Glimpses of African Political Engagement in Weimar Germany – The Berlin Section of the 
*Ligue de la Defense de Race Negre*

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Political activity by Africans in Weimar Germany is a little known chapter in African diaspora 
history and has been little studied by historians. Only the international conference of Africans held 
in Hamburg 1930 has received some attention.¹ Other information about Africans and their 
undertakings in Weimar Germany is at its best sporadic. Among the few studies those by Adolf 
Rüger² and Katharina Oguntoye³ have been able to shed some light on this subject and give a rough 
outline of political aspirations of Africans in Germany, especially Berlin, during the 1920s. Rüger’s 
study concentrates on petitions sent by representatives of the Duala community to the 
*Reichskolonialamt* (German Colonial Office) and the German Parliament in 1919 in connection 
with the outcome of the Versailles treaty and the transfer of the German colonies to France and 
Britain.⁴ Among the signatory in the petition to the German Parliament one Joseph Bille is listed. 

Ten years later Joseph Bilé (Bille) together with one Viktor Bell, who was also among the 
signatories of the 1919 petition, were the key propagators behind the establishment of a Berlin 
section of the *Ligue de la Defense de la Race Negre* (LDRN), the *Deutsche Sektion der Liga zur 
Verteidigung der Negerrasse* (hereafter DSLVN).⁵ Some further details about the foundation of this organisation are put forward by Oguntoye, although she covers only the initial aspirations of the group in 1929.

The existence of such an organisation in Weimar Germany is interesting. Above all, it is an 
indication that there existed so far unknown networks and contacts among Africans living in


(Western) Europe during the post WWI period. The LDRN was in 1929 already a well known political actor in France and its founder, the Senegalese Lamine Senghor, had established contacts with various radical and leftist organizations. Although the LDRN was not a communist organisation, as the French authorities claimed, Senghor, who died already at the end of 1927, had close links with the French Communist Party (*Parti Communiste Français*, PCF) and communist-led front organizations, especially the League Against Imperialism (LAI). Senghor was a founding member of the LAI and belonged to its Executive Committee. A key figure of the LAI was its founder, the German communist Willi Münzenberg (1889-1940). Münzenberg was the Secretary General of the LAI but, more than so, he was also the head of the Workers International Relief (WIR or *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe*, IAH). Moreover, he was to become a key sponsor of politically motivated Africans in Germany, as will be discussed below.

However, apart from the few notes by Rüger and Oguntoye not much has been known hitherto about the further activities of the DSLVN. The main reason for this is the paucity of documentation. Rüger, in fact, does not give any references for his information about the foundation of the DSLVN by Bell and Bilé on 17 September 1929 and Oguntoye’s sketch is based only on documents found in the archives of the *Reichskolonialamt*. However, recent archival research by my research group in Moscow and Berlin has been able to locate some further documents on both the activities of Bilé – especially his links with Münzenberg – and the DSLVN in 1930.⁶

I.

Little is known about political activism by Africans in Weimar Germany. One of the earliest African political organizations was perhaps the African Association for Solidarity, which existed already in 1918. Not much is known about the Association: it is unknown how long it existed, its purposes and goals, or its relationship with the state. However, according to a membership list from June 1918, the Association claimed among its membership 32 Africans all across Germany, including Berlin, Hamburg, Breslau and Bavaria.⁷ At least in 1919 most of its members were still politically active as they were among the signatories of the 1919 petition. Thereafter, not much is known about political activism of Africans in Weimar Germany. Risto Marjomaa’s investigation on the activities of the League Against Colonial Oppression (LACO), the forerunner of the LAI, gives reference to two West Africans, Makube and Munumi, that were present at a meeting in the Berliner

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⁶ The original documents are reproduced as DACCO 8 and DACCO 9.
Rathauskeller on the 10\textsuperscript{th} of February, 1926: Makube was listed as representing an organization called \textit{Verein der Kameruner} whereas Munumi was referred to a representative for ‘West Africa’. This meeting resulted in the foundation of the LACO. Also present were, among others, Otto Lehmann-Russbüldt, who was the President of the \textit{Deutsche Liga für Menschenrechte} (German League for Human Rights) as well as Willi Münzenberg. As Fredrik Petersson’s research reveals, the LACO was but one of the many different front organizations that Münzenberg had established during the 1920s.

