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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 38(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

2014

DOI

10.5070/F7381025031

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The Third International and the Struggle for National Liberation in South Africa¹

Robin D.G. Kelley

With few exceptions, historians and activists alike have argued that the 1928 Resolution of the Communist International on the South African Question was little more than an abstract creation “made in Moscow.” The thesis, according to a number of authors, calling for the right of self-determination for African people as well as the wholesale expropriation and redistribution of land to the peasantry was in no way representative of the demands of Africans in South Africa. The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct the origins of the COMINTERN’s “Resolution on the South African Question” adopted at the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International within the context of South African history. I will concentrate on the impact that African nationalism in general, and African Communists in particular, made on the Communist Party of South Africa as well as the Communist International. My thesis argues that the demands embodied in the COMINTERN Resolution reflected the actual struggles of Africans in South Africa as well as Africans in the United States. Thus, the COMINTERN’s position was not merely a result of Stalinist intrigue: but instead it was a response to the praxis of Africans both within the CPSA as well as the African working-class as a whole.

Early Articulations of Self-Determination

The demand for self-determination did not suddenly appear with the advent of the CPSA in 1921. To Africans, self-determination was a very old concept. It was given a coherent theological form with the emergence of ‘Ethiopianism,’² dating back to the early 19th century. Black theologians and followers of the Ethiopian movement, among them the Reverend John L. Dube, who coined the term “Africa for the Africans” before Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association.³

This article was first published in *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 15:1-2, 1986. It is republished here with the permission of the author.

One central issue giving rise to the popular demand for national self-determination was the Land Act of 1913. Under the new act, share-cropping was terminated and individuals were offered the choice of returning to the reserves, working as wage-labourers on the farms or in the mines, or migrating to the cities in search of employment. Although the process was not without precedent, it meant the wholesale expropriation of land from the African population.⁴ The immediate reaction of the South African National Congress (SANNC), founded only a year earlier, was to reject any legislation which would lead to further segregation. Soon afterwards, leading Congressmen became disillusioned with the idea of multi-racial society and concentrated on obtaining an equitable distribution of land. In a letter to Botha dated February 1914, Reverend John L. Dube made the point that segregation was not the central issue.⁵ The same attitude, calling for the equitable division of land and accepting segregation, was evident in the SANNC's "Resolution Against the Natives Land etc, 1913" formulated in 1916.⁶

But the African nationalist intelligentsia had not given up on the idea of British intervention altogether. When war broke out in Europe in 1914, the Congress subdued its protest for the duration of the conflict. The war, however, aroused false hopes of post-war social justice, thus creating a sense of frustration among the African petty-bourgeoisie and working-class. Post-war disappointments were exacerbated by a series of droughts, an increased flow of migrants to the urban areas, and a sharp rise in food prices.⁷ In 1919, demands for increased wages and antipass agitation were widespread on the land. Strikes occurred in Natal collieries and at the Messina Copper Mine in the Northern Transvaal. The Industrial Workers of Africa, founded in 1917, was active in Johannesburg as well as in various mining compounds. Moreover, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union was formed in 1919, organizing dock workers in the Cape. A year later, approximately 71,000 African mine workers walked off their jobs demanding higher wages.⁸

Although the SANNC did not abandon its constitutional approach to political struggle, the rising militancy of the African working-class in addition to post-war South Africa's failure to extend basic civil and political rights to African people, led to a re-thinking of the nature of the struggle itself. Reverend Z.R. Mahabane of the SANNC came straight out with it and demanded

the right of self-determination. After discussing the historical importance of the Garvey movement throughout the diaspora, he agreed that territorial separation was acceptable.⁹ Mahabane's ideas were taken seriously by members of Congress. In 1923, a fraction within the SANNC actually suggested that an "independent republic" be established in South Africa in order to ensure the extension of rights to oppressed nationalities.¹⁰

Three observations can be made from the above. First, the demand for the right of self-determination was not new to African people when the COMINTERN introduced its "Resolution on the South African Question" in 1928. Secondly, the land issue, in addition to extension of democratic rights, was the central point of the struggle in South Africa after 1913. The struggle for land crossed class lines, the petty-bourgeois SANNC taking an active role in the effort toward land redistribution. Finally, African disillusionment following World War I, linked of course to the proletarianization of Africans, resulted in a rise in militancy and class consciousness of South Africa's black working-class. It was in the midst of these struggles that the CPSA was formed.

