

# GEORGE PADMORE'S AFRICAN REVOLUTION: REVIVING MARX- IST-LENINISM IN THE PAN-AFRI- CAN TRADITION

Berber Jin

Introduction by James T. Campbell, Professor of History,  
Stanford University

George Padmore stands as the Zelig of black radicalism. Born in 1903 in Trinidad, he traced his descent to an enslaved Asante warrior carried to the Caribbean on a British slave ship. He came to the United States in 1924, enrolling at Fisk University, where he was immediately swept up in a student strike. The years that followed took him to New York City, where he worked as an advisor at The New York Times and enrolled in the Communist Party; Moscow, where he was elected to the City Soviet, taught at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, and headed the Negro Bureau of the Profintern; Hamburg, where he edited the Negro Worker until its violent suppression by the newly ascendant Nazis; Paris, where he resigned from the Communist Party in protest of its betrayal of the cause of colonial independence; London, where he and a group of determined African students -- including Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Nnamdi Azikiwe, all future heads of state -- successfully plotted the overthrow of the British Empire; Manchester, where he revived the moribund Pan-African Congress movement; and newly independent Ghana, where he worked as an advisor for Nkrumah, now Prime Minister. He died in Ghana in 1959, a few months after his 56th birthday. Along the way, he penned a dozen books, edited several newspapers, and corresponded with virtually every significant figure in the history of 20th century radicalism. He was buried at Christiansborg Castle in Accra,

---

seat of the Ghanaian government, a former slave fortress, perhaps the very one from which his Asante ancestor had been shipped a century and a half before.

As even this bare summary suggests, George Padmore lived a very consequential life. Yet in contrast to comrades like Nkrumah, W.E.B. Du Bois, and C.L.R. James, each the subject of a vast historical literature, he remains a curiously elusive figure. Like Woody Allen's fictional Zelig, he appears only in the corner of the frame, fleetingly and out of focus. The few historians who have attempted to assay his life -- I include myself -- have usually quit in frustration, undone not only by the scope of Padmore's peripatetic life but also by the intricacy of his political thought, which centered on a life-long quest to develop an independent Marxist theory of African Revolution.

When Berber Jin proposed writing a senior thesis on George Padmore, my first response was to discourage him. I doubted it could be done, certainly not within the constraints of an undergraduate thesis project. Happily, he ignored my advice. The essay that follows is drawn from that thesis. Based on original archival research in Moscow, London, and New York, the essay reconstructs a pivotal period in Padmore's life, from his departure from the Communist Party to the eve of the Second World War. This is historical research and writing of the highest order. From my perspective, it is also a reminder of how blessed I am to teach at a place like Stanford University.

---

## **George Padmore's African Revolution: Reviving Marxist-Leninism in the Pan-African Tradition**

### **Berber Jin**

On February 2, 1934, the thirty-one-year-old Trinidadian anti-colonialist George Padmore resigned from the American Communist Party. Then the world's foremost black Communist, Padmore had spent the first three years of the decade leading the Communist International's Negro Bureau, tasked with organizing black and African workers for the impending world socialist revolution. Operating during what historians now call the Communist International's "Third Period," Padmore led the effort to build revolutionary trade unions across the black trans-Atlantic world, eschewing socialist organizations that sought to compromise with political authority. Only a global proletarian revolution, the Comintern believed, would secure the survival and triumph of the Soviet Union as the leader of a new, socialist epoch. Yet, in August 1933, Padmore was asked to pause the Negro Bureau operations indefinitely, then based out of a small office in Paris that coordinated the distribution of revolutionary directives and political pamphlets to black trade union activists across the world. Padmore protested the decision, claiming that Soviet authorities shut down the Negro Bureau to appease the British Foreign Office, which was growing weary of anti-colonial Communist propaganda in the British colonies.<sup>1</sup> After a bitter war of words with the Communist press, Padmore resigned from the Party in February 1934. "The Negro toiling masses of the world," he declared in his resignation letter, "will continue their struggles and build their liberation movements — with or without the Comintern."<sup>2</sup> Now an independent activist, Padmore was determined to carry on the African revolution, with or without the institutions of organized Marxism.

Padmore laid out his plan for African revolution in his book

---

1 Padmore made this claim sometime after his formal expulsion from the Communist International in February 1934. See: George Padmore, 'Open Letter to Earl Browder, Secretary of the American Communist Press,' no date. George Padmore Collection/Princeton University Library. Scholars have not been able to confirm the historical accuracy of this claim.

2 Padmore, 'To the Secretariat Communist Party of USA, NYC,' 3 February 1934. George Padmore Collection/Princeton University Library.

*How Britain Rules Africa*, written in the immediate months after his Comintern expulsion. Challenging Communist Party's orthodoxy, Padmore promoted a broad "anti-imperialist peoples' front" that, at once, included reformist nationalists and excluded white African workers, whom he believed had a vested interest in maintaining racial hierarchy to support their economic interests. While rejecting the Comintern's policies of unconditional class unity and revolutionary trade union organizing, Padmore retained faith in the emancipatory potential of Marxist thought, which he believed the Comintern had misinterpreted. Like Lenin and Trotsky, Padmore theorized an African revolution imbricated with a global proletariat revolution and viewed class as the fundamental engine of human conflict. He rejected the idea that underdeveloped nations needed to pass through two distinct phases of revolution: a bourgeois-democratic revolution which established a sovereign nation-state and capitalist economy, and a socialist revolution, in which the proletariat would overthrow the capitalist class. Instead, he believed that the triumph of African sovereignty went hand-in-hand with the success of a white working-class revolution in Europe. The success of both these political transformations would be crucial, Padmore argued, in creating a new socialist world order.

