as improving world economy after the post-war depression gave also African entrepreneurs other things to ponder about.

That the NCBWA had not already collapsed was mainly due to its distinguished founding father who was the other LACO correspondent in the Gold Coast with an address in Sekondi. The Honorable Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford was an early example of an African activist who had managed to receive western education and to use it to beat the colonial system. After graduating as a lawyer Hayford had made his name in the 1890’s by defending the collective land rights of a local people in a British court. After this success he had become a prolific political writer and even a member in the Gold Coast legislative council. In 1926 he was already sixty years old, but still politically active.

Neither Makube nor Munimi are mentioned among the LACO correspondents. However, the correspondence for Cameroon was to go via an unnamed person stationed in Berlin. It would thus seem that Makube was residing there at the time, possibly also Munimi, if he indeed was another Cameroonian. Africans from former German colonies, sailors, missionary educates and such, were still living in Germany and it is quite likely that Makube and, perhaps, Munimi were among these immigrants. If so, they were probably chosen to participate in the conference mainly as they happened to be available, and not as representatives of any actual African organisations. Lack of contacts back home would also explain their silent disappearance after the organising meeting. Or maybe they just went back to Africa and lost contact with Berlin.  

27 It could well be that Makube was the same as "Makembe" who had in 1919 signed a petition on behalf of a group of expatriate Cameroonians who opposed the Versailles peace negotiations and wished to retain their native country as a German colony. If so, Makube had lived in Germany already for a decade. In 1919 his address had been given as Hamburg. The connection is strengthened by the fact that the author of the petition, one Martin Dibode, himself had strong socialist sympathies. Rüger, pp. 1302-1303. For a similar case of a German-born emigrant purporting to be a delegate from the Rifkabyls during the Brussels conference of February 1927 see Buber-Neumann, p. 101. For Africans living in Germany during the interwar years see Campt, Grosse & Lemke-Muniz, pp. 214-215; El-Tayeb, pp. 142-148.
A few weeks after the Berlin Conference Louis Gibarti, one of Münzenberg’s close associates, contacted Moscow to describe what connections the LACO had so far created and what were its plans for the future.\(^{28}\) His report included a section for Africa. After having described a promising start in Egypt and Sudan, Gibarti noted that it should be possible to organise in them a courier network that would reach also Djibouti and Kenya. As so often would be the case, there were no details included as to how such an impressive arrangement could be achieved in practice.

The rest of the report went on in similar over-optimistic tones. Gibarti announced that the ANLC had send from the United States a list of no less than a hundred black organisations in Africa and the West Indies that presumably were affiliated with it. No such list was included in the letter and nothing seems to have ever come of it, if it indeed existed. Apparently the tiny ANLC was trying to live up to its role as a centre for international contacts among the black peoples, at least by making grossly inflated accounts of its purported achievements.\(^ {29}\)

Such enthusiastic reports were apparently enough to keep up the Cominterns’ interest towards the fledgling organisation. The LACO intended to herald itself to the world by organising a large anti-imperialist conference sometime in near future. In July 1926 the ECCI send to Münzenberg secret instructions concerning the proposed meeting.\(^ {30}\) Apparently Moscow had began to fear that it might loose control over the new organisation before it ever got off ground. Münzenberg was advised to take a firmer hold on the LACO, the Congress and any resolutions made during it. At the same time complete secrecy was to be maintained concerning Comintern’s involvement so as not to loose the support of nationalists and other non-Communist sympathisers.

In order to achieve all this, it was suggested that a secret Communist faction should take control of the LACO from the inside. This faction should include representatives from the Communist parties of all the major colonial powers, but it should carefully avoid exposure “so that neither the League nor the Congress is too obviously identified with the Communists”.\(^ {31}\) An adviser was to be send from Moscow to help with these arrangements.

Despite sending such detailed instructions on how to organise the LACO, the Executive Committee appears to have also harboured suspicions as to the organisation’s true merit. Münzenberg was warned not to allow the Congress to degenerate into another futile meeting where Western anti-imperialist well-wishers and colonial emigrants living in Europe made endless

\(^{28}\) “Bericht über den Stand der Kolonialbewegung” by Gibarti, Berlin, 23th Feb. 1926. Comintern archives, fond 542, opis 1/5, pp. 4–5. Gibarti was actually Laszlo Dobos, a former Austro-Hungarian artillery officer who lived in Berlin.


speeches to each other. It was strongly stressed that enough people should be invited from the colonies themselves to form “a large majority of the delegates”. These colonial subjects were also not to be just anybody, but should represent “important political (nationalist and labour) organisations”.32

Münzenberg’s instructions reveal that Moscow was well aware of the main obstructs in its attempts to reach the colonies, and especially the Sub-Saharan Africa. No local organisation from this part of the world had sent a delegate to the LACO organising conference in February. In fact, if Makube and Munimi were indeed emigrants living in Germany, there had not even been anyone from Africa south of the Sahara present. With such members the LACO would be of no help in bringing about a revolution in the colonies, whatever use it might have by drawing in intellectual sympathisers from the West.

The determination of the ECCI to create direct links to the colonies was further underlined by the cold treatment Münzenberg’s instructions offered to the various anti-imperialist emigrant organisations. To be sure, they were also to be invited to the Congress, but only after careful checking as they “are usually full of opportunist and provocative elements”. It was also suggested that emigrants were only to be used to establish contacts with the colonies themselves and that after this had been accomplished “it is absolutely necessary to eliminate intermediaries”.33 As a final note the instructions remarked that while some progress had been made in recruiting natives of China and India, not much had so far been done to create contacts with the colonies elsewhere. This was something that the League should go into with more vigour in the future.

The LACO falls apart

While discussing the proposed Negro Congress back in 1923, David Ivon Jones had mentioned the threat posed to the recruitment of blacks by the American Pan-Africanist movements, and especially by ‘Garveyism’.34 Marcus Garvey was a black Jamaican journalist who advocated total segregation between white and black races. His organisation, the awkwardly titled Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and African Communities League (UNIA), had been formed already in 1914 in Kingston, Jamaica. Garvey dreamed of an African nation state where all the blacks could find a home without oppression and on equal basis with the Western world. He was

33 Ibid, pp. 16–17.
not a socialist at heart, but was prepared to accept capitalism as a way to improve the lot of the black people.

Marcus Garvey’s millenarian visions had raised real mass support to back it up. By the early 1920’s the UNIA boasted over a thousand branches in forty countries. It even had its own shipping line, ‘The Black Star’, for the transportation of the black diaspora back to Africa. Most of the activity was concentrated in the United States, but the UNIA claimed branches also in the African continent, in Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and South Africa.

David Ivon Jones and his comrades in the Comintern might view the UNIA as an imperialist tool to divert oppressed blacks from socialism, but his teachings had in fact caused much indignation and worry among the white majority in the United States. Garvey was eventually jailed for mail fraud in February 1925 and the UNIA fell into hard times. This left the field open to another Pan-Africanist organisation which showed more potential from the Comintern’s point of view. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) was in fact older and more prestigious than the UNIA, although it had for a while been somewhat eclipsed by the firebrand Garvey. It had been formed in 1909 in the United States by a group of black and white civil rights activists. The most influential among them was W.E.B. Du Bois.

Du Bois was a black political writer and ideologist who had made his name envisioning a global colour line that divided the ruling white race from the rest of the humanity. Hence those who struggled for the rights of American and African blacks were in fact fighting a common cause with the Asians and other oppressed peoples. Du Bois’ experiences of the wartime industrialisation in the USA and the exodus of southern blacks to northern factories had led him to adopt strong socialist leanings. In 1926 he was to make a long visit to the Soviet Union.\(^{35}\)

The 5th NAACP congress for the “Negroes of the World” was held at the Liberty Hall, New York, in July 1926. The Comintern had a copy of its resolutions translated into German.\(^{36}\) Whatever the personal inclinations Du Bois held at this point he was not in a position to carry his organisation with him. Congress resolutions were filled with lofty ideals of freedom and there was even some fiery talk of revolution, but not much substance to go with it. The tone was racial and nationalistic with a slight socialist touch.