The Formation of the CPSA and the Rand Revolt of 1922

In August of 1921, a unity conference comprising the Social Democratic Federation, the Marxian Club of Durban, the United Communist Party of Cape Town, the Poalai Zion of Johannesburg, and the International Socialist League (ISL) met in Johannesburg. The coalition of leftists decided to affiliate to the newly formed Third International as one organization--the Communist Party of South Africa.¹¹ The force behind the unification was ultimately the ISL.

Of the organizations which merged to form the CPSA, only the ISL made a commitment to organizing African workers. But even within the ISL, those who worked among Africans were a tiny minority. The "negrophiles," as they were called, were mainly S.P. Bunting and David Ivon Jones. During World War I, both played a leading role in organizing the Industrial Workers of Africa. By 1919, however, the struggles of African workers were subordinated by South Africa's radicals, including the ISL worked avidly toward creating unity among the white left, thus neglecting the rising militancy of Africans workers.¹² In Johannesburg, where

the ISL was founded, the first branch of the CPSA initially did not allow people of colour to become members. The party's organ, the International, reported that "a keen debate took place proposes a number of applications by natives for election to membership of the [Johannesburg] branch."¹³

The white orientation of the CPSA was revealed less than a year after it was formed during the infamous Rand Revolt of 1922. The central grievance of striking white miners, walking off their jobs in February of 1922, was over the retention of the colour bar. White miners, especially unskilled Afrikaners from the rural areas, found Africans beginning to take skilled positions which were hitherto the preserve of whites. Mining capital obviously wanted to reduce labour costs by extending skilled jobs to lower paid Africans.¹⁴

Despite the fact that the demands of the striking white miners and the interests of Africans were in conflict, the CPSA continued to give full support to the strike. In the Cape, where the CPSA had made a commitment to building non-racial unity, the party's support for the Rand Revolt created some contradictions. In response to criticisms from black leaders, the International simply replied that the problems of race relations in South Africa could only be solved through a socialist revolution, something the striking white miners were allegedly struggling to achieve.¹⁵

With the failure of the Rand Revolt, a few of the white party members began to reconsider the CPSA's position toward African workers. By the end of 1922, the party's membership dwindled to about 200, of which only 100 were regular full-time members.¹⁶ The only African Communist was T.W. Thibedi, an old stalwart who was active with the ISL and the IWA during the War. Although those calling for a re-assessment of the party were still in the minority, certain changes in the Communist International's theoretical understanding of the anti-colonial movement strengthened the minority position toward the African masses.

South Africa, the COMINTERN and the National Colonial Question

Woodrow Wilson was not the first to raise the issue of self-determination of nations in the aftermath of World War I. This dilemma was tackled by V.I. Lenin long before the end of the war. In an

article entitled “The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination” (Theses) written in 1916, Lenin dealt with this question in order to establish a strategy for dealing with “national minorities” in the event of a successful socialist revolution in Russia. In this article, Lenin defined self-determination as:

The right of nations to self-determination means only the right of independence in a political sense, the right to free, political secession from the oppressing nation. Concretely this political, democratic demand implies complete freedom to carry out agitation in favour of secession by means of referendum of the nation that desires to secede. . . . It is merely the logical expression of the struggle against national oppression in every form.¹⁷

After the war, Lenin expanded his theses to include the colonies. In 1920, with the assistance of Indian Communists, M.N. Roy, Lenin drafted his famous “Theses on the National and Colonial Questions” submitted to the Second Congress of the Communist International. For the first time, the colonies and “semi-colonies” were placed in a pivotal position in the struggle for socialism. Lenin argue that imperialisms held the colonies back in feudal societal conditions, thus hindering the development of capitalism and thwarting the rise of an indigenous bourgeoisie in the colonies. Thus, Lenin maintained, the colonies had to undergo a bourgeois revolution before the dictatorship of the proletariat could take place. The “Theses” insisted that the “communist parties must give direct support to the revolutionary movements among the dependent nations and those without equal rights (e.g. Ireland, among American Negroes), and in the colonies.”¹⁸

Roy on the other hand, had differences with Lenin’s original draft. He argued that the bourgeoisie in the colonies was not economically or culturally different from the feudal social order out of which it emerged. In other words, Roy maintained that the national bourgeoisie was often reactionary, citing the example of Gandhi in his own country. Roy undoubtedly accepted the idea that proletarian revolution could not take place in the colonies because of the absence of a large organized working class. However, he posited that the struggle in the colonies could not take on a revolutionary character under the organized pressure of the workers and peasants, and with the proper guidance of the

respective communist parties. Where Lenin was willing to support virtually all anti-colonial movements, Roy feared that the petty-bourgeois leadership of the respective nationalist movements “would compromise with imperialism in return for some economic and political concessions to their class.”¹⁹

It is clear that from the COMINTERN’s very inception, under Lenin’s guidance, the struggles of colonial peoples were viewed as a vital aspect of the overall struggle for socialism throughout the world. It was against this background that David Ivon Jones and S.P. Bunting arrived in Moscow to attend the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921. The purpose of their trip was to solicit COMINTERN support for the newly established CPSA. Jones’s report to the COMINTERN reveals the sharp differences between the emerging Leninist position on the character of the struggle in the colonies and semi-colonies and the position of the predominantly European CPSA.