Written by a man without money or a political party, *How Britain Rules Africa* should by most accounts have fallen by the wayside--the deviationist product of a Communist Party exile whose ideas would never take shape in the world. This was the prescribed path for most opponents of the Soviet regime under Joseph Stalin. Even Leon Trotsky, a founding father of the Russian Revolution and leader of the anti-Soviet Trotskyist movement abroad, would suffer an undignified death in 1940, assassinated by a Stalinist agent in Mexico City. However, Padmore would not only survive the tumultuous years of the Stalinist Terror, but also become the veritable leader of the interwar black anti-colonial movement. Through the International African Service Bureau (IASB), founded in 1937, Padmore would lead a group of radical, Marxist Pan-Africanists, all committed to executing the plan for African revolution outlined in *How Britain Rules Africa*. The roster of Padmore's colleagues and proteges includes many of the towering giants of 20th century black history, including the Trinidadian historian and activist C.L.R. James, South African novelist Peter Abrahams, and

three young Africans destined to become heads of state in newly independent Africa: Nigeria's Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, and Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah.

Scholars have often used Padmore's departure from the Communist International to reveal Marxism's insufficiency as a theory of racial oppression, drawing a distinction between Western political thought and what political theorist Cedric Robinson calls the "black radical tradition."<sup>3</sup> This study challenges this binary. Rather than argue that Marxism could never provide a solution to the condition of racial oppression, Padmore maintained that the condition of racial oppression was what gave black people the very mandate to interpret Marxist doctrine for their own liberation. He retained faith in the universal potential of the Marxist project even after his break from organized Communism, thinking of Pan-African liberation within the framework of world socialist revolution.

Resurrecting how Padmore attempted to implement his vision of Marxist revolution also recasts interwar black anti-colonialism as, to borrow the words of one scholar, a "world-making" project.<sup>4</sup> Historians have tended to explain Padmore's influence through his work within the Black International, a set of interwar black diasporic thinkers and institutions that advocated a pan-African conception of black identity and united around their opposition to European imperialism.<sup>5</sup> They emphasize Padmore's commitment to African self-determination as part of a broader ethos of black solidarity that transcended geographic and linguistic divisions. But Padmore's story is not just about an ex-Communist who abandoned Communist ideology and shifted towards pragmatic anti-colonial work. Instead, it is the story about how an ex-Communist

3 See Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press); Bogue, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (Abingdon: Routledge); James, *George Padmore Decolonization from Below* (London: Springer). Robinson explicitly places Padmore in the black radical tradition. Padmore's biographer Leslie James also locates Padmore within the "black radical tradition" (see page 9).

4 Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

5 See Matera, *Black London: the imperial metropolis and decolonization in the twentieth century* (Oakland: University of California Press); Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press); Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917 - 1939* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press).

built a political movement that theorized and tried to execute an independent, Marxist-inspired African Revolution. Alongside other members of the International African Service Bureau, Padmore's activism was always informed by a broader theory of world revolution, one that supported black nationalism only as a step towards proletarian internationalism. While the Bureau's political focus centered on promoting African self-determination and political rights alongside various other institutions of the Black International, its ideological motivations rested upon a thoroughly Marxist conception of global revolution.

By the end of World War II, history would disprove the vision of socialist transformation envisioned in *How Britain Rules Africa* and the International African Service Bureau. But Padmore's political thought and activism in the late interwar years still deserves reappraisal. Though the Bureau's prophecy of global proletarian revolution fell by the wayside, it trained a whole generation of African nationalists of the British Empire — including future heads of state Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah — to see the world through an anti-Soviet, Marxist lens. In addition, resurrecting Padmore's early attempts to execute an uncorrupted version of Marxist revolution centering African sovereignty provides an opportunity to reevaluate the relationship between Pan-African thought and the Western political tradition.

\*\*\*

George Padmore was born to the son of a Barbadian slave in Arouca, Trinidad in 1903. He lived a comfortable, black middle-class life in the West Indies and first aspired to become a doctor. As with so many young black nationalists, Padmore's political awakening would come when studying abroad. He emigrated to America in December 1924 to attend Fisk University before moving to New York City in the summer of 1927 to attend New York University's Law School. The following year, Padmore enrolled at Howard University. During this time, Padmore abandoned studying medicine and soon immersed himself in politics, making a name for himself by challenging speakers' attitudes on race and imperialism at university events.<sup>6</sup> At Fisk, he joined Nnamdi "Benjamin"

---

6 'Information obtained from Dr. Legrand Coleman,' no date. Nkrumah Papers/Howard University, box 154-41, folder 16.