The NAACP was thus just the kind of organisation the LACO might be able to draw into the orbit of the Comintern. The final clause of the New York Conference mentioned that a delegate was to be send to Brussels to attend an impending anti-imperialist congress. This was the meeting the

\(^{35}\) For Du Bois and socialism see eg. Mullen, 2003, pp. 217–236.

LACO was planning to organise. However, besides having by now agreed on a location, the fledgling organisation had run into troubles trying to actually draw things together. This was hardly surprising. The task of creating a worldwide network out of nothing would have been daunting to anyone, not to mention a secretive, anti-government organisation that suffered from a chronic lack of funds and had only a most rudimentary staff.

As the Comintern operatives continually, and somewhat disingenuously, complained, the colonial authorities were not going to oblige in assisting the creation of an anti-colonial revolt by allowing revolutionary propaganda to reach the colonies freely. Mail was closely monitored and, if deemed necessary, intercepted. Suspected couriers were denied access to colonies. Any colonial subject found to be in contact with anti-colonial organisations was liable to get into trouble.\(^37\)

Despite such adverse conditions the LACO had at least managed to come up with its own periodical *Der koloniale Freiheitskampf*. The first issue of this crude, leaflet-like paper was printed already on 15\(^{th}\) February 1926, just five days after the organising conference in Berlin. The magazine was to be regularly printed not only in German, French and English, but also in Arabic. However, by July it had ran only to number three.

The July issue discussed the upcoming congress in several letters to the editor. Among them was one from Casely Hayford, as a representative of the NCBWA. Writing from his home at Sekondi, the old lawyer urgently enquired the actual date of the congress and noted that his organisation was meeting with some unspecified problems in sending a delegate. Hayford then began to praise the ANLC with which he had apparently had some contact. The American comrades had assured him that they would do everything in their power to spread the word of the upcoming congress. *The Chicago Defender*, presumably the largest black newspaper in the United States with an edition of half a million copies, was to help in this work.\(^38\)

Hayford’s letter is revealing of the kind of problems of communication African activists suffered in trying to form links to potential outside supporters. A distinguished member of a native community was compelled to ask the timing of the Brussels conference via an open letter to the editors of the LACO periodical. Presumably Hayford either had no other address to contact, or he was trying to maximise his chances to have an answer in time.

The letter also confirms that the ANLC was still actively trying to form direct contacts with Africa. Hayford, who had in the past kept aloof from extremist views had now been drawn into the sphere of a communist trade union. Or perhaps the venerated old lawyer was just out of touch with

\(^{37}\) See e.g. Edwards, 2003, p. 20.

the organisations true nature. It also appears to have escaped him that whatever publicity an American trade union might draw to the congress, it was colonial participation that was so hoped for by its organisers and that would not be helped by advertising in a Chicago newspaper.

Casely Hayford’s puzzlement over the Brussels conference’s timing was certainly understandable. Months had passed but definite opening date had still not been decided on. Partly this was due to interference from Moscow, where the ECCI not only wanted to assure as wide participation as possible, but also that the conference would be kept in a tight, although invisible, leach. The main problem, however, appears to have been the lack of a permanent LACO executive committee, which could have found the time and energy to tie the various contacts together into a coherent network. By Autumn the whole organisation was withering away. Der koloniale Freiheitskampf published its last number in early October.

**A new start: The League Against Imperialism**

Seeing his international anti-imperial organisation disintegrating, Münzenberg came up with a characteristic solution. He proposed to recreate the whole project under a new name. The planned conference would still go ahead, but as a platform for a new, more centralised and vigorous anti-colonial organisation, the League Against Imperialism and for National Independence (LAI). Its purpose would continue to be to draw together anti-colonalist groups all over the world and Münzenberg assured Moscow that its control would be firmly kept in Comintern hands.³⁹

After additional delays the ‘World Anti-Colonial Conference’ was finally opened in Brussels on 10th February 1927. It turned out to be a rather successful meeting, considering all the hardships its organisers had previously met with. According to Münzenberg the conference was attended by some 180–200 participants, including celebrities like Albert Einstein and Henri Barbusse. Münzenberg assured his comrades in Moscow that a majority of the delegates had sided with the communists. The congress lasted for six days and managed to come up with a fiery resolution in which the creation of a new anti-colonial organisation was enthusiastically proclaimed. The LAI had evidently received an auspicious start.⁴⁰

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³⁹ For the creation of the LAI from the point of view of Comintern see Haikal, pp. 143–149.
Sub-Saharan Africans were not particularly well attested in the Brussels Conference. Apparently Casely Hayford had in the end failed to have a delegate stand in for his NCBWA. Nor had any other European colony south of the Sahara send a representative. On the other hand, there were now two relatively influential delegates present from the Dominion of South Africa.

The CPSA had send to Brussels James La Guma, a coloured trade unionist and one of the first non-whites among the party leadership who was on his way to his first visit to Moscow. The South African Communist Party claimed now to have around 400 members of which some 50–100 were black. Until recently the Communists had exerted some influence over the Industrial Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU), a national trade organisation for black and coloured workers formed in 1920. With a membership of some 45,000 the ICU was by far the most important native workers’ organisation in the whole Sub-Saharan Africa. It was headed by Clements Kadalie, a young Nyasaland born former missionary schoolteacher who had previously been in good terms with the Communists. However, in December 1926 Kadalie had cut all ties with the CPSA and had veered his organisation towards the Socialist International. This was a bitter blow to the South African Communists who were themselves on the brink of a devastating internecine quarreling that would weaken the party in the following years.41

The other South African in Brussels was Josiah Tshangana Gumede, a black businessman and politician, who stood as the delegate for the African National Congress (ANC). Formed in 1912 the ANC was the oldest surviving African anti-colonial nationalist movement and, like the NCBWA, it draw much of its inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi’s Indian movement. Gumede was currently its Vice President and soon to become its President-General. Having strong communist leanings he was closely associated with the CPSA.42

There was also one other prominent black African present in the conference. Lamine Senghor was a Senegalese who had originally come to Europe as a volunteer for the Great War.43 Unlike the other imperial powers, France recruited tens of thousands of black Africans to fight in the western front to make up for her grievous losses in manpower. Colonial forces were used as expendable shock troops to preserve white soldiers and Senghor was severely gassed. When the war ended he had been send back home with the rest of the African soldiers and vague promises of increased political freedoms were quickly dropped by the French government.44

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41 See a group of ECCI documents concerning the CPSA copied in Davidson et al., I, pp. 149–161.
43 For Lamine Senghor’s career see the forthcoming article on LDRN. Also Edwards, 2003, pp. 16–17.
Senghor had managed to get a small disability pension due to the effects of gas to his lungs and soon returned to France. Finding work as a postal clerk and marrying a Frenchwoman he settled down in Fréjus to start a career as an anti-colonial activist. Senghor apparently lacked any formal schooling, but he nevertheless became a fluent political orator and an energetic organiser who drew his main support among the black African dockers and sailors in the port of Marseille. Originally under the wings of the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Francaise, PCF), he had become frustrated with its lack of interest towards Sub-Saharan Africa. In 1926 Senghor was instrumental in the founding of the Comité de Défense de la Race Noire (CDRN), which drew its support from several sources, including the Afro-American NAACP.\(^{45}\)

Although African participation in the Brussels Congress was still not impressive quantitatively, it was far more imposing in quality than had been the case in the Berlin meeting a year before. Whereas Makube and Munimi had apparently represented only themselves, Senghor had the backing of an emigrant organisation in France, Gumede stood for one of the most influential nationalist movements in black Africa and La Guma represented the sole existing Sub-Saharan communist party. Also, while the NCBWA had in the end failed to send a representative, it had nevertheless shown clear interest towards the conference through Casely Hayford.

As Münzenberg had planned, the Brussels Congress decided that the LAI would have an executive committee and a permanent secretariat to carry out its practical work. The former was originally decided to have eleven members.\(^{46}\) Just two of them came from the colonies, Jawaharlal Nehru from the INC, and Mohamed Hatta who stood for the Perhimpoenan Indonesia. Liau Hansin represented the Chinese Communists who were still allies of the Kuomintang Party in an ongoing military campaign to unite war-torn China under single rule. All the others were Europeans, save Roger Nash Baldwin, a famous civil rights activist from the United States.