The identity of the two Africans, Makube and Munumi, is puzzling although the few documents available give room for some speculations, especially as the spelling of African names tended to vary greatly until some kind of standardization was achieved. This was not the case during the 1920s. Thus, given the possibility of variation of the spelling, such as differences in vocalization and inserting/omitting consonants, some of the already known Africans in Weimar Germany can be discussed. In Rüger’s list of the signers of the 1919 petition there is reference to one Makembe, Hamburg, and according to Oguntoye’s investigation, this was perhaps the same person as one Mukuri Makembe, who was quarrelling with the German Colonial Office in 1926, defending three Africans in a law case, and was jailed in 1927. Yet, in a letter dated [?] November 1931, reference is given to one Peter Makembe, living in Berlin, Kulmerstr.1. Although one can argue in favour of Makembe being Makube, Oguntoye also lists one Otto Makube. However, according to the colonial files checked by her, this person was living in Bavaria, at least in 1928, and it is unlikely that he would have attended the 1926 meeting in Berlin – provided that he was already living in Bavaria at that point.

On the other hand, the person referred to as Munumi is a more clear-cut case. Although neither he nor any person whose name comes close to his is not mentioned (by name) in the 1919 petition, in Oguntoye’s list there is reference to one Wilhelm Munumé. This person is almost certainly the same as Munumi. The 1930 report of activities by the DSLVN (see further below) mentions the attempts by the German Colonial Office to get one of its members, Munumé, expelled

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{8} RGASPI 542/1/4; p. 2-6 (Protocol for ”der im Berliner Rathauskeller am 10. Februar abgehaltenen Konferenz der deutschen (sic) Organisationen und der Kolonialvertreter” including participants. No year!); Risto Marjomaa, The LACO and the LAI: Willi Münzenberg and Africa, \textit{CoWoPa} 4/2005, 8.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Fredrik Petersson, ”We are no visionaries and utopian dreamers” - Fragments and Reflections Regarding the League Against Imperialism, \textit{CoWoPa} 1/2005.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Oguntoye has collected a list of Africans in Weimer Germany she has been able to identify (Personenliste: Alphabetische Namensliste der Afrikaner und Afro-Deutschen, die bis Dezember 1995 in der Untersuchung festgestellt warden konnten, Oguntoye 1997, pp. 185-193).
\item \textsuperscript{11} Rüger; Oguntoye 1997, 190.
\item \textsuperscript{12} BArchB RY 1/I 2/5/33, p. 122, photocopy of letter of Wilhelm Munumé.
\end{itemize}
by charging him for political activities and anticolonial propaganda in Germany. Further, the
author of the November 1931 letter was Wilhelm Munumé, living at Berlin, Kurfürstenstrasse 4.
According to Oguntoyé’s list, Munumé had already in January 1927 been jailed, presumably for his political activities. The 1930 case against Munumé is interesting and will be dealt with below as it
ties some further actors into the web that had been created by Münzenberg and its links to the activities by Africans in Germany.

Be as it may, Makube/Makembe? and most certainly Munimi/Munumé were politically active during the mid-1920s and thus interesting for Münzenberg and others who tried to establish a critical platform against German colonial revisionism. Although no further evidence has been –so far – established for Makube’s activities, Munumé’s case gives some further insights of the political activities of the Africans in Weimar Germany at the end of the 1920s. One of the tasks of the LACO was to protest against German claims to regain their former African colonies. Therefore, it seems likely that those Africans in Germany who were engaged by the LACO were used in the agitation against German colonial revisionism. It is less clear that Makube’s and Munumé’s task was to establish contacts with West Africa, as Marjomaa assumes. Munumé at least seems to have been engaged in the anticolonial agitation in Germany since 1926/27 and by 1930 had become, according to the DSLVN report, become a detestable and feared activist, if not a persona non grata, in the eyes of the German colonial lobby and especially the German Colonial Office. However, it is probable that Munumé did not represent any particular organization before 1929. It is not known if he did participate in the 1927 Brussels anticolonial conference which had – officially – been organized by the LACO in February 1927 and neither are there any references about him in the correspondence of the LAI.

II.

One reason for the paucity in documentary references about African activities in Weimar Germany during the latter half of the 1920s might be due to the turbulence that marked African organizations