Azikiwe, a future president of independent Nigeria, in forming an African nationalist student organization on campus. While in New York, he decided to broaden his activism beyond campus politics and began work to create an American “Negro Youth movement” that encompassed Africans, West Indians, and African-Americans. “We realize the part Chinese and Indian nationalist students are playing; and we feel that the time has come for Negro students to close ranks, and think in terms of African nationalism,” he wrote to his old professor Alain Locke, then the impresario of Harlem’s New Negro movement, “and we feel that the time has come for Negro students to close ranks and think in terms of African nationalism.”<sup>7</sup>

Padmore joined the American Communist Party in the summer of 1927, when he stumbled into a group of Communist Party organizers at Union Square, New York. He soon sacrificed his education to pursue Party work. “George’s idea at the time,” one of his classmates would later recall, “was that it was only the Communist Party which was willing to do anything about the Negro problem.”<sup>8</sup> Instead of finishing his Law degree at Howard University, Padmore decided to accept a rare invitation from the American Communist Party to train with the Comintern as a Marxist revolutionary in December 1929. It had been a little over a year since Stalin identified ‘right deviationists’ as the principal threat to the Communist movement, exhorting the Comintern to pressure national Communist Parties to go on the offensive against social democrats who sought to reconcile workers to capitalism via constitutional reform. Stalin predicted an imminent war between the Soviet Union and its capitalist adversaries in the Western world; it was Padmore’s job to mobilize the broader black world in defense of the Soviet Union through the Comintern’s Negro Bureau. But while Padmore worked to persuade colonized Africans to choose socialist revolution over colonial rule, Stalin himself began to collaborate with colonial powers. In 1934, the Soviet Union joined the League of Nations with the aim of allying with France and Britain against Nazi Germany. By 1935, the Comintern abandoned its ultra-Leftist approach for a “Popular Front” policy that involved broad allian-

7 Letter Padmore to Alain Locke, 14 December 1927. Locke Papers/Howard, box 75, folder 20. See also: Padmore to Locke, 18 January 1928.

8 ‘Information obtained from Dr. Legrand Coleman,’ no date. Nkrumah Papers/Howard University, box 154-41, folder 16.

es with non-revolutionary, anti-fascist parties to contain the Nazi German threat.<sup>9</sup>

Exiled from the Comintern in February 1934, Padmore broadened his strategy for achieving African revolution beyond the narrow revolutionary trade union approach of the Third Period. While writing of a broad anti-imperial front in *How Britain Rules Africa*, he also spent the months following his resignation re-building his anti-colonial network. Padmore renounced the sectarianism of his Comintern days and enlisted both revolutionary trade unionists and moderate reformists to convene a Negro World Unity Congress in July 1935. He contacted W.E.B. Du Bois, whom he had previously dismissed as an “uncle Tom” politician who “appealed to the toilers of their race to help the capitalists.”<sup>10</sup> The Pan-African stalwart was asked to provide American representation for the Congress. “The present international situation,” Padmore wrote to Du Bois in February 1934, “demands unity between all Negro organizations, groups and individuals fighting for the emancipation of our race.”<sup>11</sup>

As Padmore promoted the Conference, his old Comintern compatriots accused him of betraying the Communist movement. In a 1934 pamphlet entitled “World Problems of the Negro People: a refutation of George Padmore,” Padmore’s old Comintern boss James Ford chastised him for collaborating with “the Negro Middle class, intellectual and petty bourgeois leaders” who sought to “combine their forces with the growing negro bourgeois for Negro capitalist aims.”<sup>12</sup> Ford accused Padmore of colluding with black intellectuals like Du Bois to build up a network of black capitalists that would betray black workers. The criticisms were part of the American Communist Party’s broader effort to “expose the treach-

9 For detailed examinations of the Communist International’s Third Period, which lasted from 1928-1934, see: Agnew and McDermott, *The Comintern: A history of international communism from Lenin to Stalin*. (London: MacMillan Press Ltd); Pons, *The global revolution: A history of international communism 1917-1991*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

10 Padmore, ‘Negro Workers and the Imperialist War Intervention in the Soviet Union,’ 1931. Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI): 534/3/669.

11 Letter Padmore to W.E.B. DuBois, 17 February 1934. W.E.B. Du Bois Papers/UMass.

12 James Ford, *World Problems of the Negro People: a refutation of George Padmore* (New York, n.d.), p 19.



ery of Padmore,” which included attacks against Padmore and “international Negro reformism” in the Communist newspaper *The Liberator*.<sup>13</sup>

Padmore’s impetus for collaborating with reformist black anti-colonialists was not to serve bourgeois-nationalist interests, but rather emerged from his own reinterpretation of Lenin and Trotsky’s theory of proletarian revolution. In segmenting bourgeois-democratic revolution and proletarian revolution into two historically-distinct phases of societal evolution, Karl Marx’s philosophy of history stressed socioeconomic development over human agency as the main driver of historical change. For Marx, the development of capitalism under a sovereign nation-state defined by representative democracy and liberal political institutions was a historical prerequisite to the class divisions which could give rise to a proletarian uprising. However, Lenin and Trotsky reconfigured this progression in the years preceding the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The two argued that an alliance between the working class and the peasantry in a “semi-feudal” nation like Russia could transform a bourgeois-democratic revolution directly into a socialist proletarian revolution. They emphasized that this alliance’s temporary seizure of power would be consolidated with the aid of a more advanced Western European proletariat class, which would overthrow their own capitalist states and assist their Russian compatriots.<sup>14</sup>

In *How Britain Rules Africa*, Padmore utilized Trotsky and Lenin’s revolutionary logic to theorize an African revolution. Largely agrarian states with small working classes, African nations still needed to go through a bourgeois-democratic revolution that reconstituted political authority along the lines of popular sovereignty, let alone a proletarian revolution that would abolish private property. Drawing upon Lenin and Trotsky’s theories of the political vanguard, Padmore contended that Africa need not wait for capitalism to develop after a bourgeois-democratic revolution in order to bring about a socialist state. Instead, African political par-

13 Quoted in Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919-1939* (Trenton: Africa World Press), p 192-3.

14 See Lenin on the “Revolution of 1905” and Trotsky on “Permanent Revolution” in Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia* (Lebanon: UPNE) for their interpretations of Marxist political thought.

ties could immediately agitate for national independence through a broad anti-colonial coalition while also realizing a socialist revolution by allying Africa's burgeoning working class with an impending proletarian revolution in Europe.<sup>15</sup> For Padmore, the Comintern's apprehension that supporting bourgeois forms of anti-colonial nationalism would empower a reactionary native capitalist class was misplaced. Africa's underdevelopment meant that there was virtually no indigenous, black bourgeois class on the continent. The most important prerequisite for the coming African revolution was to lend the broadest support possible for African self-determination that ensured the support of working-class forces in Western Europe.