To this impressive list was soon added the name of Lamine Senghor who had raised attention in the conference with his emotional speech against colonialism.\(^{47}\) He was in fact a natural choice to represent Sub-Saharan Africa in the LAI executive committee. Although either Gumede or La Guma would have carried more weight than a member of an emigrant movement, they were only visiting Europe and thus could not take effective part in the practical work of the organisation. Senghor lived permanently in France and was thus ideal for this purpose.

Senghor’s exact role in the secretariat seems to have been somewhat hard to define. In LAI documents he is variously described as the delegate for the ”Colonais Francaises“, the

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\(^{45}\) See the upcoming article for the CDRN/LDRN.

\(^{46}\) “Das Exekutive-Komitee der ”Liga gegen Imperialismus und für nationale Unabhängigkeit“. Comintern archives, fond 542, opis 1/15, p 9.

representative of his own organization, or without any affiliation. Although the CDRN boasted to have an active section in Dakar, Senegal, its base was firmly in the metropolitan France. Nor did Senghor seem to have had contacts elsewhere in the Sub-Saharan Africa, outside the French West African colonies. He was in effect an emigrant leader with a small group of followers and it did not hurt to imply that he was in fact something more than that. Hence probably the ambiguity.

Although the LAI now had an African of some standing in its executive branch, this was still far from what the ECCI had hoped for. From their point of view Senghor represented just such middlemen, which the Comintern had wanted to get rid of in its dealings with the colonies. And yet, it is difficult to see how things could have been different as no-one living permanently in the African continent could have taken active part in the workings of a committee that met in Europe.

After the Brussels conference the LAI executive and secretariat took over the laborious work of organising a worldwide anti-colonial network. Their main focus remained in Asia, especially in India and China. Some new contacts were, however, made also in Sub-Saharan Africa, and especially in the British West Africa.

Sometime in early 1927 a link was formed to the Gold Coast Farmer's Association (GCFA). Presumably it was originally contacted through the auspices of the NCBWA, which had its centre of activity in the same colony. As an agricultural labour union the GCFA fitted well to the revolutionary agenda of the ECCI, which continued to feel awkward to support colonial movements with purely nationalist tendencies, such as the ANC. On the other hand the Gold Coast farmers lacked an influential and effective leader who could have provided their movement coherence in the eyes of their European correspondents. The GCFA would stay in contact with the LAI during the coming years, but without ever making much of an impression within the organisation.

The other new contact in the British West Africa was even more promising from the point of view of the LAI’s secret backers in the Comintern. The Sierra Leone Railwaymen's Union (SLRU) may have been contacted through the NCBWA as well. Other than that not much can be said about it. The president of the organisation, a certain K. A. Richards, was later to announce that his union had 1322 members. Such a grandiose claim must have raised some scepticism in Moscow, if it was

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49 For a lively description of the employees in the early secretariat, Gibarti, another Hungarian Joseph Lengyel and an Indian emigrant Chattopadhaya see Buber-Neumann, pp. 107–110.
known there that there was only a few kilometres of small gauge mine railway in the whole country.\textsuperscript{51}

Still, the SLRU was a true workers’ union and to have created a link to it was undoubtedly viewed as a success by the ECCI. In some ways an even more impressive catch was the Mozambique Railwaymen's Union (MRU) which was also listed among the early LAI contacts.\textsuperscript{52} It seemed to promise a widening of the anti-imperialist sphere into a new colonial empire. Under a tightening right-wing military rule since May 1926 Portugal had no Communist party that could have co-operated with the LAI or its backers. Therefore it is likely that whoever the members of the MRU were, they had been contacted via South Africa, perhaps with the assistance of the mysterious Social Revolutionary Party.

The French African colonies were apparently all originally grouped together and recognised as being in the sphere of the CDRN.\textsuperscript{53} This decision undoubtedly reflected the lobbying of Senghor, but it did little to broaden LAI influence in Africa itself. In May 1927 it was reported that a special LAI section had been created in Dakar.\textsuperscript{54} This in all likelihood referred to the cell the CDRN claimed to have formed there. Dakar was the main port of entry to the French West Africa and its large harbour was a vital link for maritime connections elsewhere within the French colonial empire. Considering where the CDRN draw its main support, it is more than likely that the local LAI section consisted of native sailors stationed in Senegal.

Besides this rather flimsy connection made through the auspices of the CDRN, the LAI claimed at this point only one direct contact within the French Sub-Saharan Africa. It was with a Malagasy nationalist group called \textit{Ligue des Bas Croisés}.\textsuperscript{55} No clues were provided as to how this link had been made or what this enigmatic group in the far away Madagascar exactly represented. Possibly this was another maritime connection as the Malagasy often worked as sailors in European ships.

Despite a relatively auspicious start, the LAI was still very far from creating an anti-colonial network that would cover at least the most important African colonies. In fact, even the Dakar connection was soon in doubt. Lamine Senghor had been briefly arrested by the French police in

\textsuperscript{52} “Report on the Activities of the League Against Imperialism in the different countries February to May 1927”.
\textsuperscript{54} “Report on the Activities of the League Against Imperialism in the different countries February to May 1927”. Comintern archives, fond 542, opis 1/16, pp. 31.
Cannes after his return from Brussels. The reason for this remains unclear, but could be tied to his suspected connections with the Comintern. He appears to have known who the secret backers of the LAI were and choosing him to the executive committee might have been a part in the plan to keep the organisation in Communist hands.

After his release from prison Senghor tried to persuade his colleagues in the CDRN to follow him back to the folds of the PCF. Rebuffed, he left the organisation he had helped to create just two years earlier. Together with Tiémoko Garan Kouyaté, an emigrant from the French Sudan and a primary schoolteacher, he formed yet another organisation, Ligue de Défense de la Race Noire (LDRN) placing it firmly under the wings of the PCF. By August 1927 it was the LDRN, and no longer the CDRN, that was said to act as a liaison between the LAI and the French colonial Africa.

The breaking of relations with the CDRN and the creation of the LDRN as a counterpose to it were symptomatic of things to come. The ECCI wished to create a wide anti-colonial front under its wings, but only on its own terms. No independence of action or deviation from the Party line was to be allowed. This was quite understandable considering the supposed nature of the LAI as an umbrella organisation of various anti-colonial movements all around the world. Loosing control over such a kaleidoscopic group with multiple interests would be easy and the League might easily end up being taken over by people hostile to Comintern views.

This imperative to retain control at all cost was, however, quite contradictory with the equally vital goal of retaining the appearance of LAI’s independence from Moscow. Without such camouflage it would be impossible to expand the sphere of the organisation to cover also non-communist sympathisers of the anti-colonial struggle. Those who knew the secret, like Lamine Senghor, had thus to walk a tightrope between following Moscow’s dictates and at the same time giving the impression that the LAI agenda was open to discussion. Senghor tripped early on and was forced to create a new organisation that would not question his leadership. While doing so he also inadvertently weakened LAI contacts with Africa by denying it the support of the CDRN. Other similar cases were to follow.

56 For the surveillance of the anti-colonial activists by the French authorities see Edwards, 2003, p. 29.  
57 See Buber-Neumann, pp. 104–105.  
The second Brussels Conference

It had originally been intended that the LAI secretariat would be based in Paris. However, when the executive committee held its first meeting at the end of March 1927 in Amsterdam it was decided to postpone this plan and to set up the secretariat temporarily in Berlin. The reasons provided were mainly financial, but Senghor’s arrest by the French police weighed also. Berlin was meant to be only a temporary solution, but in the end the secretary was to remain there permanently, a decision that might well have been sought for by Münzenberg from the beginning.

There were in fact quite rational reasons to stay in Berlin. Germany no longer had colonies of its own and thus local authorities would have less reason to bother to watch over the activities of an anti-colonial organisation within its borders. In fact, they might even regard with some glee any discomfiture the LAI caused to the other colonial powers that had crushed its own imperial designs. Still, albeit this might had made the life of the permanent LAI secretariat so much easier, it further complicated the connections the organisation had with the colonies. In Berlin the secretariat was ever more isolated from the people it was supposed to be trying to reach. Most of the groundwork in creating colonial contacts had thus to be delegated to LAI branches in France, Great Britain and, in the case of Indonesia, the Netherlands.

