

A Black Communist in 1930s Berlin

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On the 8th of December 1929 at Alexanderplatz in Berlin, the *Sozialistischer Schülerbund* (Union of Socialist School Pupils) staged an anti-nationalist and anti-colonial demonstration. This was part of the increasing anti-colonial events being organized and run by the political Left within Germany, under the direction of the Communist International (Comintern). The second speaker of the afternoon was Joseph Ekwe Bilé. Bilé, from Douala, Cameroon was enthusiastically greeted by his audience, which reports suggested included a further five Africans. [1] He proceeded to inform his listeners about the brutality of the German regime in the former colony of Cameroon as well as the abuse and mistreatment suffered by people of African heritage worldwide.

The German authorities' attention was soon brought to his propaganda activities. In light of a foreign policy which continued to cling on to hopes of one day regaining Germany's former colonial possessions, Bilé's opinions were unwelcome and led to a serious discussion about his deportation. For the President of the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft* (German Colonial Society), former governor of Cameroon and colonial irredentist Theodor Seitz, Bilé's political agitation was symptomatic of a pressing danger. Seitz argued: "I am convinced that under the current economic conditions the natives who still find themselves in Germany will fall completely under the spell of Communism." [2] His suspicions were not entirely unfounded. Several weeks earlier Bilé and six Cameroonian contemporaries had formed the Comintern sponsored and radical anti-colonial group the *Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse* (League for the Defence of the Negro Race, LzVN). [3]

This essay focuses on the political career of Joseph Bilé in order to highlight aspects of the largely forgotten political activism of Africans who were living in Germany (particularly Berlin) in the late 1920s. [4] It examines the creation of the LzVN as well as several concrete examples of members' political activities, including a remarkable theatre project staged by the group in 1930. These in turn highlight the presence of German-based Africans within wider transnational networks of anti-colonialism and anti-racism, often in connection with the Comintern, and transnational networks of Black Internationalism.

Blacks in Interwar Berlin

Bilé was one of around 250–500 Black residents and their German-born children living in Berlin in the late 1920s; the vast majority of whom could trace their roots back to Germany's former African colonies. Most originally came from Cameroon while a handful of others came from Togo or the former German East Africa (present-day Tanzania, Burundi, and Rwanda). Like the overwhelming majority, Bilé arrived in Germany pre-1914. He was the son of the influential trader James Bilé a M'bule and his wife Georgette Eyango and, like an older brother, Robert Ebolo, and sister, Esther Sike, was sent by his parents to be educated in Germany. Indeed, dozens of children from elite Cameroonian and Togolese coastal families went to school or served an apprenticeship in Imperial Germany. [5] In Bilé's case, he attended the technical school in Hildburghausen in Thuringia from 1912 to 1914, qualifying as a civil engineer.

While his siblings returned to Douala before the outbreak of World War One, Bilé, like several hundred African contemporaries, became effectively stateless and stranded in Europe as a result of the fighting and the subsequent peace process. The latter saw Germany stripped of its overseas empire and its colonies placed under mandate protection. In general the new mandate authorities, primarily the French and the British, were unwilling to allow Africans from the now former German colonies to return home. Now stuck in Europe, after serving briefly in the German army during the war, Bilé, like many African contemporaries, struggled to find long-term, stable employment. He moved around from East Prussia to Berlin to Vienna and back to Berlin over the course of the 1920s. And it is against this context of increased economic crisis by late 1920s and rising racial prejudice that the LzVN was created.

Its creation can be seen as part of a longer history of anti-colonial protest amongst Africans living in Germany that developed out of personal experiences of actual colonialism as well as their experiences of living in Germany and being subjected to exclusionary and discriminatory practices. Examples included the early pre-1914 activism of the Duala men Alfred Bell and Mpundu Akwa, the formation of the self-help organisation *Afrikanischer Hilfsverein* (African Welfare Association) in Hamburg in 1918, of which Bilé was a member, and the petition sent to the National Assembly at Weimar in the immediate postwar period by a group of Africans led by the Cameroonian Martin Dibobe. [6] The latter initiative called for a renegotiation of the relationship between Cameroon and Germany which would free Cameroon from the hold of colonialism and help bring about the country's development. The petitioners were to be disappointed but a number, including Bilé, found a new outlet for their activism in the LzVN.

Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, Willi Münzenberg, and the “League against Imperialism”

From the beginning the LzVN was under the influence of both the Comintern and wider, related and developing networks of Black Internationalism. It was formed in the presence of the French Sudanese radical Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, who was Secretary of the similarly named organization, the *Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre* based in Paris. [7] With others Kouyaté was striving to create a network of African activists throughout Europe and the LzVN became a German affiliate. Additionally, he was in correspondence with a number of prominent Black intellectuals including W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. Kouyaté had likely gained access to Africans in Berlin through the influential Communist organizer and propagandist Willi Münzenberg. Over the course of the 1920s Münzenberg had helped establish the city as a key centre of Comintern-sponsored anti-colonial activism. Among other things Münzenberg was the head of the *Liga gegen den Imperialismus* (League against Imperialism), a broad-based front organization with its headquarters in the city. In this role he too had been actively seeking to establish contact with colonial subjects in Europe to help mobilize them against colonial oppression. And at least tentative links to Germany's Black population had already been made in 1926. [8] Anecdotal evidence suggests that contact between Communist groups and Black Germans might have been established even earlier. In 1919 the Duala man Wilhelm Makube was taken into custody when he arrived in Salzburg, on the grounds of being a member of a German Communist organization. [9] Several years later, in 1924 the East African Josef Mambo was injured when police in Berlin opened fire on Communist demonstrators during May Day celebrations. [10]

The “League for the Defence of the Negro Race”

What do we know about the LzVN? Membership was open to all Black people, partly reflecting the Black Internationalist ethos of the organization as well as the diversity of Germany's Black population. In addition, white wives were also allowed to join. A report drawn up by Bilé, the group's Secretary, suggests that there were around thirty members, including several women. The majority were from Cameroon, but a handful came from Togo and other parts of West Africa. Most were

based in Berlin where the group had an office within the headquarters of Münzenberg's *League against Imperialism* at Friedrichstrasse 24. [11] This address served as meeting center for a wide range of German and foreign nationals, bringing diverse activist groups into contact and enabling collaboration and exchange.

The group's constitution was a "hybrid product" of competing concerns: we can see the influence of the socialist revolutionary vision of the Comintern, Kouyaté's Black internationalist outlook, as well as the more day-to-day concerns of German-based Africans. [12] Thus, among other things it stressed the need for unity between white and Black workers worldwide, called for independence for African states, the defence of Liberian and Ethiopian independence, the liberation of African Americans, and it encouraged Black Germans to join German trade unions. In addition, members were to provide moral and material support to one another in times of illness and unemployment, echoing elements of earlier Black German self-help initiatives.

All too little is known about the group's political activities. Members were actively engaged in an exchange of information between Germany and Africa; smuggling propaganda material, including copies of the group's constitution, in private letters being sent to friends and relatives on the west coast of Africa. Indeed, the French mandate authorities expressed concern in the early 1930s that anti-colonial literature as well as copies of the Communist newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne*, were reaching Douala and being distributed further inland. [13] In addition, LzVN members were expected to attend and participate at political gatherings organized by Comintern-associated groups. [14] Perhaps the most intriguing example of activism, however, is the one we know least about.

Berlin—Vienna—Baltimore

In January 1930 the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper drew readers' attention to the creation of a "race theatre" in Berlin announced by Victor Bell, the LzVN's President—an announcement that hints at other transnational connections Germany's Black population had established. [15] Indeed it is largely through African-American, German, and Austrian newspapers that we can at least try to reconstruct elements of this project. It should not surprise us that Black residents would utilise theatre and performance as a means of activism. Most had now turned to performance, whether on stage, screen or in the circus as a way of making a living. This included Bilé who found work as a performer whilst based in Vienna. There he appeared alongside Josephine Baker and he also starred as a dancer in the revue show "Apollo? Nur Apollo!" at the Apollo Theater. [16] In Berlin in March 1930, he shared the stage of the *Deutsches Künstlertheater* with Paul Robeson for the first German performance (in English) of the Eugene O'Neill play *The Emperor Jones*. [17]

According to multiple reports it was his colleague, the actor Bebe Mpressa, better known under his stage name of Louis Brody, who was behind these plans. [18] His intention was to create a revue show which challenged clichéd images of Africa and discriminatory representations of Black people—there were to be no step dancers in top hats and no shaking banjo players. Instead, Brody's *Sonnenaufgang im Morgenland* (Sunrise in the Orient) was to celebrate Black history and culture and his intention was to show that Black people were just as "good, bad, funny and capable" as white Europeans. [19]

The first half of the revue, performed partly in an unspecified Bantu language, likely Duala, was set around 1880 and was to critically engage with the impact of European colonialism on Africa, from an African perspective. The second half, set in the present, was performed in French, English, and German. The show was composed of thirty Black male performers, eight Black female performers, three white performers, and included a jazz orchestra. Hopes to recruit Black performers from the United States and receive funding from Kouyaté's group in Paris appear not to have been realised.