Although Padmore was armed with a theory of revolution, his early efforts in building a broad anti-imperial front failed. Padmore's mood and condition deteriorated as he faced daily slander from the Communist Press. Lacking both funds and political credibility, Padmore's 1935 Negro World Unity Congress floundered.<sup>16</sup> The future seemed bleak for a man who had once been the world's most famous black Communist. Where was Padmore to go from here?

\*\*\*

Padmore's opportunity to re-enter black anti-colonial organizing came with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, which energized global, Pan-African activity. On October 3, 1935, one hundred thousand Italian soldiers marched into Ethiopia from Eritrea, beginning an assault on Africa's last independent state. By the start of May 1936, Mussolini's legions entered into Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, ending a relentless campaign of poison gas attacks and aerial bombings that did little to separate soldier from civilian. While Britain and France both voted in support of League sanctions against Italy a month after the invasion, they continued to cooperate covertly with the Italian regime, concluding a secret pact that essentially conceded the majority of Ethiopia to Mussolini in December. Haile Selassie's impassioned speech before the League urging it to affirm its own commitment to self-determination elicited

---

15 Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa* (London: Wishart, 1936), p 332.

16 James, *Notes on the Life of George Padmore*.

ed only an uncomfortable silence from Europe's great powers, who ultimately prioritized European peace over a commitment to the principle of self-determination. The white world, it seemed, had abandoned Africa.

Italy's assault on Ethiopia prompted a unified outpouring of support from the Pan-African world in solidarity with Ethiopia. Far more than the world's oldest independent African state, Ethiopia was a symbol of the black world's defiance to centuries of colonial humiliation, the last citadel of black sovereignty in a Western-dominated world order. As the Italian invasion ensued through the late months of 1935, black people across the world rushed to Ethiopia's defense. African-American newspapers proclaimed solidarity with Ethiopians and some black Americans volunteered for military service to fight the Italians. While Britain debated the merits of sanctions against Italy in the early months of the invasion, dockworkers in South Africa and Trinidad enacted their own, refusing to offload Italian cargo. Mass protests in British-controlled Lagos, Nigeria led to the formation of the Lagos Ethiopia Defense Committee in December.<sup>17</sup> Padmore himself joined the International African Friends of Ethiopia, an advocacy group formed by C.L.R. James and Amy Ashwood Garvey to build support for Ethiopia in London.

The invasion pushed London's black organizations to look past political differences and cooperate in defending Ethiopian sovereignty. In the early years of the decade, the starkly anti-communist West African Students Union and Christian-inspired League of Colored Peoples (LCP) in London advocated for reforms, not self-determination, in the colonies. After Mussolini's invasion, these two black organizations escalated their criticisms against imperialism, and even worked with members of the Communist and Trotskyist Left to stage public protests and pen articles in defense of African sovereignty. In spring 1936, the LCP's journal *The Keys* published C. L. R. James' "Abyssinia and the Imperialists," which characterized the British Empire as fundamentally corrupt: "Africans and people of African descent, especially those who have been poisoned by British Imperialist education," James wrote, "needed a lesson. They have got it."<sup>18</sup> Conflicting political

17      Matera, *Black London*, p 66-67.

18      *Ibid.*, p 70.

ideologies — which had already torn apart the Communist movement internally and sharply divided the world along fascist, democratic, and socialist lines — would play a little role in the practical politics of the post-Ethiopia era. As Padmore would later recall, the “personal idiosyncrasies” of black activists at this time did little to affect their unified support for Ethiopian sovereignty.<sup>19</sup>

The anti-colonial solidarity of the Ethiopia moment was crucial in setting up Padmore’s new career in the struggle against imperialism. The Italian invasion not only allowed him to find a role in the burgeoning London anti-colonial scene at the International African Friends of Ethiopia, but also engendered political sympathies more favorable to his theory of building a broad, anti-imperial coalition. To Padmore’s benefit, the Comintern was now fully committed to the Popular Front, which pushed national Communist Parties across Europe into alliances with reformist progressive organizations that often supported colonialism.<sup>20</sup> This prevented the organization from issuing any effective response to the Ethiopian invasion, constrained by the Soviet Union’s need to maintain friendly relations with fascist Italy to contain Nazi German expansionism.<sup>21</sup>

Though Padmore now had a foothold in the London anti-colonial scene, he still lacked the broad political mandate needed to achieve his twin goals of African self-determination and global proletarian revolution. To help achieve the ambitious vision of world transformation laid out in *How Britain Rules Africa*, Padmore realized he needed an organization that could go beyond Ethiopia. His opportunity came with a touch of serendipity, when an old Comintern compatriot arrived on the shores of Britain in March 1937.

---

19 Letter Padmore to W.E.B. DuBois, 17 August 1945. W.E.B. Du Bois Papers/UMass.

20 Padmore was most upset by the French Communist Party’s shift from supporting colonial independence to assimilation within the French Empire in 1935. See: Cohen, “The colonial policy of the Popular Front.” *French Historical Studies* 7, no. 3 (1972): 368-393; Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p 82.