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13 RGASPI, 495/155/87, pp.404–408, Kurzer Tätigkeitsbericht der Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse. Deutsche Sektion (e.V.). See further DACCO 8.
17 RGASPI, 495/155/87, pp.404–408, Kurzer Tätigkeitsbericht der Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse. Deutsche Sektion (e.V.). See further DACCO 8.
18 Munumé’s name is not found in the list of participants of the 1927 Brussels conference. However, the lists of participants the research group has checked in the Comintern archive are inclusive. Only the most well-known and prominent participants seems to have been listed by name, although reference is given both in the archival material and by Italiander that there was quite a large participation of various colonial and ‘semi-colonial’ groups and individuals.
in Western Europe. It seems that there had existed no registered African organization in Germany before the establishment of the DSLVN in September 1929 as a branch of the *Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre* (LDRN). The LDRN had been founded by Lamine Senghor and Tiémoko Garan Kouyaté during mid-1927 as a result of a break between them and the members of another French African diaspora organization, the *Comité de Defense de la Race Noire* (CDRN). In fact, Senghor had been the founding member of the CDRN as well in 1926 and it was with Senghor representing the CDRN that Münzenberg and the LACO had established contacts – presumably by the end of 1926. Senghor participated at the Brussels anticolonial conference in February 1927 and visited Berlin shortly afterwards. Not much is known about the outcome of Senghor’s Berlin visit. However, shortly after his visit to Brussels a break followed with the CDRN in March 1927. Although the CDRN had links to the PCF, it remained outside the orbit of the party. Senghor, on the other hand, had been active in the party before he founded the Comité. When his attempt to reintegrate the CDRN to be closer linked to the party failed during spring 1927, he and Kouyaté established the LDRN which was to have good relations with the party. By August 1927 the LDRN had replaced the CDRN as a member of the LAI. However, Senghor’s premature death in December 1927 resulted in a standstill of organization and during the following year the LDRN, now under the leadership of Kouyaté, was struggling to organize itself and to create a political platform for the Africans in France.

Further, the agitation among Africans in Germany was even more hampered by the rivalry between Münzenberg and the LAI on the one hand and the PCF on the other in 1928 and early 1929. According to a report to the Comintern by British communist Robin Page Arnott, the French communists held a grudge against Münzenberg, wishing to leave the recruitment of black Africans to the LDRN which was their own protégé and had – at that time – no direct links to the Münzenberg network. Neither of the two platforms, the LDRN or the LAI, was capable in activating Africans in Germany, not to speak about being the motor behind an organization for Africans. Whereas the LDRN was struggling for survival in France, the LAI tried to establish its international network, leaving little time and energy for the LAI secretariat in Berlin – headed by Münzenberg and his close associate Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (1880-1937) – to organize Africans in Germany. It seems as if the main task of the LAI at this point was to establish national

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19 It is not known if the African Association for Solidarity was a registered organization and our research group has so far not been able to establish any direct links between the Association and the DSLVN. If the Association still existed in 1927, such a link is possible as many of the identifiable activists of the DSLVN had been members in the Association.
20 Margarete Buber-Neumann, *Kriegsschauplätze der Weltrevolution. Ein Bericht aus der Praxis der Komintern 1919-1943*, Stuttgart. Seewald Verlag 1967, 306. This visit is not mentioned by DeWitte. However, according to him Senghor received an invitation, presumably by Münzenberg, to visit Germany in August 1927.
branches, among others in Germany, France and Britain. In Germany, at least, the national branch and its local sections were more or less purely European affairs, recruiting sympathetic intellectuals, students and some workers.  

Be as it may, the LDRN–LAI relationship and their engagement with Africans in Germany were to change during 1929. The turning point was – presumably – the Second Anticolonial Conference of the LAI which was held at Frankfurt in July 1929. It is most likely that the reason for the change in approach of this matter was due to decisions made in Moscow, although so far my research group has not been able to find clear documentary evidence for this link. However, there are some documents from this period in the Comintern archive which could be interpreted as pointing towards such a change. Already in 1928 a draft on convening an international conference of ‘Negro’ workers had been put forward by Afro-American communist James W. Ford to the Profintern/RILU (Red Trade Union International). According to Ford’s plan, the conference was to be held in Berlin no later than October 1929 with African/Afro-American ['Negro'] delegates from the USA, the West Indies, Africa as well as associations such as the London Students’ Organisation [presumably the West African Students Union or WASU, HW] and the Paris Negro Group [presumably the LDRN, HW]. In January 1929 Ford attended the meeting of the Executive Committee of the LAI in Cologne where he criticized the LAI for inactivity, urged the LAI to promote a ‘militant’ struggle against imperialism and to take part in the upcoming conference of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers. Other internal reports, such as Harry Haywood’s on ‘The Work of the Comintern among the Negroes’, dated 24.10.1929, was equally critical about the performance of the PCF and the LDRN: not much had been achieved among Africans living in France due to insufficient party support. Already Ford had criticized in another report, dated 14.2.1929, about the poor performance of the PCF, urging the Negro Bureau of the Comintern to set up a section in Paris as well as to monitor more closely the policies of the LAI. Finally, in the plan of work for the Negro Section of the Eastern Secretariat for the period between 15 September 1929 – 1 January 1930, it was outlined that the Section should also establish a bureau

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23 See further Fredrik Petersson’s forthcoming study on the LAI.
24 James W. Ford (1893-1957), one of the founders of the American Negro Labour Congress (ANLC, 1925) and since 1926 member of the Workers (Communist) Party of America. In 1928 he went to Soviet Russia, where he participated in the 4th Congress of the Profintern and was elected a member of its executive bureau. He also attended the 6th Congress of the Comintern during the same year. He participated in the 1929 Anticolonial Congress in Frankfurt and organized the 1930 African Workers Congress in Hamburg. See further Biographical dictionary of the Comintern, ed. Branko Lazitch in collaboration with Milorad M. Drachkovitch, 2nd ed., Stanford, Calif.: The Hoover Institution Press, 1986.
27 RGASPI 495/155/70, pp. 76.
28 RGASPI 495/155/77, p. 222.
in Paris to “…assist the LDRN in issuing a regular organ for the Negroes, giving special attention to the Negro soldiers, in clarifying the problems of the Negro colonies, both in France and in the West Indies.”