The potential problems caused by such a delegation were amply demonstrated by the visit of a member of the British LAI section to South Africa in early autumn 1927. John Beckett was an MP for the Independent Labour Party (ILP) who also belonged to the executive committee of the British LAI. A firebrand radical, his chequered political career was to later take him to the British Union of Fascists. Perhaps due to such leanings he seems to have refused to take any interest in the black workers or the possible creation of a local LAI section during his stay. At least this was the opinion of Sidney Percival Bunting, one of the founding members of the CPSA, who send from Johannesburg a bitter letter to Gibarti in Berlin to complaint over Beckett’s cavalier behaviour.60

If John Beckett was being negligent in his responsibilities to the League, his colleagues in the other LAI sections do not appear to made much more of an impression. The main problem was still how to approach the colonies. Regular mail connections to Africa were closely censored and all subversive material; circulars, newspapers, letters etc. was returned or confiscated. The French LAI section, based at 10, Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, Paris, had two paid employees and appears to

59 London, Amsterdam and Brussels were also considered. An undated summary of a LAI meeting sometime between Feb. – Nov. 1927, possibly written by Münzenberg (in German). Comintern archives, Fond 542, opis 1/10, p. 57. See also “Organising Report”, unnamed, undated and in poor shape. Comintern archives, fond 542, opis 1/10, p. 60.
have taken an active interest in Africa. It even managed to publish a critical bulletin on French imperialism in Congo. However, besides having some propaganda value within western intellectual spheres, this could make no real difference in the African context.\(^6^1\)

Lamine Senghor’s short period of influence in the LAI was now already coming to an end. While in prison his fragile health had been impaired further and he soon developed consumption. He was unable to attend the second LAI executive meeting at Cologne in late August and his position was temporarily taken over by Gabrielle Duchêne, a French feminist-pacifist from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.\(^6^2\) Senghor was apparently meant to have his seat back in a conference scheduled for early December, but he died just prior to it and Sub-Saharan Africa was left without an influential representative in the organisation.

The conference to which Senghor had planned to take part was the meeting of the LAI General Council between 9\(^{th}\) – 11\(^{th}\) December 1927, again in Brussels. It was hoped that it would draw a large number of participants from numerous anti-colonial and, increasingly, also pacifist organisations. At the beginning of October Münzenberg send to Moscow a preliminary list of the proposed delegates. South Africa was again to be represented by La Guma and Gumede for whom this was to be their second joint trip to Europe within a year. Richards, the President of the SLRU, was also listed with a grandiloquent, and misleading, title as the delegate of the ‘North African Negro Colonies’. His participation had not been confirmed, however, as he still lacked the funds for the long journey.\(^6^3\)

Münzenberg also provided for Moscow a short summary of the correspondence so far received by the LAI secretariat concerning the conference.\(^6^4\) Mere half a dozen of these were connected with the Sub-Saharan Africa and even they were mostly of dubious value. A certain ‘A. Gadi Ahim’ of the Sudanese-Egyptian Union had written to express his interest. Most likely he was the same person as ‘Abdel Gader’ who eventually represented the Union in Brussels. Solly Sachs had sent a letter from South Africa on behalf of the ICU and there was also a letter from Casely Hayford of the NCBWA. Neither of these two correspondents, nor any delegate from the latter organisation, were to be present in the conference.

Two letters had also been sent by the ANLC, which was now said to be representing black workers in the United States, Central America and the British West Africa. The CDRN was also


\(^{6^2}\) A letter to P (in German), probably from Münzenberg, Berlin 22nd Aug. 1927. Comintern archives, fond 542, opis 1/9, p. 69.

\(^{6^3}\) A letter (in German) from Münzenberg to Benett (sic) in Moscow, Berlin 1st Oct. 1927. Comintern archives, fond 542, opis 1/8, p. 171.

claimed to have send a letter, but most likely this was in error and the LDRN was actually meant. The two closely named, but rival organisations were to cause confusion among the LAI operatives for years to come. Finally, there was a letter from Kweku Bankole, a native of Gold Coast currently studying at the Eastern University of Moscow (KUTV) under the wings of the CPUSA.65

When the General Council finally convened, the original list of African delegates appears to have been considerably modified.66 Oddly enough, Lamine Senghor was still listed among the members of the executive committee, although he was already dead. The other non-Europeans were still Nehru, Hatta, Liau Hansin and Baldwin, together with Manuel Ugarte, an Argentinian novelist and a new member. The only Sub-Saharan African among the thirty-one names listed in the General Council was Daniel Colraine who represented the South African Trades Union Congress (SATUC). He was a white labour unionist leader who had found fame in the 1922 Rand mine strike.

Several Sub-Saharan Africans had been invited as guests to the conference, together with the Sudanese representative and half a dozen North Africans. The presence of the South African ICU leader Clements Kadalie implies that the Comintern had not been able to dictate the quest list all the way. Or perhaps the ECCI was still trying to court this influential trade unionist back to its orbit. Just prior to the conference Gibarti had written to Moscow suggesting Kadalie together with the Sierra Leonean Richards as potential agitators in a propaganda campaign against the anti-colonial pretensions of the Socialist International.67

William Henry (Bill) Andrews, one of the white founders of the CPSA and its former chairman accompanied Colraine as another representative from the SATUC. Instead of Richards, the SLRU was represented by a certain Smith of whom nothing more is known. The GCFA had also send a delegate, but he cannot have made much of an impression in the Conference as even his name went unrecorded. It was just stated that he came from Nsawam, Gold Coast.

The list of participants included the travelling expenses each of them required from the LAI.68 Colraine and Andrews both got 750 German marks for a return boat ticket from Johannesburg. After joining the Socialist International Kadalie had toured for months around Europe as a celebrated guest in various conferences and meetings. To Brussels he came from London drawing 50 marks for a return ticket. Both West Africans got 300 marks for their return trip from Sierra Leone and Nsawam respectively, less than half the expenses of the white South

68 Ibid.
Africans. Altogether Sub-Saharan Africans cost the organisers 2.175 German marks, a little over 20 per cent of the total travel expenses of 10.695 marks. Interestingly, Lamine Senghor was also listed as having been provided with 25 marks for a return train ticket from Paris. Either he had been advanced the money before his death, or someone was pocketing expenses to his own purposes.

For some reason neither La Gum a or Gumede are nowhere listed among the participants of the Brussels Conference, although both of them certainly did take part in it. The reason could have something to do with the fact that they arrived to Belgium directly from the Soviet Union, which Gumede had just visited for the first and La Guma for the second time. However, it cannot be that they were simply omitted from the list of participants as they drew no travel expenses. Several members of the General Council and also guests were noted in the list as having had independent means to pay for their journey. Also, there were other delegates coming directly from Moscow, like the Indonesian A. Semaoen.

Due to the puzzling omission of La Guma and Gumede it cannot be said for certain how many Sub-Saharan Africans took part in the second Brussels Conference. There could have had been others who failed to appear in the list of participants. Anyway, there certainly were more Africans present than had been the case in February. The LAI seemed to be moving to the right direction, at least what came to Sub-Saharan Africa.

On the other hand, black Africa did not raise much interest during the Conference itself. Most of the anti-colonial debate seems to have been preoccupied with the situation in China and India. Also, anti-war issues, which in practical terms meant the protection of the Soviet Union from imperialist aggression, were now becoming more and more central themes within the LAI. What discussion of the colonies there were, was mostly self-criticism over the lack of direct contacts so far made. The British and the French LAI sections in particular were urged to seek out metropolitan students and labourers with colonial background and to use them as a means to infiltrate anti-colonial propaganda, leaflets, bulletins etc. to the colonies. It was thus tacitly acknowledged that the emigrant middle-men could not be dispensed with, after all. At least not at this point.