21 Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: Africa American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (Leiden: BRILL), p 648-649.

\*\*\*

In many ways, I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson's biography mirrored George Padmore's. Like Padmore, Wallace-Johnson had spent the early years of the decade promoting African independence through the Comintern's Negro Bureau. When Padmore moved to Paris in early 1934, Wallace-Johnson left Moscow for West Africa. There, he spent the remainder of the year building support for his proposed West African Youth League. Like Padmore, Wallace-Johnson had qualms about the class-against-class approach to African nationalism. While organizing the Youth League, he worked alongside reformist black activists like Nnamdi Azikiwe, the *African Morning Post* editor who eventually became the president of Nigeria. It seems that Wallace-Johnson, still faithful to the Comintern, deferred Padmore's initial request to help organize the Negro World Unity Congress.<sup>22</sup> But by 1936, he was drifting away from organized Communism for good and likely shared Padmore's disappointment with the Soviet Union's prioritization of diplomatic pragmatism over global revolution. Wallace-Johnson became an unapologetic black nationalist after the Ethiopian invasion. The day after Mussolini's army set foot in Addis Ababa, he penned "Has the African a God?", an article condemning Europe's collective inaction over the Ethiopian crisis. Soon after, British authorities in Nigeria arrested him on charges of sedition.<sup>23</sup>

Wallace-Johnson arrived in London in March 1937 to appeal his conviction before the courts. In order to raise funds to lobby on behalf of his case, he turned to Pan-Africanist T. Ras Makonnen, C.L.R. James, and Padmore for support.<sup>24</sup> But Wallace-Johnson also thought beyond his own trial, proposing to set up a Central Bureau in London that would coordinate anti-colo-

---

22 Letter from Wallace-Johnson to Otto Huiwood, 1 June, 1934. RGASPI 495/64/138.

23 This biographical note of I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson draws from: Spitzer, Leo, and LaRay Denzer, "ITA Wallace-Johnson and the West African Youth League," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 6, no. 3 (1973): 413-452.

24 'Secret: Wallace Johnson and the International African Service Bureau,' n.d. The National Archives (TNA)/Colonial Office (CO): 323/1610/2.

nial work between the colonies and the metropole. His proposal came at a germinal moment, for Padmore, Makonnen, and James were themselves attempting to transform the International African Friends of Ethiopia into an organization with a broader mandate. They accepted Wallace-Johnson's proposal with open arms and the four of them formed the International African Service Bureau in May 1937.

In the cooperative spirit of the post-Ethiopia moment, the International African Service Bureau established itself as a non-partisan group advocating colonial independence. In its opening manifesto, the Bureau branded itself as a non-ideological interest organization promising not to "usurp or in any other way monopolize" the activities of other black political organizations.<sup>25</sup> Its mission, it proclaimed, was instead to educate the public about socioeconomic conditions across the Empire. The Bureau also volunteered to supply speakers for any group wanting to learn more about the colonies, whether that be Labor Party branches and trade unions, or peace societies and religious organizations.

Though only consisting of a motley group of radical pan-Africanists -- the four initial founders were soon joined by Jomo Kenyatta and Ben Azikiwe -- the Bureau churned out a steady stream of news and commentary on African events. Beginning in July 1937, it ran a monthly news bulletin called *Africa and the World*, which reported on socioeconomic developments across the black world. It frequently held public protests at Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square and initiated petitions on colonial issues to be brought before the House of Commons. Within Parliament, Bureau members secured the support of radical Labor M.P.s who bucked party orthodoxy to support colonial self-determination, including Ellen Wilkinson, Reginald Sorensen, and Arthur Creech Jones. These politicians not only served as financial patrons for the Bureau, but also relied on the organization to stay updated on colonial developments and force the House of Commons to confront colonial policies.

While pressuring the Colonial Office for reform in Britain, the Bureau also agitated for rebellion in the colonies. It distributed *Africa and the World* throughout the black world, often using infor-

---

25 'The International African Service Bureau: For the Defense of Africans & Peoples of African Descent', 1937. Schomburg Center/Ralph Bunche Papers.

mal networks of distribution to circumvent colonial censors. (Fears over the paper's influence prompted the administration of the Gold Coast to propose banning it outright in early 1938.<sup>26</sup>) During the West Indian labor uprisings of 1937 and 1938, the Bureau not only staged public protests pressuring the government to improve colonial working conditions, but also pressured Parliament directly for change. In a decision that one scholar has suggested was at least partially attributable to the pressures exerted by the IASB, the British government appointed a ten-member Royal Commission of Enquiry under Lord Moyne in late 1938 to investigate the socio-economic conditions of the West Indian colonies.<sup>27</sup> Reflecting the lasting impact of post-Ethiopian black solidarity, the IASB joined the League of Colored Peoples and the more radical Negro Welfare Association in presenting a memorandum to the Commission. Demanding “the establishment of democratic government fully representative of the people of these territories,” the memorandum situated Caribbean resistance within a “growing Negro consciousness” that emerged after the “rape of Ethiopia.”<sup>28</sup>

Padmore was at the very center of black anti-colonial organizing in London. Though a Communist exile, he retained the allegiance of dozens of revolutionary black trade unionists across Africa, America, and the West Indies. Free from the constraints of the Comintern's Third Period approach to revolution, Padmore now broadened his network to include anti-colonialist activists of all political leanings, and his home at 22 Cranleigh Street became a hub for both revolutionaries and bourgeois nationalists. “Not only a programme and tactics for the revolutionary nationalist movement in Africa but many a tactical approach to the Colonial Office by bourgeois African politicians were worked out with Padmore's advice and not infrequently under his direct inspiration,” C.L.R.