Whether or not there existed a link between Moscow and the decision to establish a branch of the LDRN in Berlin in 1929 is unclear. All key persons eventually attended the Frankfurt conference in July 1929, Kouyaté, Ford and Münzenberg, but whether they met in private and discussed future plans is not known. The 1929 conference marked a break in the development of the LAI: the organization was put closely under the surveillance of the Comintern and its watchdog in Berlin, the Western European Bureau (WEB). The International Secretariat of the LAI was supplemented with a reliable member of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI), Bohumir Smeral (1880-1941), who was to serve as one of its secretaries as well as a link between the ECCI and LAI. In September 1929 Kouyaté visited Berlin.

It is not known who called and organized the meeting of the Africans in Berlin in September 1929. According to DeWitte, Willi Münzenberg played a central role in calling for the meeting between Kouyaté and the Cameroonian and Togolese living in Berlin. Among those who attended the meeting were Viktor Bell, Thomas Ngambi Ul Kuo, Joseph Bilé and Madeline Guber. However, some further hints are given in the 1930 report by the DSLVN. It was stated in that report that comrade Konyaté [sic] founded the section in September 1929 and that its headquarters were located at Friedrichstrasse 24, sharing the same office as the League Against Imperialism. The DSLVN was regarded as a branch of the LDRN, although the section was said to have some degree of autonomy towards the central headquarters of the LDRN at Paris. On the other hand, political work of the Berlin section was led from Paris.

It seems that at first there existed a close link between the LAI and the DSLVN. Shortly after its establishment, the LAI officials sent the representatives of the DSLVN to a solicitor to get registered by a German court and to a printer to order letterheads. LAI Secretary Chattopadhyaya promised to pay all expenses (160 Marks) for the registration and the stationery. Further, Chattopadhyaya declared that the secretary of the DSLVN would receive a monthly payment of 300 Marks for his work in the office at Friedrichstrasse. In addition, ‘political courses’ and lectures for selected members of the group were organized by Smeral.

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30 DeWitte 1985, 193.
31 Lusane 2003, 84.
32 RGASPI, 495/155/87, pp.404-408, Kurzer Tätigkeitsbericht der Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse. Deutsche Sektion (e.V.). See further DACCO 8.
33 RGASPI, 495/155/87, pp.404-408, Kurzer Tätigkeitsbericht der Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse. Deutsche Sektion (e.V.). See further DACCO 8.
However, it seems as if the relationship between the DSLVN and the LAI soon deteriorated. In fact, the 1930 report of the DSLVN amounts to a fierce critique for the lack of support from the LAI and its officials towards the organization and the problems its members were facing. Neither the expenses for its establishment nor the remuneration to its secretary had been paid at the time of writing the report. The financial resources of the organization were much constrained as the central bureau in Paris had no resources to spare for the German section. Thus, the members of the DSLVN had to try with their little private financial resources to pay off debtors. Further constraint was put on the group when one of its members, Richard Dinn, died impecunious in a Berlin hospital during the Winter 1929/1930. Despite promises by the LAI secretariat to pay for his funeral, no relief had been forthcoming and the cost had to be covered by the African community of Berlin. According to the report, this lack of support and especially the non-commitment of the LAI secretariat towards the hardship the Africans were facing when they tried to meet the cost for Dinn’s funeral caused deep embitterment among them against the LAI. Also Smeral’s courses had ended with embitterment: after having organized 5 sessions within three weeks he suddenly left Germany and had not resumed his engagement although he had been in Berlin for six months after his return from abroad.\footnote{RGASPI, 495/155/87, pp.404-408, Kurzer Tätigkeitsbericht der Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse. Deutsche Sektion (e.V.). See further DACCO 8.}