In his report to Moscow a few days before the conference Louis Gibarti had advertised the creation of a Sub-Saharan black labour movement that would comprise of the LAI affiliated unions

69 See documents in Davidson et al., I, pp. 166–174.


71 "Resolutionen über die unmittelbaren Aufgaben des Sekretariates und der Sektionen der Liga gegen Imperialismus, im Zusammenhang mit der internationalen Aktion gegen den Krieg", no author or date. Comintern archives, fond 542, opis 1/13, pp. 29–38.
in South Africa, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast, and Mozambique. Another preliminary memorandum of the upcoming conference written in French by an anonymous person envisioned vast regional alliances among revolutionary and minority movements. Its sole reference to Sub-Saharan Africa was rather enigmatic. The writer suggested that the ANC should be regarded “comme le centre d’action pour les organisations de la Côte d’Ivoire”. Presumably he meant that anti-colonial organisations in the French Ivory Coast should follow the example of the South African black nationalist movement in their agenda. Unfortunately he did not elaborate on what organisations he was talking about.

During the conference such vague suggestions were transformed into more coherent organisational plans. According to an organising report probably compiled during the meeting, ‘Central secretariats of the League’ had been created in twenty-two countries or areas around the world. Three of these were in Africa. The ‘South African Secretariat’ was based in Johannesburg and headed by a triumvirate of La Guma, Gumede and Colraine. The ‘West African Secretariat’ was to be a joint venture of the SLRU and the NCBWA. That the GCFA was not mentioned probably reflects the ineffectual nature of this organisation's unnamed representative in the Conference. Finally, there was the ‘North African Secretariat’ headed by the National Egyptian Party.

Attached to the report was also a list of thirty-two organisations “affiliated to the International League”. Five of these were from Africa. The National-Radical Party of Egypt and the Sudanese-Egyptian Union (in Khartum) represented the North. The ANC stood for the South. The other two organisations were the GCFA and, oddly enough, the SLRU, which thus doubled both as one of the core members in the West African Secretariat and an affiliated organisation outside the LAI inner circle. These five organisations in fact headed the list followed by others from various parts of the world.

The CDRN was also included in the list, but only near its end, among the European sympathisers and supporters. It is once again likely that the LDRN was in fact intended. Still, grouping its name among the European organisations shows that the organisation was no longer regarded to stand directly for the French African colonies. Presumably the LDRN, if it was the

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72 “Politische und organisatorische Auswertung der Tagung des Generlarates (sic) am 6. Dezember 1927” compiled by the Secretary of the LAI Louis Gibarti. Comintern archives, fond 542, opis 1/10, p. 30. A mailing list compiled during or after the meeting included also Kenya among the African colonies with which the LAI had had correspondence with. Comintern archives, fond 542, opis 1/10, pp. 61–62.
73 “Reunion du Conseil General (Projet)”, unnamed and undated report. Comintern archives, fond 542, opis 1/10, p. 44.
actual reference, was considered too weak and shorn of any direct contacts to the African continent to justify such a claim.

A promise that failed

At least in the African context the meeting of the General Council at Brussels in December 1927 undoubtedly meant a step forward. After almost two years of vacillation and false starts there was now a blueprint on how to organise anti-colonial work within the Sub-Saharan colonies themselves. To be sure, the system of ‘central secretariats’ existed only in paper and it covered only parts of the continent. The whole East Africa remained outside even most ephemeral contacts to the LAI. Still, there was now at least a start and it remained to put the agreed plan into effect.

However, at the moment the League Against Imperialism was supposed to take shape and spread out to the world, it began to disintegrate in its most important non-European area of operations, Asia. In April 1927 the Chinese Kuomintang Party had turned against its Communist allies who were all but exterminated in a series of bloody purges. Thus the LAI lost its sole non-European supporter who actually held a share in political power. The Chinese Communists raised a revolt in Canton in 11th December, during the final day of the Brussels conference, only to be crushed in three days. Russian counsellors were involved in the desperate street fighting and this provided the Kuomintang an excuse to cut all relations with the Soviet Union.

The meeting of the LAI General Council brought also to the fore the ambitions of the colonial organisations themselves, and especially those of the Indian National Congress. The INC was not prepared to fall in line with Moscow, but wished to have its own saying in the League. Such a show of nationalist initiative alarmed the Comintern causing it to use its backstage influence to isolate and sidetrack the Indians. Frustrated, the INC was eventually compelled to leave the LAI altogether rather than to accept a subservient role in it. Münzenberg’s creation had began to feel the full impact of its inner contradictions. In order to thrive the League needed the support of strong and influential anti-colonial nationalist movements, but any such members threatened Comintern’s invisible domination of the organisation.76

The LAI was also facing problems with its African contacts. The NCBWA was now in a terminal state and would soon to disintegrate.77 This was caused by the frustration of its middle-class entrepreneur supporters whose modest political aspirations had been consistently and harshly foiled by the colonial authorities. Improving economic conditions in the colonies had also provided

76 See e.g. Haikal, pp. 149–152.
77 See e.g. Langley, 1969, pp. 390–395.
them with better opportunities to dissipate their energies in commerce rather than politics. The death of Casely Hayford in 1930 removed the last link which kept this multi-colony organisation together.

The NCBWA had been the sole native movement affiliated to the League that had been able to bring together several colonies in the British West Africa. It has also in all likelihood been instrumental in drawing the GCFA and the SLRU to the orbit of the LAI. Neither of these strictly local organisations was likely to be able to take up its place in forming an anti-colonial network in the ‘West African Secretariat’, especially as they lacked influential leaders in the calibre of Hayford.

The LDRN was also in decline after the premature death of its founder.\(^78\) Senghor had had no time to eclipse the CDRN with his new organisation, which was now left struggling with a small emigrant following among black sailors in French ports. The LDRN apparently had no direct contacts to the African continent and was regarded merely as an emigrant organisation by the LAI itself. Thus the League was left without any meaningful connections to the French African colonies.

Even the South African Communist Party was experiencing considerable turmoil within its ranks. During 1927 the Comintern began to insist that the CPSA must adopt a slogan that called for a black nationalist republic in South Africa as a precursor to moving towards socialism. This caused great friction among the CPSA leadership, the majority of whom were white. It took well into the next year before the new line was officially adopted and some influential members left the party in protest, or were forced into sidelines.\(^79\)

As a result of this internecine struggle, the CPSA was not in a position to carry out the task of creating a ‘South African Secretariat’ for the LAI. Nor was there anyone else likely to take its place in this. After Josiah Gumede, the new President-General of the ANC, returned from his journey to Soviet Union he found himself accused by his colleagues in the organisation of having moved too close to the communists. Hoping to draw the ANC to the orbit of the Comintern he was in fact himself being caught in a similar trap of divided loyalties that had earlier compelled Senghor to leave his CDRN.

The next meeting of the LAI executive was held in April 1928, again in Brussels.\(^80\) Lamine Senghor had not been replaced and there were thus only ten members left in the executive committee, four of whom represented non-European countries. Liau Hansin still sat for the much reduced Communist Party of China. Abdul Manaf and Mohammed Nazir Pamontjak came from

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\(^78\) See p. ?? below.

\(^79\) For the inner struggle in the CPSA see Davidson et al., I, pp 12–13 and the documents on pp. 154–212.

Indonesia. As the INC had now been purged from the League, the Indian delegate had been changed to V. Chattopadhaya. He was an associate of Münzenberg who had been involved in his anti-colonial operations ever since the LACO and worked now in the LAI secretariat in Berlin. One of the two British members, S. Saklatvala, also came originally from India.

After having dealt with the annual report from the LAI secretariat, the meeting went through local reports from four LAI sections; Germany, France, Great Britain and the Netherlands. Situations in India, Egypt, the Arabic countries and China were discussed, together with plans for a Pan-American congress. Not much interest was shown towards Africa. Albert Marteaux, the Belgian member, deplored the eager support Belgian socialists were giving to colonial activities in the Congo. He concluded that at the moment there was no possibility to come up with a LAI section in Belgium. It was also decided to keep the LAI secretariat permanently in Berlin as France was still regarded to be too hostile for it.

There was not going to be another LAI conference for 1928 and the organisation seems to have just plodded through the rest of the year without much to show for it. In June a meeting of the International Secretariat was held in Berlin to discuss the work being done by local LAI branches. At some point there was also talk about arranging local conferences and South Africa was put forward as the potential centre for one that would encompass the whole Sub-Saharan Africa.⁸¹ Nothing apparently came of this idea, however, and it was quietly buried. After a vigorous start the LAI was now showing similar signs of lethargy that had crippled the LACO from the start.