26 Letter from Government House, Accra to Colonial Office, 26 February 1938. TNA/CO 847/11/16.

27 Roderick J. Macdonald, ‘Introductory essay’ to reprint of *The Keys: the official organ of The League of Colored Peoples* (New York: Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd.), 1976.

28 Quoted in M. Matera, “Black Internationalism and African and Caribbean Intellectuals in London 1919-1950” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2008), p 126; Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, p 341.

James would later recall.<sup>29</sup>

Though the Bureau cooperated with other anti-colonial organizations in London, it was distinguished by its theoretical commitments to executing an independent, Marxist revolution for Africa. Because the Soviet Union had abandoned its commitment to world revolution for a program of pragmatic antifascism, the Bureau's members did not trust the European political Left. Padmore was not alone in his disillusionment with the organized Communist movement following his break with the Comintern. C.L.R. James' *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International*, published in 1937, also criticized the Stalinist bureaucracy's abandonment of the global revolutionary movement via the Popular Front. For James, as for Padmore, the Popular Front had effectively ended hopes of liberating Africa through formal Communist institutions. "Recent political experience shows us that European organizations tend to ignore the African struggle and to use the colonial movement merely as a decoration to their own for ceremonial occasions," the International African Service Bureau wrote in an opening editorial to its paper, *International African Opinion*, which replaced *Africa and World Peace* in July 1938.<sup>30</sup> For this reason, the Bureau only admitted black people into its membership. "It must never be felt by the masses of black people that people like ourselves were simply operating as agents of some other imperialist power like Russia," Makonnen recollected. "We were out to create a movement that was free from any entanglement; and any black man coming into our camp who had one foot in the communist camp, we would deal with ruthlessly."<sup>31</sup>

This movement broadly incorporated Padmore's theory of revolution developed in *How Britain Rules Africa*. According to James, the Bureau's members shared Padmore's expectation of an impending European war, from which would emerge a proletarian revolution and an opportunity for Africa to throw off the shackles of imperialism. "...[A]ll of us saw African emancipation as depen-

29 C.L.R. James, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (Connecticut: Lawrence Hill, 1978), p 65.

30 Opening Editorial to *International African Opinion*, Vol. 1, No. 1, July 1938.

31 T.R. Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism from Within* (London: Oxford University Press), p 117.



dent upon the breakdown of imperialist power in Europe,” James later remembered. “Armed rebellion was sure to be crushed unless the imperialist powers were impotent, and this could only be the result of revolutions within the metropolitan powers themselves.”<sup>32</sup> The Bureau’s job, Padmore explained, was not just to work towards black national liberation, but to “coordinate” these struggles “within the British, French, and other European imperial systems.”<sup>33</sup>

Padmore further developed the theoretical basis of the Bureau’s work in his 1937 book *Africa and World Peace*, which developed a Marxist interpretation of world politics. The monograph, promoted by the Bureau alongside *How Britain Rules Africa*, transposed Lenin’s arguments in *Imperialism: the Highest of Capitalism* onto contemporary European politics. It identified the root cause of conflict between Europe’s fascist powers and liberal democracies as a fight for resources in Africa and Asia. In a capitalist world dominated by ever-expanding monopolies, Padmore characterized the rise of fascist aggression in Germany and Italy as a form of aggressive economic expansionism hidden behind ethnonational principles. With the globe’s resources dwindling, Padmore predicted an impending war between liberal democracies (which had benefited territorially from the 1919 Treaty of Versailles), and the fascist powers seeking to recover the land they lost from the same treaty. Ethiopia, he argued, had been conceded to the Italians to stave off a larger European war for resource distribution. Yet ultimately neither Italy nor Germany would be sufficiently appeased, and Padmore warned blacks against fighting in defense of their colonial overlords. “There is only way out, and that is the Leninist way: ‘Turn the imperialist war into civil war,’” Padmore wrote, again declaring his allegiance to the principles of Marxist-Leninist thought.<sup>34</sup> Black revolutionaries were to wage war against their European superiors in the face of fascist aggression, joining the European proletariat in using the conflict to birth a new socialist

32 C.L.R. James, ‘Notes on the Life of George Padmore’. Unpublished Typescript. University of London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies archives, 1959.

33 Letter from Padmore to Alain Locke, 3 October 1938. Locke Papers/Howard, box 75, folder 20.

34 Padmore, *Africa and World Peace* (London: M. Secker and Warburg), p 264. Emphasis in the original text.

epoch. "There is only one way of abolishing war, and that is *by a fundamental change in the present social system*," he declared. "And the only class in modern society capable of carrying out this change and thereby saving humanity and civilization from destruction is the organized working class."<sup>35</sup>

The comprehensive theory of world politics developed by the Bureau's members distinguished the organization from other anti-colonial groups in London. While groups like the League of Colored Peoples and the West African Students Union were also committed anti-imperialists, they lacked the theoretical vision of the Bureau's leaders, which had been developed from a strong grounding in Marxist theory and oftentimes direct participation in the Communist movement itself. Almost every black organization in London recognized the moral imperative of Pan-African emancipation. But only the Bureau's members—with Padmore and James leading the way—saw their work as prioritizing African liberation in a Marxist world revolution and restoring the integrity of the Communist project. Their vision, James recalled "ensured that Marxism, unadulterated, uncorrupted, would be applied to the African political scene."<sup>36</sup>