Jones, hailed as one of the South Africa’s great “negrophiles,” showed his true colours in Moscow. In his racist view, Africans were not capable of organizing themselves “owing to their heavy social disabilities and political backwardness.”²⁰ He quite lucidly expressed his underestimation of African workers in a letter to W.H. Andrews:

As cold matter of fact, there is no room for a CP in a white South Africa *except* as the watchdog of the native, as the promoters of rapprochement, watching *within* the broader organizations, for every opportunity to switch the white movement on right lines on this question and scotching every conspiracy to rouse race hatred and strike breaking of race against race. . .²¹

Despite Jones’ pleas for COMINTERN support, the newly formed International was beset with too many of its own internal problems to take a substantial interest in the CPSA. While it officially recognized the CPSA, the so-called “Native Question” was not taken up at the Third Congress in 1921.

At the Fourth Congress of the COMINTERN in 1922, the South African Communists, represented by S.P. Bunting, began to enter the purview of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI). This time, the presence of a white man claiming to speak for Africans was challenged by two

African-Americans: Claude McKay, a black poet who had been invited as an unofficial delegate, and Otto Huiswoud, a representative of the CPUSA and a member of the militant black nationalist organization, the African Blood Brotherhood.²²

The “Theses” as passed by the Fourth Congress placed the struggles of Black people in the context of the national and colonial question for the first time since Lenin alluded to it in 1920. The “Theses” argued that Africans throughout the world were experiencing imperialist exploitation, and thus the struggles of Black toilers were essentially anti-imperialist.²³ Therefore, Africans throughout the world had to be organized in order to weaken imperialism. Moreover, the “Theses” recognized the success of the UNIA under Marcus Garvey, as well as the Pan-African Congress led by W.E.B. DuBois, and urged that immediate steps be taken by the COMINTERN to call a world congress of African leaders.

Toward the ‘Africanization’ of the CPSA

When Bunting arrived back from Moscow in 1922, he surprised many of his white comrades in the party. In the aftermath of the Rand Revolt, where the white miners rallied around the slogan “Workers of the World United and Fight for a WHITE SOUTH AFRICA.” Bunting’s message from the COMINTERN seemed quite inappropriate. The COMINTERN’s “Theses on the Negro Question” was eventually ignored by party leadership. Once the Rand Revolt was crushed, the CPSA joined in the creation of a white united front in order to oust the the regime of Prime Minister Jan Smuts. The South African Labour Party (SALP) joined the Nationalist Party and supported General Hertzog in the elections of 1924. In support of Hertzog, in 1923 the CPSA attempted to affiliate with the SALP. Although the party was rejected, this policy was in step with its overall program of concentrating on white workers. The central resolutions called for the amnesty for strike prisoners, the creation of ship committees and workers’ councils, and for more work in the white trade union movement.²⁴ Unfortunately for the party, Hertzog was far more successful in attracting white workers with his “civilised labour policy” than the Communists were with their program. The failure of South Africa’s white working-class to respond to the CPSA gave strength to

the COMINTERN's position which placed African workers in the vanguard of the struggle.

The decision to direct the party toward the African masses was made at the historic Third Party Conference in December of 1924. Although all the official delegates were white, three representatives from the ICU, Thomas Mbeki, J.M.K. Sibella, and Stanley Silwana addressed the conference. Mbeki and Silwana were recent recruits of the Young Communist League. After a heated debate the COMINTERN's position was adopted, calling on the CPSA to "turn to the African masses."²⁵ Consequently, the decision led to a tumultuous split in the tiny organization. Leading activist C.F. Glass resigned from the party. He even went so far as to affiliate the Tailors' Union, which he headed with the SALP. W.H. Andrews also voiced his opposition to the new party line by resigning from his position as General Secretary of the party in 1919.²⁶

While the party's official policy shifted toward the African working-class and peasantry, African nationalism was still dismissed as reactionary. In a revealing report by Eddie Roux on behalf of the YCL at the 1924 party conference, he stated:

The Communist Party has a very definite function to perform in this connection. We have fought nationalism just as relentlessly among the natives as among the whites. That means that while preserving all the revolutionary spirit of the national movement, i.e. into contact with the white workers politically and industrially.²⁷

Thus, while the COMINTERN's "Theses on the Negro Question" recognized black nationalism as inherently anti-imperialist, CPSA leadership insisted upon rejecting all manifestations of nationalism. Such a rejection coincided with the height of the ICU on a national scale and the Garvey movement on an International scale.