One reason for the apparent LAI inactivity during 1928 may have been that the focus of everyone affiliated to the Comintern was now directed towards the central organisation itself. The Sixth Comintern Congress was held in Moscow in Summer 1928 and lasted all the way from July 15th to 1st September. During it the Communist International adopted once again a more confrontational revolutionary program. Instead of seeking to co-operate with the other left against the right-wing parties and movements, the Communists everywhere should draw a firm ideological line separating them from everyone else, be they nationalists, fascists or socialists.⁸²

The new line forebode hard times for organisations like the LAI that specifically sought to create contacts between the Comintern and potential sympathisers outside the communist ranks. The Sixth Congress also confirmed the decision to call for a black republic of South Africa, which the CPSA was finally compelled to accept as its goal. A similar thesis was extended, rather unrealistically, to such parts of the United States where blacks formed the majority. This was to

⁸¹ “Dringendste Aufgaben der Liga”, no author or date. Comintern archives, fond 542, opis 1/26, p. 86.
⁸² Hooker, pp. 11–12.
cause similar friction and disintegration within the CPUSA as had earlier plagued the South African comrades.

During all this ideological turmoil LAI recruitment stagnated. Several lists of current LAI contacts were send to Moscow during 1928. One of them categorised all affiliated organisations according to their function.\(^\text{83}\) According to it there were 23 workers’ organisations linked to the LAI. Several of them were actually European and the only Sub-Saharan African was the Sierra Leonean SLRU. The GCFA was listed among four farmers’ organisations, and the ANC among a group of 11 nationalist organisations. The CPSA was not mentioned, presumably as there was no category for communist parties.

A separate category was included for “Neger-Organisationen”. There were only three names in it. The first was “Pan-Afrikanische Kongress, New-York”, which appears to refer, rather confusingly, to the NAACP Congress held back in 1926. This ‘organisation’ was dubiously said to represent no less than 208 affiliated groups. The second organisation was the NAACP itself followed by the CDRN, or more likely the LDRN. The abbreviation of this French organisation appears to have still been persistently miss-spelled after the split over a year ago.

Another list of LAI affiliated organisations from December 1928 elaborated this division further by differentiating between organisations that were actually members of the League and those who just sympathised with its goals.\(^\text{84}\) The sole member organisation from South Africa was the Native Federation of Trade Unions (NAFTU), which the CPSA had created in March 1928 to compete with the ICU. The latter was by now already in decline and the communist union had managed to attract several thousand members to its ranks. Two sympathisers from South Africa were also listed, the ANC and the white South African Trade Union Congress (SATUC). That the CPSA itself was not included among LAI members perhaps reflects deliberate policy to camouflage the Communists’ role in the organisation.

In West Africa only the SLRU was counted as a LAI member. The GCFA was listed merely as a sympathiser. Perhaps the delegate send by the Gold Coast farmers to the Brussels conference a year ago had not had the necessary credentials to subscribe for a membership. No other Sub-Saharan African organisations were included in the December list. That the LDRN (or the CDRN) was omitted from it probably reflects its ambiguous role as an emigrant organisation based in Europe.

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These two LAI documents and a third one with similar contents reveal that the organisation was not gaining ground in Sub-Saharan Africa.\(^{85}\) In fact, it was shrinking. The NCBWA was no longer included even among potential sympathisers and the more spurious contacts, like the Mozambiquean railwaymen’s MRU, had disappeared without a trace. No new contacts had been made during the year, unless one counts the South African native trade union, the NAFTU, which was the creation of the CPSA.

It appears that the LAI was still not able to pass even its first main stumbling block in forging an anti-colonial network in Sub-Saharan Africa. It had not found a satisfactory way to contact the colonies directly. African emigrant organisations like the LDRN were clearly unable to make good their claim to represent also people back home. Nor had the Afro-Americans been able to act as a bridge to Africa, whatever their postulations to the contrary. Based in Germany which had no colonies of its own the LAI was not in a position to reach the natives by itself. This left the communist parties and League cells in the imperial metropolises, France, Great Britain and Belgium, but even these appeared to leave much to be desired.

Münzenberg’s intrusion into the colonial sphere in the form of the LAI had been regarded with suspicion by the western communist parties, especially in France. In February 1929 R. Page Arnot, a prominent British communist, send to Moscow a detailed report on the PCF describing its relations with the LAI as “a sore point".\(^{86}\) It appears that the French communists held a grudge against Münzenberg whom they regarded as having meddled in their affairs while conducting his international AIH campaign for famine relief in Russia. They wished to leave the recruitment of black colonial Africans to the LDRN, which was their own protege and had no direct links to Münzenberg and Germany.\(^{87}\)

In his report Page Arnot also noted that ever since the death of the charismatic Senghor (whose name he miss-spelled) the growth of the LDRN had stalled.\(^{88}\) It was only now beginning to regain headway among black sailors in Bordeaux. Practically no recruitment was being done in the French African colonies themselves. The sole exception was Madagascar where “since VI Congress there are 5 comrades doing good work".\(^{89}\) It would appear from this casual remark that after the Comintern Congress last summer a communist cell had been successfully created in this faraway

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colony. The report offered no explanation on how this had come about, but a contact through Malagasy sailors seems likely. However, there was nothing to indicate that the LAI had been involved in this success, or that the new link was even in any contact with it.

Metropolitan communist parties were in fact suffering from similar contradictions that were causing so much controversy within the CPSA. Their main interest was to reach the white European working class and any anti-colonial agenda within their own ranks threatened constantly to embarrass such ambitions. Racial prejudice was not restricted to the upper classes. French, British and Belgian proletariat was mainly concerned over its own future and did not take kindly to being bunched together with the coloured peoples. Many regarded colonial empires with national pride and knew, or cared, little for the plight of the natives. In such circumstances an openly anti-colonial stand was not ideal to draw mass support among the white workers.  

Despite the enormous problems it was facing in creating a worldwide anti-colonial network, the LAI was not going to give up so easily. After a year of relative inactivity it began busily to organise the Second Anti-Imperialist World Congress for the summer of 1929. This time the meeting was held in Frankfurt, near the Zoological Gardens. It lasted no less than twelve days, from the 20th to the 31st of July, and there were 200 delegates present, roughly the same number as had attended the founding conference in February 1927. However, only 84 of the delegates were of colonial descent and mere 15 really came from the colonies. It appears that the only African present was Tiémoko Garan Kouyaté, the co-founder of the LDRN who had taken over its leadership after Lamine Senghor’s death.

A list of affiliated and sympathetic organisations compiled before or during the Frankfurt Congress reveals no great improvement concerning Sub-Saharan Africa. The SLRU and the GCFA were the sole West African contacts listed, the latter still only as a sympathiser. In South Africa the ANC had now been raised among the members, together with the NAFTU. The SATUC had been dropped out, but there was now supposed to be an actual LAI section for South Africa. The only new contact was Lehotla la Bafo, a native movement from Basutoland (modern Lesotho) which had been contacted through the CPSA.

For some reason the LDRN was once again missing from the list, although Kouyaté certainly took part in the Congress as its representative. Perhaps this reflects the unclear role the French emigrant organisation held in the League structure. The list of participants also reveals a

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90 See e.g. Edwards, 2003, pp. 21–22.
91 For the Frankfurt Congress see e.g. Hooker, pp. 12–13.
93 See also a letter from Maphutseng Lefela to the RILU, 9th Oct. 1929 in Davidson et al., I, pp. 221–222.
subtle change in the nature of the LAI, away from the anti-colonial struggle and towards anti-war issues and European separatist movements. Together with local LAI sections from Germany, France, Great Britain and the Netherlands, there were now such unlikely organisations included as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and *Bund religiöser Sozialisten*.

One of the propositions discussed in Frankfurt was the creation of a LAI Youth Secretary. As usual, the envisioned network was extremely ambitious.\(^94\) It was intended to connect not only the colonies and the colonial metropolises, but the rest of the world as well. This reflected the new anti-imperialist emphasizing that went beyond mere colonial issues.