The Bureau's newspaper *International African Opinion* revealed the tremendous influence of this political heritage on the organization. Published between July 1938 and June 1939, the paper not only outlined political developments across the black world, but also articulated a distinct vision of political change. Black political leaders in the colonies were urged to recognize that domestic advances toward political autonomy were only an "intermediate stage" that would lay the basis for a broader socialist struggle. Editorials to white trade unionists explained the importance of white working-class support for black nationalist struggles, particularly as a "counterbalance" to the development of large native bureaucracies following independence. Praising C.L.R. James' monograph *The Black Jacobins*, published in 1938, columnists also highlighted the Haitian Revolution as a historical model for theorizing the collective emancipation of the black and white underclass.<sup>37</sup>

---

35 Ibid.

36 James, *Notes on the Life of George Padmore*.

37 See volume 1, numbers 2-4 in *International African Opinion*.

In public protests in London, Bureau members argued that fascism was both a colonial and a continental phenomenon, thus laying a foundation for solidarity between white working-class audiences and colonial subjects. During one June 1938 protest at Trafalgar Square condemning African colonialism, Padmore told the largely-white audience that fascism in South Africa originally emerged with the British, who created the country's first concentration camps in order to control black labor in diamond mines. Kenyatta followed Padmore. He argued that Hitler and Mussolini had "learnt their tyrannical form of dictatorship" from the abuses of the British government in its African colonies, such as the detainment of thousands of black people in Kenya.<sup>38</sup> The public meeting concluded with a speech from Kenyatta's white housemate Amy Geraldine Stock, who appealed directly to the white working-class to support colonial independence.<sup>39</sup>

The Bureau also cultivated a close alliance with Stock's political party, the Independent Labor Party (ILP). In the early 1930s, the ILP occupied a curious in-between space within the British Left, opposing the Labor Party's reformism while also rejecting the British Communist Party's revolutionary approach to organizing workers. Yet by the time the Communist Party adopted the Popular Front and urged workers to vote Labor, the ILP had effectively swapped places with the Communists on the political spectrum. Steadfast in its commitment to anti-colonialism, the ILP criticized the Soviet Union's entry into the League of Nations and Stalin's decision to abandon global revolution. By the early months of 1939, both the Bureau and the ILP operated out of the same building in London.<sup>40</sup>

Padmore developed intimate relationships with many prominent members of the Independent Labor Party. His acquaintances included the British Quaker Reginald Reynolds, who had spent a year at Gandhi's Indian ashram in 1929. The two first met when Padmore was just settling into London, and their political partnership solidified over a shared disappointment with the "Communist somersault of 1934," during which the French Communist

38 Metropolitan Police Report, 8 June 1938. TNA/Metropolitan Police, Special Branch (MEPO): 38/91.

39 Ibid.

40 Summary of letter from I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson to George Padmore, TNA/Security Service, Personal Files (KV): 2/1824.

Party suddenly abandoned its anti-colonial work upon entering negotiations to form a Popular Front government.<sup>41</sup> Padmore also grew close with Reynolds' soon-to-be wife and novelist Ethel Mannin, whose 1936 visit to the Soviet Union left her completely disillusioned with Stalinism. (The two of them, along with the African-American diplomat Ralph Bunche, travelled to Spain in April 1937 to see a concert by the famed black singer and Soviet loyalist Paul Robeson.<sup>42</sup>) Padmore also contributed frequently to the Party's *New Leader* paper and, according to a British police report, was "virtually in charge of [the ILP's] negro activities" by May 1939.<sup>43</sup>

The Bureau's close relationship with the Independent Labor Party and its outreach to the white working-class revealed the integral connection the organization saw between European proletarian revolution and African independence. Throughout the final years of the decade, Padmore and his coterie of radical black Pan-Africanists would not just agitate for colonial independence alongside black organizations. They would also work with white radicals, seeking to ensure that an impending proletarian revolution in Europe would lend its full support to colonial rebellion. This theory of social transformation, however, would take on an added urgency in the late months of 1938, when the European geopolitical situation irreversibly took a turn for the worse.

\*\*\*

Over the summer of 1938, Hitler revealed his ambitions to annex the Sudetenland, a geographical slice of Czechoslovakia that was home to over three million people of German descent. Having turned a blind eye to German expansion into the Rhineland and Austria, the British government felt compelled to stop further Nazi aggression. In September, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain rushed to broker a deal with the Nazi regime, agreeing on the 15th to grant self-determination for the Sudetenland if

41 Quoted in S. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p 82.

42 Letter from Padmore to Ralph Bunche, 27 April 1937. Schomburg Center/Ralph Bunche Papers.

43 Summary of letter from I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson to George Padmore, TNA/Security Service, Personal Files (KV): 2/1824.

Germany pressed no further territorial claims. But to the shock of much of the democratic world, Hitler rejected this solution, instead demanding the immediate occupation of the Sudetenland by German military forces. As the British naval fleet mobilized alongside the Czech and French armies in the following days, the Bureau's leadership convened an emergency meeting. The coming imperialist war it had long anticipated was finally beginning.