All the props and costumes were made by the Black performers themselves, while a Berlin artist helped with the design of the sets. Although rehearsals started at the beginning of 1930 it was not until December that “Sunrise in the Orient” received its premiere at Kliems Ballroom in the Hasenheide, Neukölln: a venue with strong links to the workers’ movement. Just how often the revue was staged and how it was received by Berlin audiences remains largely unknown, although it did draw some unwanted attention. The Nazi mouthpiece, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, produced a scathing article, expressing surprise at the very thought of a play centring on African culture being performed in Berlin. [20]

James Ford, George Padmore, Joseph Bilé

It is difficult to believe that Bilé would not have been involved in this project. At the same time over the course of 1930 he was emerging as the LzVN’s most influential figure and was being drawn into wider anti-colonial and Black liberation circles. In July he was the group’s representative at the First International Conference of Negro Workers, and there is some evidence to suggest that he was involved in helping to organise the event. [21] The three-day conference had been called by the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW) which had been created two years earlier. [22] Its formation represented the institutionalization of the Comintern’s commitment to mobilise and liberate Black workers worldwide. This important conference was held in Hamburg and brought together some of the most prominent Black activists in the anti-colonial movement, such as the African American James Ford and the Trinidadian George Padmore, who became a mentor to Bilé. In Hamburg, Bilé gave a presentation to delegates on European exploitation of Cameroon which was later published in the ITUCNW’s newspaper *The Negro Worker*. [23] Over the course of the conference participants drew up political demands for equality for Africans and the realisation of the right of self-determination or the creation of independent African states. Bilé and ten others then travelled to Moscow to attend the Fifth Congress of the International Trade Union and to celebrate the creation of the ITUCNW.

Once back in Berlin, Bilé was debriefed about his Moscow experience by officials of the *League against Imperialism*, and he participated in advisory discussions concerning future Communist activities in Africa. As a further sign of his growing influence he was increasingly active as a political agitator in various large factory and street cells as an agit-prop leader, amongst other things. [24] Alongside fellow LzVN members Victor Bell and Hermann Ngange he was selected for political instruction and attended propaganda courses at Berlin’s *Deutsche Hochschule für Politik* and the *Marxistische Arbeiterschule*. [25] The latter were taught by the Communist Party member Hermann Duncker. By the end of 1930 Bilé also officially joined the Communist Party of Germany (KPD)—the only member of the LzVN to do so. He was particularly active in the Comintern’s Scottsboro campaign, a European-wide campaign to prevent the electrocution of nine African-Americans in Alabama wrongly accused of rape. [26]

Bilé’s connection to Padmore helped to establish him as a key speaker who featured at a number of related demonstrations, often in Berlin where he frequently spoke to audiences of up to one and a half thousand people. [27] This political platform offered him the chance to challenge existing stereotypes of Black people prevailing in Germany, as well as condemning the practice of lynch justice in the United States. It also enabled him to give voice to the grievances of Africans, both in Germany and in Africa. He typically testified to the brutality of German colonial rule, aware of nationalist hopes that Germany regain its former colonies, and charged the Christian missions for failing to act against this brutality. [28] The French mandate authorities were also subject to his criticism. His critique, however, covered all forms of colonial control and echoed demands coming from Cameroon itself that Cameroon be granted its independence. Such political activities resulted in him being arrested twice.

Bilé in Moscow

While Bilé was increasingly involved in Comintern agitation, the LzVN increasingly fell victim to infighting. This was partly on account of the strains placed upon members by their dire financial and social situation in Germany which led to the development of intrigues and jealousies. [29] Padmore suggested closing the group down and set about trying to rescue Bilé from his situation. In keeping with Comintern efforts to expand its support base amongst African workers and in Africa, he argued that Bilé be sent to Moscow for training and future work in Cameroon.

In summer 1932 Bilé arrived in Moscow to attend the Communist University of the Toilers of the East. At the University, and under the alias of Charles Morris, Bilé was part of Section 9, an English-speaking section devoted to Africans. During his eighteen month stay he attended classes with future Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta and he came into contact with a number of influential Africans and African-Americans, all of whom were similarly mobile within the transnational networks of African political activity. He undertook a variety of courses in political and economic theory, focusing on themes such as the Soviet economy, Leninism and dialectical materialism, as well as a course on party and trade union activism. His progress was frequently reported on. Tutors were divided over whether he was a “fiery nationalist” or whether he avoided nationalist entanglements. Some complained that he was too bourgeois and even too German, having spent too long in Europe. Nonetheless, they agreed that he was a model student and entirely dependable politically. [30] A brief insight into his Moscow experience is provided by a letter of January 1933. Bilé alongside thirteen others protested about offensive depictions of Africans which were being produced on the Moscow stage and in Russian school textbooks. [31]

From Paris to Cameroon

In February 1934, after completing his training, Bilé left Moscow for Paris. He was provided with a letter of reference to join the French Communist Party, but little else. In Paris he was penniless, without papers, and had no hope of returning to Germany, where he had left behind a daughter and all his possessions.