Further constraint in the relationship between the DSLVN and the LAI was caused by the lack of support by the LAI in defending Munumé against the charges made against him by the German Colonial Office and the attempts by the German authorities to expel him from the country. Munumé was a member of the DSLVN and, as noted above, actively engaged in anticolonial propaganda. In 1927 he had been jailed due to his political activities.\footnote{Oguntoye 1997, 191.} The DSLVN tried its utmost to prevent the deportation of him and took his case also to the LAI. Chattopadhyaya again promised to do his best to defend Munumé’s case, to make it a political issue and to engage influential politicians and lawyers. Chattopadhyaya’s – and behind him most certainly Münzenberg’s – aim was to use Munumé’s case to raise the still unresolved question of the nationality of individuals from former German colonies who had been living in Germany since before the war and due to the Versailles treaty had lost whatsoever nationality they had possessed. However, nothing came out of this plan. In the end, it was only the \textit{Liga für Menschenrechte} which was forthcoming.\footnote{RGASPI, 495/155/87, pp.404-408, Kurzer Tätigkeitsbericht der Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse. Deutsche Sektion (e.V.). See further DACCO 8.} In retrospect, one could argue that Chattopadhyaya’s engagement was more than lip service. The \textit{Liga für Menschenrechte} was one of those organizations that had close connections with Münzenberg’s
network, its office was also located at Friedrichstrasse 24. In addition, Munumé had been in contact with Lehmann-Russbüldt, the leader of the Liga, at least while both were engaged in the LACO. Eventually, Munumé was not expelled and about one year later he took part in an attempt to denunciate Joseph Bilé.

A final blow in the relationship between LAI and the DSLVN came in 1930 in connection with the Hamburg conference of the Negro workers. According to the report, the Berlin section was urged to send a participant to the conference and was told that there would be another representative from the Paris bureau of the LNDR who had also been invited. The secretary of the DSLVN, Joseph Bilé, went to Hamburg, only to find out that due to the short notice of the conference, nobody from Paris had been able to come to Hamburg. Again, blame was put on the LAI and its secretariat for mismanagement and a laissez-faire attitude.\(^{37}\)

By the time of writing the 1930 report, i.e., sometimes during late autumn 1930, the relationship between the DSLVN and the LAI were at its nadir. The former had received only little support and even less material backing from the LAI and its board highly questioned the advisability of being connected to the LAI instead of some other organization. In fact, since its establishment the DSLVN had participated in local activities by the German Communist Party (KPD) and the International Red Aid (IRA, also known through its Russian abbreviation MOPR\(^{38}\)).

By the end of 1930, the leaders of the DSLVN were more than keen to break with the LAI and instead establish a direct relationship with the KPD and the IRA. This was also the main argument of the 1930 report, which ended with a four point list of suggestions – most likely to the KPD central secretariat as the (presumably) original – handwritten – version of the report was sent to the Berlin headquarters of the KPD although no recipient is indicated (for a critical analysis, see further DACCO 9):

1) if agreement is given by the central bureau of the LNDR, the Berlin section will establish a direct connection to the KPD and that a ‘Negro comrade from Africa’ is to be included in the Colonial Section of its secretariat whose task would be to serve as a link between the DSLVN and the party.  
2) to establish a direct contact with the IRA.  
3) to organize courses for DSLVN members by the KPD.  
4) to send young Africans to Moscow for schooling and to send them back to Africa as cadres.

\(^{37}\) RGASPI, 495/155/87, pp.404-408, Kurzer Tätigkeitsbericht der Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse. Deutsche Sektion (e.V.). See further DACCO 8.  
\(^{38}\) The organization was known in Germany as *Internationale Rote Hilfe* or IRH.
So far the document. It is not known (yet) what happened to the report and its suggestions. However, the different communist organizations referred to in the report may give some further clues about what was going on behind the curtains in Berlin. It is evident from a variety of archival sources that the relationship between the two key international communist solidarity organizations, the IRA and the Workers International Relief (WIR) were strained. This was especially the case with the key persons in those organizations, such as Wilhelm Pieck and R. Gyptner, who were closely tied to the IRA in Germany, and Willi Münzenberg, the General Secretary of the WIR. For example, an attempt to liquidate the WIR in the USA and to merge its activities with the IRA had failed in 1925 after Münzenberg’s violent protests to the ECCI, whereas later on the WIR and IRA were competing with each other in their engagement in international campaigns, such as the Sacco & Vanzetti campaign during 1926-27 as well as the Scottsboro and Meerut campaigns during the early 1930s.

III.

According to the 1930 report, the DSLVN had 30 members of which five were women. All the members were claimed to be proletariats. They were working as drivers, artists, craftsmen, porters, cooks and so on. Although the group was registered by the German authorities, I have so far not been able to trace any official documents concerning its organization or membership. Based on Oguntoye’s and DeWitte’s material as well as other documentary evidence, it seems that Viktor Bell was the chair person of the organisation whereas Joseph Bilé was the secretary. According to information in the files of the German Colonial Office, which have been checked by Oguntoye but so far not by my research group, the German authorities had been informed by one Manga Akwa that Viktor Bell was in charge of a recently formed organization called ‘Deutsche Sektion der Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse’. Manga Akwa told the authorities that he had distanced himself from the organization as he believed that it was a communist one.

