

# UK: Marxism, Pan-Africanism and the International African Service Bureau

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**One of the most remarkable black radical formations of the twentieth century was the International African Service Bureau, which was active in Britain during the 1930s and 1940s. Theo Williams writes about an astonishing activist group and argues that the left of today has much to learn from this Pan-Africanist and Marxist organisation.**

The International African Service Bureau (IASB) — along with its predecessor, the International African Friends of Ethiopia, and successor, the Pan-African Federation — included within its ranks some of the most notable figures in the history of anti-imperialism, such as Amy Ashwood Garvey, C.L.R. James, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore. This activist formation played the central role in organising the famous Fifth Pan-African Congress, which was held in Manchester in October 1945.

The IASB was shaped by the currents of radical internationalism that developed over the early decades of the twentieth century. By 1900, almost the entire world was divided into European colonies and semi-colonies. The world's three independent black-ruled states — Ethiopia, Haiti and Liberia — would all have their sovereignty challenged by Western powers in the coming years. In the United States, the promise of the Reconstruction era was followed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the enactment of Jim Crow laws and widespread racial violence, including lynching. In this context, the First Pan-African Conference met in London in 1900. At this meeting, the African American activist-intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois famously and prophetically declared: 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.'

During the First World War (1914-18), Britain and France, which were the world's largest colonial powers, drew extensively on the resources of their colonies, including their peoples. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans participated in the US war effort. Yet, despite this contribution to the Allied victory, black people across the world continued to face imperialist and racist violence and oppression at the war's conclusion. During the years following the war, Du Bois organised four Pan-African Congresses, and Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association reached a membership purportedly in the millions.

The First World War and its aftermath was accompanied by shockwaves and revolts throughout the colonial world, from Ireland to India. Nowhere, however, were the effects of the war more keenly felt than in Russia. The Bolsheviks took power in the October Revolution of 1917, and spent the next half decade fighting a bloody civil war. However, the Bolsheviks did not just look inwards, but instead looked outwards in order to promote world revolution. The Communist International was formed in 1919. The Comintern's Second Congress, held the following year, declared that Communists should support national liberation movements in the colonies.

The militant anti-imperialism of the Comintern attracted many black radicals, such as Cyril Briggs

and Claude McKay, to the movement. For the first time, it became possible to speak — albeit with qualifications — of a world-revolutionary movement for socialism and colonial liberation. The commitment of the Comintern apparatus to anticolonialism waxed and waned; under Stalin, the movement's strategy and objectives were always at the mercy of Soviet foreign policy. Nevertheless, Marxism (and especially Leninism) provided a crucial theoretical tool for thinking about imperialism, and the Comintern itself often provided important resources for colonial activists who wanted to organise and fight for their liberation. Most significantly for black activists, the Sixth Congress of the Comintern, held in 1928, led to the creation of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW).

Various currents of early twentieth-century radical internationalism converged in the ITUCNW. The organisation combined the Pan-Africanist idea that Africans and people of African descent held common interests that spanned seas and oceans with the revolutionary proletarian politics of Marxism and the Bolsheviks. The ITUCNW's most important theorist was George Padmore. Padmore was born in Trinidad in 1903. He studied in the United States during the 1920s, where he joined the Communist Party of the USA, before moving to Moscow and then eventually to Hamburg, where the ITUCNW was based.

Padmore's 1931 book, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers*, articulated a Pan-Africanist Marxism that set an important precedent for future black radical struggles. In Padmore's analysis, the 'Negro toilers' were the most oppressed people in the world. His use of the word 'toiler', encompassing both workers and peasants, expanded on the Leninist idea that the peasantry could be a revolutionary class, and, in a way, prefigured the Maoism that animated Third-Worldist movements during the second half of the twentieth century. In Padmore's vision, the European proletariat and the colonial peoples would work together to overthrow capitalist-imperialism. By arguing for the revolutionary potential of African peoples, Padmore reconceptualised the revolutionary subject. Lenin's analysis of imperialism focused primarily on its implications for revolution in Europe — the 'super-profits' extracted from the colonies were used to bribe a 'labour aristocracy' and thereby retard the European socialist movement. Padmore elaborated on this theory in order to examine the formation and prospects of the African working class and peasantry. Padmore was acutely aware of the racism that plagued much of the European labour movement, but his Marxist analysis meant that he understood the building of international socialist solidarity to be central to both African and European proletarian liberation. Borrowing a quotation from Marx, he urged that 'labour in the white skin cannot free itself while labour in the black is enslaved.'

Padmore and the Comintern split acrimoniously in 1933-34. The Comintern accused Padmore of 'nationalism', while Padmore accused the Comintern of moderating its anticolonialism in order to allow the Soviet Union to seek anti-German alliances with Britain and France. What is absolutely crucial about this split is that Padmore did not denounce Marxism, but instead argued that the softening of Comintern anticolonialism was a betrayal of Marxism — he left the Comintern in order to uphold the true Leninist position. After the split, Padmore arrived to live in London in 1935. He was immediately thrust into the fervour of the British socialist and anti-colonialist movement that accompanied the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-36).