During his time in Moscow, the context of Black Internationalist and anti-colonial politics in Europe (and Cameroon) had changed. In Germany, following the Nazis’ seizure of power the Comintern’s anti-colonial movement had been wiped out. Münzenberg’s *League against Imperialism* had been shut down, Padmore had been forced to flee, and the LzVN had effectively ceased functioning. LzVN President Victor Bell appears to have been “invited” to discuss the group’s future at the Nazis’ Horst-Wessel-Haus in Berlin at the beginning of 1933. [32] Officially the group was wound up in 1935. Meanwhile, Bilé’s mentors Kouyaté and Padmore had both broken with the Comintern as the latter shifted towards closer collaboration with the Western Powers in order to combat the threat of Nazism.

For several years Bilé had expressed a desire to return to Cameroon, primarily for family reasons, but his political connections had made that impossible. After renouncing Communism, however, the French mandate authorities allowed him to return home in 1935. Back in Douala he largely withdrew from political life, started a family and found work as an architect. [33] Joseph Ekwe Bilé died in 1959, less than a year before Cameroon gained independence.

Robbie Aitken is a Reader in History at Sheffield Hallam University. He has published widely on the history of the Black Diaspora in Germany. Recent publications include Black Germany the Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884-1960 (with Eve Rosenhaft: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 2015); ‘Embracing Germany: Interwar Germany and Black Germans through the Eyes of African-American Reporters’, Journal of American History 52/2 (2018): 447-473; ‘A

Transient Presence: Black Visitors and Sojourners in Imperial Germany, 1884-1914, Immigrants and Minorities 34/3 (2016), pp. 233-53. He is also the curator of a travelling exhibition entitled Black Germany. His current work looks at claims made by Black victims of the Nazi period.

Robbie Aitken

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Footnotes

[1] "Politik mit der Zigarette im Mund", *Lokal-Anzeiger*, 15 November 1929, Bundesarchiv Berlin (BArch) R1001 4457/7, p. 229.

[2] Letter, Theodor Seitz to the Foreign Office, Colonial Department, 17.12.1930, BArch R1001 4457/7, p. 228.

[3] This essay reworks elements of my earlier research into Joseph Bilé. See "From Cameroon to Germany and Back via Moscow and Paris: The Political Career of Joseph Bilé (1892-1959), Performer, 'Negerarbeiter' and Comintern activist", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43 (2008), pp. 597-616.

[4] For rare exceptions see Stefan Gerbing, *Afrodeutscher Aktivismus: Interventionen von Kolonisierten am Wendepunkt der Dekolonisierung Deutschlands 1919* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2010); Peter Martin, "Anfänge politischer Selbstorganisation der deutschen Schwarzen bis 1933", in: Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst and Reinhardt Klein-Arendt (eds.), *Die (koloniale) Begegnung. AfrikanerInnen in Deutschland 1880-1945, Deutsche in Afrika 1880-1918* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 193-206; Adolf Rüger, "Imperialismus, Sozialreformismus und antikoloniale demokratische Alternative. Zielvorstellung von Afrikanern in Deutschland im Jahre 1919", *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 23 (1975), pp. 1293-1308.

[5] For more see Robbie Aitken and Eve Rosenhaft, *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chapter 1.

[6] For more see Aitken and Rosenhaft, *Black Germany*, pp. 24-30 and chapter 6.

[7] Intelligence Report, APA 10367 Propagande Révolutionnaire 31 October 1929, Cameroon National Archive, Yaoundé (ANC). Regarding Kouyaté, see Philippe DeWitte, *Les Mouvements Negres en France 1919-1939* (Paris: Harmattan, 1985); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003), in particular chapter 5. Kouyaté stopped in Berlin on his way back to Paris

from the worldwide conference of the *Liga gegen den Imperialismus* that had been held in Frankfurt.

[8] See Aitken and Rosenhaft, *Black Germany*, p. 204.