39 The WIR or the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (IAH, founded in 1921) was the key organization of Münzenberg’s network.
40 BArchB R 3003/ORA RG/Sammlung ”Rote Hilfe”/7.
41 RGASPI, 495/155/87, pp.404-408, Kurzer Tätigkeitsbericht der Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse. Deutsche Sektion (e.V.). See further DACCO 8.
42 Presumably, the group had to deliver to the German authorities some kind of statutes and membership register, but there is no reference to this organization in the Bundesarchiv in Berlin. However, as the group was registered in Berlin, its application was perhaps filed by the local police, hence the documents might not be deposited at the Bundesarchiv but in some of the other archives in Berlin – if they survived the Nazi era and WWII.
43 DeWitte 1985, 193; Oguntoye 1997, 98 ; BArchB RY 1 I 2/5/33, Letter from Wilhelm Mumuné to unknown receiver, dated 22.11.1931, p.122, see further DACCO 9.
Interestingly, many of the above referred Africans can be identified and connected with each other during the 1920s. At least Manga Akwa, Joseph Bilé and Wilhelm Munumé had received financial support from the German authorities during the 1920s,\textsuperscript{44} Manga Akwa, Joseph Bilé and Victor Bell had signed the 1919 petition, Bell and Bilé (as well as Mukuri Makembe, among others) were listed in the 1918 membership list of the African Association for Solidarity,\textsuperscript{45} and all of them were engaged in a fierce dispute in 1931-1932 (see below). Whether or not Manga Akwa’s negative attitude towards the DSLVN was based on him being critical towards communism or fearing to be attached with a communist organization which could result him losing the financial assistance he was receiving from the authorities is not known. Whatever the case, he seemed to have joined the DSLVN after some time as he is included among the signatures in a joint letter, dated 22.11.1931, from the group to the Berlin Section of the KPD. Other Africans, most probably members of the DSLVN, mentioned in the letter were Thomas Koo, Peter Makembe, Victor Bell, Louis Brody, Wilhelm Munumé, Gregor Kotto and Joseph Bilé.\textsuperscript{46}

The purpose of the DSLVN was to form a union for all Africans working in Germany. In its turn, the combined effort of the group aimed to organize the toilers in their former countries, especially in the former German colonies. It was vaguely noted in the 1930 report that the individual members of the group had correspondence with people in various West African countries, notably Togo and Cameroun. This was not surprising as most, if not all, of the members of the DSLVN had come from the former German colonies. The group was also in contact with African workers in the harbour of Hamburg, although the plan to establish a section in Hamburg had not been realized (by 1930) due to financial constraints.\textsuperscript{47}

The lack of financial resources restricted the activities of the group to Berlin. The members of the group met on a monthly basis for general meetings. Public appearances of its members occurred mostly in conjunction with political rallies of the KPD and the IRA. It seems as if especially DSLVN secretary, Joseph Bilé, was an active agitator. Participating in a political rally in Siemensstadt (Berlin) he was even for a while arrested by the police on the 6\textsuperscript{th} of March 1930. A few months later he participated in the first international conference of Negro toilers in Hamburg in July 1930 where he held a speech criticizing the activities of the French and British colonial authorities in the Cameroons. Consequently, the DSLVN – in addition to the LDRN – was listed

\textsuperscript{44} Oguntoye 1997, 66.\textsuperscript{45} Lusane 2003, 85, table 5: African Association for Solidarity Membership List, June 1918.\textsuperscript{46} BArchB RY 1 I 2/5/33, Letter from Wilhelm Mumumé to unknown receiver, dated 22.11.1931, p.122, see further DACCO 9. Oguntoye’s list does not include Thomas Koo and Peter Makembe.\textsuperscript{47} RGASPI, 495/155/87, pp.404-408, Kurzer Tätigkeitsbericht der Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse. Deutsche Sektion (e.V.). See further DACCO 8.
among the members of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW), although not much is known about the links between these organizations.

Despite the DSLVN’s critique of the LAI, some of the Africans still seemed to have had a good relationship with that organization. Joseph Bilé, especially, was to be regarded by Münzenberg as a reliable chap and was invited on several occasions to speak at meetings organized by Münzenberg or the LAI secretariat. Among others, he was one of the key note speakers at the Youth Congress of the LAI held in Berlin at the end of May 1931. A Negro organization, the Liga zur Verteidigung der Neger, was even an official participant at the LAI Youth Congress, according to the protocol of the congress. This reference is somewhat problematic: does it refer to the DSLVN or to the LDRN? Reference is given in the list of participants to both Bilé and the Liga (“Liga zur Verteidigung der Neger sowie Neger-Genosse Bile”) which could indicate that there was also a representative of the LDRN present at the congress. During this period, Bilé participated in the Scottsboro campaign were Münzenberg and the WIR played a crucial role and, as outlined by Miller, Pennybacker and Rosenhaft, sketched a lurid catalog of abuses and atrocities in Cameroon to introduce his argument that the oppression of American Negroes was a reflex of the global white backlash against rising Negro consciousness.