In October 1935, fascist Italy invaded the independent African nation of Ethiopia, sparking an international outcry and mobilising unprecedented Pan-Africanist sentiment. Kwame Nkrumah, who was in London at the time of the invasion, later recalled that upon seeing a newspaper headline announcing the invasion that 'it was almost as if the whole of London had suddenly declared war on me personally.' The invasion had been some time coming, and in July 1935, Amy Ashwood Garvey and C.L.R. James founded the International African Friends of Ethiopia in order to promote the cause of Ethiopian sovereignty. The group held rallies across London, including at Trafalgar Square. At one such meeting, Ashwood Garvey declared that, 'No race has been so noble in forgiving, but

now the hour has struck for our complete emancipation. We will not tolerate the invasion of Abyssinia.' At another, James, using the language of the African American abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, said that Ethiopians would 'die free rather than live enslaved!'

The IAFE lost much of its momentum after Italy declared military victory in May 1936, but the crisis had brought together the most radical black activists in Britain. Padmore formed the International African Service Bureau out of the remnants of the IAFE in the spring of 1937. Its most important members included Amy Ashwood Garvey (from Jamaica), C.L.R. James (from Trinidad), Chris Jones (from Barbados), Jomo Kenyatta (from Kenya), Ras Makonnen (from British Guiana) and I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson (from Sierra Leone). The IASB was the most radical black organisation in Britain and stood in contrast to Britain's more moderate black-led organisations, the League of Coloured Peoples and the West African Students' Union (although the IASB occasionally collaborated with these groups). Not every member of the IASB was a Marxist, but every member was, broadly speaking, a socialist who believed that colonial liberation would come through revolution. Moreover, James's and Padmore's intellectual and political leadership of the group meant that their collective statements and strategies were undergirded by a Pan-Africanist Marxism.

Following the analysis that Padmore had developed as a member of the Comintern, the IASB sought to forge transnational links between the metropolitan and colonial labour movements. In the Caribbean, a series of labour disturbances culminated in a number of violently repressed revolts in the late 1930s. In the context of these revolts in particular, and of developing colonial trade unionism more generally, the IASB wrote to the British Trades Union Congress: 'At the present moment Africans and West Indians are struggling for their elementary democratic rights. What are you going to do about it?' For the IASB, the level of engagement with anticolonial struggle was the most important index of European proletarian class consciousness. Their 1938 'Manifesto Against War' stated that the coming world war was one of rival imperialisms. Colonial peoples suffered under conditions almost identical to that of European fascism — why, then, should black people fight to defend a 'democracy' they had never known? Instead, they should use the war to strike for independence. They ended the manifesto with a plea for global anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist solidarity: 'White brothers, do not be misled. Our freedom is a step towards your freedom. In the common effort for the independence of the colonial peoples and the emancipation of the European workers, the black and white workers will rid humanity of the scourge of Imperialism and open a new future for humanity.'

The Second World War (1939-45) severely disrupted Pan-Africanist networks. Nevertheless, at the war's end the IASB reconstituted itself as the Pan-African Federation and played the leading role in organising the 1945 Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester. While claiming the heritage of Du Bois's interwar congresses, the 1945 congress placed greater emphasis on the centrality of labour to African liberation. Kwame Nkrumah, one of the congress's main organisers, said the congress was attended by 'practical men and men of action', while Padmore called it an 'expression of a mass movement.' The congress's 'Challenge to the Colonial Powers' declared: 'We condemn the monopoly of capital and the rule of private wealth and industry for private profit alone. We welcome economic democracy as the only real democracy.'

The Pan-Africanist movement underwent a realignment in the post-war years. Many of its members retained a commitment to Marxism, but greater emphasis was placed on building anticolonial movements in Africa rather than seeking alliances with the European socialist movement. This was because of a variety of factors, including the onset of the Cold War and the increasing maturity of African liberation movements. Nkrumah led Ghana to independence in 1957, but both he and Padmore saw this national independence as a prelude to the Pan-Africanist transformation of the continent.

Padmore died in 1959, and Nkrumah was overthrown by a right-wing coup in 1966. What, then, were the successes and failures of this movement? It is clear that the process of decolonisation did not bring about the collapse of global capitalism and the emergence of world socialism, as Pan-Africanist Marxists had hoped. Nevertheless, when the IASB was formed in 1937, mainstream political opinion would have scoffed at the suggestion that black Africa would become independent in only two decades. The end of European empires — even if the promises of independence have not been fully met — was perhaps the global left's most significant victory of the twentieth century.

The left of today has much to learn from the IASB's politics. On the back of accumulating economic crises, much of the world has lurched into nativist populism. The solution lies not with the neoliberal technocrats who created the conditions for this situation, nor with the nationalist 'left' who pander to the right on issues of race and foreign policy. Instead, we must look towards the international socialism of figures like James and Padmore, and understand that grasping the nettle of capitalism and imperialism is the only way of achieving human liberation.

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