[9] "Verhaftung eines Negers", *Salzburger Chronik für Stadt und Land*, 6 May 1919, p. 6.

[10] "Blutige Maifeier in Deutschland", *Neues Wiener Journal*, 2 May 1924, p. 2.

[11] Kurzer Tätigkeitsbericht der Liga zur Verteidigung der Negerrasse, 30 Sept 1930, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) 495/155/87, pp. 404-8. In March 1930 the French police received a report that the LzVN had 200 members and branches in Hamburg and Frankfurt as well as Berlin. This seems unlikely: Central Commissioner Bordeaux to Directeur of the Sûreté, 19 March 1930, *Archives Nationales, Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence*, SLOTFOM III-111.

[12] Constitution of the LzVN, 17 September 1929, Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), Rep. 42, Acc. 1743, no. 9054 (Akten des Amtsgerichts Charlottenburg betr. Auflösung der Liga), pp. 4-5.

[13] Chief Administrator for the Colonies to District Head, Yaoundé, 28 August 1931, ANC Yaoundé APA 10226 Agissements Allemands; Note on revolutionary propaganda involving the overseas territories, 30 November 1930, ANC Yaoundé APA 10367.

[14] Kurzer Tätigkeitsbericht, RGASPI, 495/155/87, pp. 404-408.

[15] "Berlin to have a Race House", *Baltimore Afro-American*, 18 January 1930, p. 8. For more on the links to African Americans, see Robbie Aitken, "Embracing Germany: interwar German society and Black Germans through the eyes of African-American reporters", *Journal of American Studies*, (2018) 52 (2), pp. 447-473.

[16] "Weiß auf Schwarz: Odys und der Hochbauingenieur aus Kamerun", *Die Bühne*, (1926) vol. 24, p. 23.

[17] Christine Naumann, "African American Performers and Culture in Weimar Germany", in: David McBride, Leroy Hopkins, and C. Aisha Blackshire-Belay (eds.): *Crosscurrents. African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), p. 112.

[18] Till, "Berlin bekommt ein Negertheater", *Neues Wiener Journal*, 12 January 1930, p.8; "Along the Color Line", *The Crisis* 3 (1930), p. 94. The German authorities were also aware of these plans, thanks to information passed on to them by a Berlin journalist. Eltester to Bruckner, 8 January 1930, BArch R1001 4457/7, p. 232. On the revue, see also Tobias Nagl, *Die unheimliche Maschine. Rasse und Repräsentation im Weimarer Kino* (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2009), pp. 572-4.

[19] "Die Neger kommen", *Westböhmisches Tageszeitung*, 31 January 1930, p. 3.

[20] "Ein Negertheater in Berlin?", *Völkischer Beobachter*, 24 January 1931, p. 2

[21] For more on the Congress see, Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919-1939* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013).

[22] For more on the ITUCNW see Adi, *Pan-Africanism*.

[23] J. Bile, "How the Workers live in Cameroon", *The Negro Worker*, (July 1932), pp. 28-30.

[24] Original letter quoted in letter from Deutscher Vertreter der IKKA (Executive Committee of the Comintern) to the Romanische Ländersekretariat, 8 March 1934, RGASPI, 495/205/1802, p. 3.

[25] Courses for colonial students, 5 November 1930, RGASPI, 542/1/40, pp. 119-23.

[26] For more on the Scottsboro campaign, see James A. Miller, Susan Pennybacker, Eve Rosenhaft, "Mother Ada Wright and the International Campaign to Free the Scottsboro Boys", *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), pp. 387-403

[27] See figures in police reports. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz Berlin Dahlem, Rep 219, Landeskriminalpolizeiamt Berlin, Nr. 19, pp. 45-48, 92, 107.

[28] Ibid.

[29] See Aitken and Rosenhaft, *Black Germany*, pp. 217-19.

[30] Bilé's Comintern personal file under the alias Charles Morris contains reports about his progress in Moscow: See RGASPI 495/279/67, pp. 1-10; Comments of Alexander Zusmanovich, Conference of Comrade Morris with Teachers, 25 December 1932, RGASPI 532/1/439, pp. 21-26

[31] Letter reprinted in: Woodford McClellan, "Africans and Black Americans in the Comintern Schools, 1925-1934", in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1993), pp. 389-390.

[32] According to Victor Bell the membership of the LzVN had been reduced to two and he declared that he no longer sympathized with its ideas and former members. LAB, Bell to the Amtsgericht Charlottenburg, 24 August 1934, Rep. 42, Acc. 1743, no. 9054.

[33] Interview with Guillaume Dina Ekwe Bilé, Douala, 17 March 2006.