Equally puzzling is the reference to one Mariam Baker who attended the First Women Conference of the WIR (Erste Internationale Frauenkonferenz der IAH) in Berlin during October 1931. Baker, who was claimed to be a Cameroonian, was one of the keynote speakers at the conference and was later to be elected as a member of the presidency of the women section of the WIR. It is rather unlikely that Mariam Baker had come all the way from Cameroon to attend the conference. One possibility is that she was one of the five female members of the DSLVN, another that she was a Cameroonian living either in Britain or in France.


49 Similar argument by James A. Miller, Susan D. Pennybacker, and Eve Rosenhaft, “Mother Ada Wright and the International Campaign to Free the Scottsboro Boys, 1931-1934,” American Historical Review 106:2, 2001, footnote 108. In their phrasing, Bilé was Münzenberg’s protégé.


51 Miller, Pennybacker and Rosenhaft 2001. My research group was able to locate one obscure report in German, titled Kamerun, in the Comintern Archive in Moscow (RGASPI 532/4/69, Kamerun [Carbon copy of a report in German on the political situation in Cameroon, no author, no date], filed as 69/No 43/Neger/SEx 2.VI.33). With reference to Bilé’s activities, speculating about the authorship of the report, one possible author, or at least informant, of the report could have been Bilé. However, as the German language of the report is more or less that of a native speaker, it is possible that someone else than Bilé (or any other African?) actually wrote the report. On the other hand, the German language of the 1930 report – both of the printed as of the handwritten version – is also more or less of a native speaker.

52 BArchB RY 9/1 6/7/2, Weltkongresse der IAH (1923, 1931).
IV.

Joseph Bilé’s activities soon gained respect among German communists, such as Fritz Heckert, MP and representing the Profintern in Berlin. Apart from participating in the 1930 Hamburg conference, Bilé he was as a member of the Negro delegation of the LAI (or rather: represented Cameroon as a member of the LAI delegation) at the Fifth Congress of the Profintern/RILU in Moscow in August 1930. After consultations at the congress, a plan was outlined by – presumably Münzenberg, at least – that Bilé should join the Berlin section of the KPD to receive further training and thereafter return to West Africa to make propaganda among fellow Africans. Bilé seems to have joined the KPD as a functionary and toured for the next year in Germany where he attended rallies that were organized by the German section of the IRA as well as the WIR during the Scottboro campaign.

While Bilé oscillated between his engagement in the DSLVN and his activities with the German communists, fellow Africans started to distance themselves from him. It is not clear what actually caused the rift between Bilé and the others, but on the 22nd of November 1931 the Berlin headquarters of the KPD received a letter where Bilé was denunciated as a thief and charlatan: he had taken all the money that was in the treasury and had always been an enemy of the working class. On the top of everything else, he was denunciated as being the son of a slave trader. The letter was signed by Wilhelm Munumé, who acted as the spokesperson of a fraction of key DSLVN members, including Thomas Koo, Peter Makembe, Victor Bell, Louis Brody, and Thomas Manga Akwa [spelled Aqua in the letter, HW]. The comrades at the KPD headquarters were at first puzzled, then started to investigate the matter. Letters were sent to the secretariats of the IRA and the LAI, inquiring about the credibility of the allegations against Bilé, underlining that Bilé had until now been a very trustworthy comrade and functionary in contrast to Munumé, who does not seem to have gained a similar respect by the German communists. In fact, Munumé had also worked with the KPD for a while, but had been suspended after a short period due to ‘unproletarian’ behaviour and it was thereafter decided by the secretariat of the KPD never to engage Munumé again in any workers organizations.