Predictably, this grandiose scheme slipped into quick oblivion after the Congress. However, the detailed proposal provided for potential methods of colonial recruitment for the Youth Secretary are revealing of the way the LAI sought to operate in Africa and elsewhere. It had by now been acknowledged that the only way to create direct contacts to the colonies was through emigrants. Their activation was discussed in several clauses:

10. Regular activity should be developed among the organised and unorganised workers and students of colonial countries resident in Europe and U.S.A. The aim of such activity must be (a) to widen the possibilities for contact with colonial organisations (b) To draw the best elements into active co-operation with the Youth Secretariat and the national Youth Sections. (c) To draw their militant anti-imperialist organisations into the influence of the League Against Imperialism and to secure their affiliation. (d) To establish Anti-Imperialist Youth organisations of these elements where such do not already exist (sic). (e) To form (sic) oppositional groupings of those elements under our influence in reactionary and national-reformist organisations (f) to (sic) expose the colonial policy of the YSI etc etc.

11. To utilise the International Seamens (sic) Clubs in Hamburg, Rotterdam, Marseilles, etc, the Indian Seamens' Union in England, and other organisationas of colonial seamen and workers for the development of contacts, distribution of materials, etc.

12. To establish official and individual connection (sic) with all colonial student organisations in Europe and U.S.A. attempting to secure their affiliation to the League.\(^95\)

This appears to be the most detailed recruitment programme the LAI ever came up with, but it was still rather vague in nature. There were additional clauses on how to recruit supporters within western societies themselves and how to spread propaganda material, but nothing concrete on who was actually supposed to do what and when. All this was left to the individual LAI sections to work out for themselves.

\(^{94}\) "Draft plan of work in connection with the Youth Secretariat Anti-Imperialist League. Comintern archives, fond 542 opis 1/31, p. 57–63

\(^{95}\) "Draft plan of work in connection with the Youth Secretariat Anti-Imperialist League. Comintern archives, fond 542 opis 1/31, p. 61–62."
All in all, the Frankfurt Congress did not go as had been planned by the Comintern. The LAI executive had secretly agreed in its January 1929 meeting in Cologne that the remaining nationalist “bourgeoisie” organisations would be purged from the League during the conference. However, such a proposal was unexpectedly turned down by the congress delegates. The revolutionary ethos of some of the speakers also left much to be desired. William Pickens from the NAACP even questioned the rationality of immediate independence for backward African colonies. In the end the communists and their allies managed to press through their version of congress resolutions, but the meeting had certainly provided substance to Moscow’s fears of loosing control over the League.96

In the wake of the Frankfurt Congress a LAI section was finally formed in Belgium.97 The Belgians only had a single colony, the Belgian Congo, and it was situated in Sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore the Belgian LAI section provides a good example of how the League actually worked in the African context. It consisted of just three members; a secretary, a news editor and a third member whose tasks were not elaborated. However, as he was said to be a former telegraphist on a mail-boat to Congo, it is likely that he was responsible for recruitment among African sailors.

It seems that relations between the new section and the Belgian Communist Party (Parti Communiste Belgique, PCB) were not all that close. Eager to make its mark the former had demanded that the Party should include black candidates to its electoral lists. This demand had been turned down by the PCB, purportedly because "colonial question has not yet been studied by the Party, and only questions of principle can be included".98 Presumably Belgian Communists did not wish to offend the racial sensitivities of their potential voters with a multi-racial list of candidates.

Having been snubbed even by the local Party, it is not surprising that the small Belgian LAI section had not achieved much during its first months of existence. There were supposed to be seven white persons in the Congo favourable to the LAI, but these had not yet been contacted. ‘A comrade’ was about to leave for the colony, presumably to form such contacts. “Several” black sailors on one of the four Antwerp-Congo mail-boats had also been approached and "possibilities of propaganda among the Negroes of Congo working on board the mailboats are much greater than we had thought first".99 The plan was to create a communist organisation among the Negro sailors and then to spread it throughout Congo.

97 “After the Colonial Conference” A copy of a report from the Belgian LAI section with no date or writer. Comintern archives, fond 542 opis 1/30, p. 143.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
The LAI turns away from the colonies

Whatever high hopes the newly created Belgian LAI section might have cherished, the League’s African connection was already in permanent decline. No new Sub-Saharan organisations were to be drawn to its orbit after 1929 and the old contacts began soon to wither away. Creating a worldwide anti-colonial network was no longer high in Comintern’s agenda. The Sixth Comintern Congress had staked strict lines towards co-operation with nationalist movements and the independence shown by the delegates to the LAI congress in Frankfurt had solidified Moscow’s fears of losing control if the organisation continued in its current course. Instead, the LAI was to be veered towards a much safer slogan of safeguarding the communist revolution embodied in the Soviet Union from imperialist aggression. Such a goal would not draw unwanted supporters to the organisation.

The new slogan behind which the LAI now increasingly rallied was in part due to the tightening international situation. In Germany Münzenberg and his associates found themselves in an increasingly unstable political situation that threatened to overthrow the Republic. This raised new hopes of an impending German revolution and by 1930 anti-colonial matters were necessarily left on the sidelines. Taking its cue from its main promoter and financier the LAI followed suit and concentrated more and more on anti-war issues and European politics in general. Colonial matters were not completely discarded, but they no longer had a strong advocate within the organisation and no-one to keep things going.100

The situation was not more promising in Africa, at least from the League’s point of view. James La Guma was expelled from the CPSA during its internecine fighting over the black republic thesis. He would later return to the Party, but would never again take an active part in it. In 1930 Josiah Gumede was forced to resign from his position as the President-General of the ANC, partially due to his Communist connections. Pitted against the utterly hostile colonial administration and devoid of influential individuals to keep up the struggle, the LAI faltered all over Africa. Whatever activity the small local anti-colonial groups managed by themselves had no hope against the wide range of oppressive methods available to colonial authorities.

The LAI had never been the sole Comintern affiliated organisation interested in spreading revolutionary ideas to the colonies. The Red International of Labour Unions, called Profintern as a short for its name in Russian, had sought to form colonial ties ever since its creation in 1921. So far

100 See McMeekin, 2003, pp. 222–251.
this had not lead to much, at least what comes to Sub-Saharan Africa, but there had been African delegates present in the Fourth Profintern World Congress in March-April 1928.101

During that conference James Ford, a black labour unionist from the United States and an influential member of the CPUSA had been elected into the Profintern executive. Next year Ford was chosen to be an Afro-American delegate in the LAI Frankfurt Congress, together with George Padmore, a young Trinidadian activist living in the United States.102 Two months before the conference Ford approached the LAI executive to ask whether he would be allowed to call together a meeting of his own just prior the main event.103 The Profintern was planning another international conference in the United States the next year and Ford wanted to recruit blacks from Africa to attend it.104

Ford appears to have gained his permission, although nothing is known of how his preliminary conference turned out in the end. However, during the actual Congress he got notice by making angry attacks not only against the Garveyists who were by now in retreat after their leader had been deported from the United States, but also against some anti-colonial groups inside Africa. He severely castigated the ANC, Clements Kadalie and such CPSA leaders who had been purged during the struggle over the black republic thesis. Some of his wrath was directed against the West African Students’ Union, an emigrant organisation based in London and a potential conduit for the recruitment of Africans.

With such tirades Ford was able to draw attention from the African delegates towards his own aspirations to form a black African connection within the Profintern. When the First International Conference of Negro Workers convened in Hamburg in July 1930, there were also Sub-Saharan Africans present to attend it. The LAI was losing initiative in the anti-colonial sphere to communist labour unions.105

Loss of drive in the anti-colonial work of the League did not, however, mean that its colonial aspirations would have been completely discarded. Metropolitan LAI sections were still expected to continue recruitment in the colonies. In January 1931 the Belgian section was once

101 See the upcoming article on Profintern and Africa. Also Hooker, pp. 9–13 and 17–18.
102 James Ford became the vice-presidential candidate for the Communist Party of the United States in 1932, the first black to ever seek such a position. For his background see Cunard & Ford, pp. 144-146. Padmore’s original name was Malcolm Ivan Meredith Nurse. During the Frankfurt Congress he was only 27. Hooker, pp. 12–13.
103 A letter from John (sic) Ford to the Commission of the Anti-Imperialist League Congress, Profintern, May 31st 1929.” Comintern archives, fond 542 opis 1/30, p. 48. For an opinion concerning the personality of James Ford see Hooker, p. 10.
105 See the upcoming article on Profintern and Africa. Hooker, pp. 12–13. One of the Sub-Saharan Africans drawn to the orbit of Ford and Padmore was E. F. Small, a Gambian who had earlier played a part in the NCBWA’s Gambian committee. Langley, pp. 383–384.
more urged to spread its activities to the Congo colony.\textsuperscript{106} Pamphlets were to be circulated and demonstrations organised. Party newspapers and others sympathetic to the cause should write articles and publish brochures describing and denouncing the colonial system.