"If Britain and France go to the aid of Czechoslovakia," the Bureau warned in a "Manifesto Against War," "it is not to defend international law and order...but to prevent Hitler from overrunning Europe and stealing their colonies."<sup>44</sup> To the Bureau, Czechoslovakia was Ethiopia all over again, a pawn to be sacrificed in order to preserve the existing class-based system of imperial exploitation. Back in 1935, France and Britain had been willing to sacrifice Ethiopia to appease Italy and preserve the integrity of their own empires. Now, if Britain decided to defend the Czechs, it would only be if it felt Germany's ambitions threatened its own colonies.

With the world standing on the precipice of another global conflagration, the Bureau urged black people to agitate for independence. In the organization's mind, it was imperative that black people remember the folly of World War I, when black soldiers fought in defense of Britain and France under the false promises of increased political freedoms. The responsibility of black colonial subjects was now to enact Lenin's maxim of turning an imperialist war into a civil war by capitalizing on Europe's impending political turmoil. "Europe's difficulty is Africa's opportunity," the Bureau wrote in its manifesto. "We call upon you to organize yourselves and be ready to seize the opportunity when it comes.... Be vigilant, comrades. Watch the traitors in your ranks."<sup>45</sup>

War was temporarily averted when Britain and France permitted Germany to annex Sudetenland on September 30th, a deal struck only two days after the Bureau released its manifesto. But Padmore sensed it was only a delay of the inevitable. Writing to his old professor Alain Locke, he remarked that the mood in London was fast-changing. "We were the first to feel the effects of the repression which is invariably associated with war preparations," he

44 'Manifesto Against War', 28 September 1938. TNA/MEPO 38/91.

45 Ibid.

remarked. "Friends in influential circles informed me that as soon as war was declared it was most likely that we would be completely suppressed and placed in internment."<sup>46</sup> Padmore transferred essential documents out of London and planned to leave the city entirely. He proposed, with Locke's assistance, to return to the United States, but the plan fell through due to visa complications. Padmore would instead spend the final months of the interwar years in London, continuing his work with the Bureau.

Events of 1939 only confirmed Padmore's forebodings. In March, German forces occupied what remained of Czech territory, finally convincing Britain and France that Hitler's territorial ambitions had no limits. The next month, Britain introduced peacetime conscription for the first time in its history. While the prospect of war must have been frightening to Padmore personally, it still presented a unique opportunity for the cause of black liberation. In the final edition of *International African Opinion*, published in May 1939, the Bureau issued a stern letter directed to black working-class people. "A new World War threatens humanity. You, therefore, cannot isolate yourselves from these international affairs," it warned. "In this dangerous situation, we, the colored races of the British Empire must be on the alert if we are to take advantage of the conflicts between the Imperialist Powers to press forward our claims for the maximum economic, political and social concessions which, with firm leadership and consistent advocacy, we may well obtain from our masters in their hour of need."<sup>47</sup>

\*\*\*

As Padmore and the IASB stood on the precipice of World War II, a social revolution in Europe seemed inevitable. The primary task at hand was to promote solidarity between the black and white working class so that neither would succumb to the manipulations of racial nationalism or anti-fascist rhetoric. But by 1945, the IASB's predictions of a European working-class revolution were disproven altogether. The revolutionary dreams Padmore held when writing *How Britain Rules Africa* soon gave way to nonvio-

46 Letter from Padmore to Alain Locke, 3 October 1938. Locke Papers/Howard University, box 76, folder 16.

47 'Open Letter to the Workers of the West Indies and British Guiana', 28 September 1938. TNA/MEPO 38/91.

lent protest and constitutional negotiations with British authorities. Like many of the grand, Marxist projects envisioned throughout the 20th century, Padmore and the Bureau's masterplan for colonial liberation, tied to metropolitan revolution, entered into the waste bin of history.

Although the revolutionary ideology that birthed Padmore's decision to found the International African Service Bureau withered away, the man and the organization would continue to play a leading role in the Pan-African independence movements of the postwar period. Padmore and the IASB organized the historic 5th Pan-African Congress of 1945, whose overwhelming representation of black working-class organizations reflected the distinctly Marxist undertones of the burgeoning Pan-African movement across Africa. Though most interwar black organizations withered away after the war as anti-colonial struggles shifted away from the metropole, the Bureau's influence would manifest itself in post-colonial Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria, whose first three presidents all worked under the auspices of Padmore and the International African Service Bureau.

Padmore shows us that black anti-colonialism in interwar Europe was not a mere negation of Western imperialism. At least in its Anglophone conception, Pan-Africanism did not draw upon some shared ancestral past or revive indigenous culture. Instead, the movement modelled itself after the example of the Russian Revolution and the Communist International's initial commitment to world revolution. Its aspiration was towards a united Africa, but only as a step towards a world socialist state that eliminated racial and ethnic divides entirely. While his dreams of working-class revolution dissipated, Padmore would carry on his vision of Pan-African socialism into the postwar years, eventually settling down in Ghana in 1957 to serve as Nkrumah's Advisor for African Affairs. He passed away two years later.

Further work needs to be done on tracing the Bureau's influence over the postwar battle for decolonization. But a reinterpretation of Padmore's engagement with the black international through his attempt to execute an independent, global Marxist revolution crucially relocates the origins of postwar Pan-African thought to the Marxist-Leninist tradition. In doing so, this essay dispels the idea that there was some fundamental, historical incom-

---

patibility between Marxist theory and the problem of racial oppression, and instead highlights the global allure of Marxist thought in the early 20th century as a solution to colonial inequality. At the same time, Padmore's engagement with the International African Service Bureau is a unique story of how a sworn enemy of the Stalinist regime succeeded in leading his own, Marxist-inspired revolution, and lived to tell the tale.