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54 BArch BRY 1/I 2/5/33, page 124, letter from the IRA German Section to the Central Committee of the KPD, 25.11.1931. For full text, see DACCO 9.
The immediate consequences of Munumé’s allegations are not known. However, based on the negative picture about Munumé and the praise of Bilé, it comes as no surprise that about one month later, Bilé was to figure in German communist strategies again. It is therefore likely that Munumé’s accusations either backfired or were ignored by the communist organizations in Berlin. Bilé was found to be trustworthy comrade, and the plan to send him back to Cameroon was taken up again in December 1931. In a letter from an unspecified secretary – most probably one of the LAI secretaries as it seems to have been originally Münzenberg’s and the LAI’s idea to send Bilé on a propaganda tour to West Africa – to an unknown receiver, perhaps one with the initials D.V. who responded to the request of the secretary, the plan was brought forward for consideration.\textsuperscript{58} It is likely that those involved in the plan were the LAI and the KPD, although none of those involved can be identified. Be as it may, the plan went as follows: Bilé, who had worked among various KPD cells and sections as an Agitprop leader, was to travel to Cameroon, select competent ‘Negro comrades’ and return with them to Moscow where all of them would study at the Communist University for Eastern Workers (KUTV) or at the Lenin school. However, it appears that – presumably – the LAI secretariat had not enough funds to pay for Bilé’s propaganda trip, and therefore turned to other parties, the KPD, the IRA or perhaps the IRG, and asked them whether or not they had the needed funds at their disposal.\textsuperscript{59} Despite earlier promises, no funding had been made available and in spring 1932 Bilé declared that he would ask his family to raise the money needed to pay for his ticket. The German comrades, however, seemed to have felt embarrassed by the turn of events and sent further inquiries about both the decision to send Bilé back to Africa and the funding of his trip.\textsuperscript{60}

In the end, Bilé never departed on his mission to Africa. At some point the decision was made to skip the whole plan. Some of the decision-making higher authorities or bodies – perhaps in Berlin or even in Moscow, although the archival sources at my disposal give no clue whatsoever – the usefulness of sending Bilé to Africa was put into question. Travel expenses were said to be much too high. Even worse, the capability of Bilé for a successful selection of Negro students for Moscow was felt to be questionable. Maybe the negative assumptions about Bilé’s suitability had been caused by a flush of Munumé’s insinuations. Or perhaps those who made the decision did not want to take the responsibility for sending someone to Africa who would turn out to be incapable of fulfilling his task.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} BArchB RY 1/I 2/5/33, pp. 127-131. For full texts see DACCO 9.
\textsuperscript{59} BArchB RY 1/I 2/5/33, pp. 127 + 130, letters dated 10.12.1931 and 1.6.1932 [wrong date!!!]. In fact, it was hinted in the earlier letter that according to the original plan, funds to pay for Bilé’s trip to Africa were to be forthcoming.
\textsuperscript{60} BArchB RY 1/I 2/5/33, pp. 129 + 130, letters dated 1.6.1932 [wrong date!!!] and 4.4.1932.
\textsuperscript{61} BArchB RY 1/I 2/5/33, pp. 131, letter dated 30.4.1932.
Bilé’s reactions are not known. There are no further traces about him or the *Deutsche Sektion der Liga der Verteidigung der Negerrasse*. Neither are there any further notes about Munumé or other members of the organization, at least not in the files that have so far been checked by my research group in Moscow and Berlin. However, other files and other archives could perhaps give some further clues. This is at least the case with Bilé who, according to Lusane, was able to escape to France after 1933. According to Lusane, Bilé continued his political activities for some years in France, publishing articles in American journals and trying to be in touch with the Africans remaining in Nazi Germany.\(^\text{62}\) What happened to the DSLVN after Hitler’s take over is not known but not difficult to guess: as all other radical, left and/or anti-racial organization it was certainly banned and disappeared from public space, perhaps managing for some time to preserve a kind of underground network. However, public political activism was impossible for Africans in Nazi Germany.

In sum, although African political activity in Weimar Germany was limited, it did exist. However, as the case of the *Deutsche Sektion der Liga der Verteidigung der Negerrasse* has shown, the relationship between radical Africans in Germany, various communist organizations, such as the LAI, the WIR or the IRA, or the KPD and even the Comintern was a complex one. The impetus for establishing the DSLVN clearly came from abroad and at least in the beginning the group was closely linked to its mother organization in Paris. However, it seems as if the Berlin branch of the LDRN never was planned to play an international role. Kouyaté and the LDRN were represented in the board of the ITUCNW. The latter’s office in Hamburg, first headed by James Ford and later by George Padmore, was in contact with Africans in Britain, France and the USA as well as in the colonies in Africa – but seemingly not with the DSLVN! The Hamburg office had links to the LAI secretariat in Berlin and the LAI in its turn with the DSLVN, but so far no direct link between Padmore’s office and Bilé or any other African in Berlin can be established – although they certainly met during the 1930 Hamburg conference. However, it is possible that Padmore and Bilé knew each other – through the LAI connection. Thus, perhaps the DSLVN was ‘just’ a national/regional/local section of a global network and its members were regarded by the Comintern apparatus to be in the same position as any other colonial subject: not really ‘real’ communists but radical enough to be supported in the global fight against imperialism…

\(^{62}\) Lusane 2003, 116.