Despite early expectations to the contrary the Belgian section appears not to have been able to form direct contacts with Congo during its first year of existence. Apparently the mail-boat connection had not proven as fruitful as had been hoped. While the Belgians were now being spurred to further exertions in this respect, they were at the same time saddled with another distraction from colonial work. The Belgian section was invited to take a stand on the domestically important Flemish question, which fitted to LAI’s agenda of national liberation. Instead of concentrating its meagre resources on anti-colonial issues, the League was reaching in every direction possible and loosing sight of its original goals.

Despite of such lack of focus, resolutions made during LAI executive meetings continued to describe assumed revolutionary developments in the colonies. Having suffered humiliating setbacks in Asia, the LAI showed now more interest than before to Africa. However, whereas previously the LAI executive and secretariat had send to Moscow reports that listed in mundane terms what actual progress had been made in recruiting native organisations in the colonies, the tone was now blatantly propagandist and wildly removed from reality. The LAI executive appears to have become more interested in impressing Moscow than in providing accurate information on its progress.

This can be clearly seen in a draft of resolutions probably made for an executive meeting held in Berlin in June 1931.\textsuperscript{107} Its compilers confidently prophesied nothing less than an imminent general anti-colonial rising in the Sub-Saharan Africa. As a proof of this they cited recent events in South Africa, Nigeria, the French and the Belgian Congo, Kenya and even the Philippines. African workers were said to be organising themselves especially in Gambia and South Africa. The imperialists were everywhere forced to resort to increasing terror campaigns in a vain hope to control the rapidly worsening situation.

No details were provided to any of these proposed revolutionary incidents and the unnamed compilers of the draft cannot have known Africa very well, if they thought the Philippine Archipelago to be a part of it. The final version of the resolutions at least omitted mentioning the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{106} Anonymous instructions (in German) concerning the organisation of anti-imperialist work in Belgium, 5th Jan. 1931. Comintern archives, fond 542 opis 1/49, p. 2–3.  
\textsuperscript{107} “Proekt rezoljutsii o polozenii v kolonijah i o zadachah Antinperialisticheskoi Ligi”. Comintern archives fond 542 opis 1/49, pp. 51–69, concerning Africa p. 60. The same resolutions in French (“Projet de resolution sur la situation dans les colonies et les taches de la ligue contre l'imperialisme”) in pp. 70–87, concerning Africa p. 78.}
Philippines, but otherwise followed a similar excited and wildly exaggerating tone. The Frankfurt Congress back in 1929 had purportedly opened up a new era for the LAI by purging the "so-called anti-imperialist organisations (the national reformists and the social democrats)" from the organisation. Nationalist leaders like Nehru and Hatta were bitterly castigated as traitors and imperialist agents. An anti-imperialist revolution was imminent especially among the oppressed black peoples of the Sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas:

In South Africa, Madagascar, Kenya Colony, Gambia, Nigeria, the French and Belgian Congo, Guadaloupe, Honduras, San Domingo, the Negro masses have taken up arms in the struggle against imperialism. In South Africa in particular the movement has reached the stage of a conscious class struggle on the part of the white and coloured workers (unemployed workers' demonstrations, the May Day demonstrations, strikes, etc.). New exceptional laws, the increasingly frequent confiscation of the land of the natives, the intensified terroristic measures of the white slaveholders, the new wave of terror, lynching and persecutions in the United States have been unable to stem the rising tide of Negro struggle for emancipation from colonial imperialism. New and tremendous reserves are wheeling into the anti-imperialist fighting front.

Besides such revolutionary ethos, these and other resolutions and reports of the period provide very little information on what the League was actually doing in Africa. There were no lists of affiliated organisations or contact addresses. After the purging of the “national reformists” from the League there was probably not that much to list.

The sole practical achievement mentioned in the draft for the June 1931 executive meeting was the creation of an International Bureau (IB). It was confidently assumed that this organisation would be able to organise black and white workers against imperial oppression. By praising the IB the League executive was in fact confessing its own failure to lead an international anti-colonial struggle. The International Bureau had been formed in July 1930 during the International Negro Workers’ Conference for which James Ford had recruited Africans from the LAI Frankfurt Conference a year before. By mentioning the Bureau as the sole current achievement

109 Ibid. pp. 211–212.
111 Interestingly, a copy of the June resolutions in (bad) Russian added Africa among places where grassroot organising was most needed, although this had not been mentioned in the original. Rezoljutsija Ispolniteljnogo Komiteta Ligi protiv imperializma i za natsionaljno-osvoboditeljnoe dvizenie ugnjetannyh narodov Evropi, 4th Jan. 1932. Comintern archives fond 542 opis 1/49, p. 122a.
112 “Proekt rezoljutsii o polozenii v kolonijah i o zadachah Antininperialisticheskoi Ligi”. Comintern archives fond 542 opis 1/49, p. 60. The same in French in p. 78.
in the anti-colonial sphere, the LAI was tacitly recognising that Profintern and its affiliated organisations were now in the vanguard of such work.\textsuperscript{113}

\textbf{Conclusions: The end of an era}

By 1932 situation in Germany was already so tense that colonial questions were inevitably pushed to the background. Adolf Hitler and his National-Socialists rose to power in January 1933 and the LAI was soon a fugitive. It continued to exist for a few years changing it base between Amsterdam, Paris and London. Its ties to the Comintern were shaken and then completely broken, as Moscow had feared all along. The last vestiges of the League faded away with the coming of a new World War in 1939.

Despite a promising start, the League Against Imperialism and for National Independence never really got off ground, at least as an anti-colonial organisation. The creation of a worldwide network to fight imperialism was an immensely ambitious task and the League lacked the resources to achieve any lasting success. Open hostility from colonial authorities effectively hampered attempts to reach the colonies themselves. The goals of the LAI affiliated organisations differed widely from each other and the secret link to the Comintern intensified inner contradictions within the organisation. If anything, it is surprising that the League managed to survive as long as it did.

Sub-Saharan Africa was never of central importance to the LAI and it provided the organisation with a most challenging environment in which to operate. Means of communication were few and easily monitored by hostile colonial authorities. Travel restrictions, censorship, postal control and other control mechanisms were enough to suppress most subversive activities. Nor were there that many active anti-colonial organisations around to contact with. Most of those which the LAI did manage to reach were locally based organisations with few followers and less influence. Of the two exceptions the NCBWA soon disintegrated and the ANC broke away from LAI. The only actual Sub-Saharan African communist party, the CPSA, succumbed to internecine squabbling that lasted well into the 1930’s.\textsuperscript{114}

In retrospect, the LAI was probably bound to fail, at least in Sub-Saharan Africa. It required the dislocations and humiliations suffered by the colonial system during the Second World War before independence movements were able to organise themselves as wide popular fronts. Even had the LAI been able to create a network of African cadres already in late 1920’s, it is doubtful whether this would have made difference in the long run. During the following decade the

\textsuperscript{113} The CPSA had been represented in the Hamburg Conference by Solly Sachs. See Davidson et al., I, p. 251n.
\textsuperscript{114} See Davidson et al., I, pp. 12–17.
Comintern was forced to completely redefine its anti-colonial policies and it is unlikely that the LAI could have survived this. It would either have cut its ties with the Comintern being doomed to insignificance for lack of resources, as is more or less what happened anyway, or it would have been forced to increasingly abandon colonial matters as Soviet leadership court-shipped western imperialist powers in order to fend off National-Socialist Germany. The protection of the Soviet Union always took precedence in Comintern agenda and no anti-colonial network would have been allowed to endanger this goal.
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