Radicalism in Black and White

The party was quick to implement the new line. In 1925 the CPSA resurrected the ISL's night school and established it in an African church in Ferreirastown, a township outside of Johannesburg. T.W. Thibedi taught literacy classes there. He was also elected

to the Executive Committee of the party in 1925, the first African ever to hold such a position. By 1936, three Africans, J.A. La Guma, Gana Makabeni, and J. Phahlane, were elected to the Central Committee. In that same year, the *South African Worker*, the party's newspaper, began to publish articles in Zulu, Tswana, and Xhosa. And in 1927, the party headquarters was moved to 41a Fox Street, in the heart of Johannesburg's African community. In addition to working within the ICU, the Communists directed most of their energies to fighting the Pact government, the pass laws, and Hertzog's "Native Bills" introduced in 1926.

From the outset, however, a conflict of ideology existed between African and white Communists. Africans joined the party as nationalists who rejected reformist politics and called for militant action. Although African Communists joined whites in a scathing critique of capitalism, the central theme of their propaganda differed little from militant nationalists who remained in the mainstream nationalist movement. The struggle, in their view, was for the land. Speaking to a Johannesburg crowd in 1926, an African Communist by the name of Malamela said:

The places where we grew our crops, the good land, was in the valleys, and on this land we had lived for generations. You never heard of a native building his house on the hills—that was where the baboons lived. Now the white man has taken all the good land for himself.²⁸

T.W. Thibedi, in an interesting article published in both Zulu and English, creatively illustrated the nature of national oppression by drawing a parallel between South Africa and pre-revolutionary Russia. "For many years," he wrote, "the workers of Russia were made to carry passes and pay taxes and were refused when they wanted a meeting to discuss matters affecting their life. The workers of Russia were not allowed to take part in making laws, just the same as the workers in South Africa."²⁹

James La Guma, a so-called "Coloured" party leader who spent a good portion of his early life organizing miners in South West Africa, epitomized this mixture of militant nationalism and proletarian ideology. Reflective of the "Negritude" movement, La Guma's *Awake Africa* appeared for all to read in the *South African Worker*.³⁰

Hark ye comrades, fellow workers,
 The cry throughout the land.
 Ethiopia lifts her weary head
 And stretches out her hand.
 The horny hand of the Worker,
 Blistered and scarred from toil
 That others may gorge their fill of
 the wealth
 Wrested by you from your own mother soil.

Arise ye' African workers,
 Strip ready for the fray,
 In the rosy East is dawning
 The long awaited day,
 The day of emancipation.
 From the bitter galling [c]hains,
 Of capitalist oppression,
 That sucks the life blood from
 your veins. . .

While African Communists wanted South Africa (i.e., the land and the rights to self-determination), white party members saw the role of African toilers in a totally different way. The so-called "Native Question" was only seen as part and parcel of the white class struggle. This was because the capitalist used "the teeming millions of unorganized colonial workers as a lever with which to bring down the already low standard of living of white workers."³¹

White party members also voiced their extreme distaste of African nationalism. Although Bunting reluctantly accepted the COMINTERN's position on the anti-imperialist nature of the African national liberation movement, he attacked all manifestations of African nationalism, especially Garveyism.³² C.F. Glass also considered Garveyism and the UNIA extreme form of African reaction.³³ An editorial in the *South African Worker* stated, "Africa for the Africans' as a basis for emancipation is futile, for it does not touch the root cause of all oppression."³⁴

Overall, party leadership did not recognize the ideological rift that was erupting within the party. Whites not only opposed militant African nationalism, they also refused to give up leadership of the party to Africans. In any case, up to the end of 1926, African Communists devoted most of their energies to building

up the ICU, and thus avoided any major conflicts with white party leadership.

African Communist and the ICU

The majority of the party's early African recruits who were eventually to hold leadership positions were drawn from the ICU. In fact, the three African delegates attending the fourth Party conference in 1925--John Gomas, E.J. Khaile, and Thibedi--were ICU members. Moreover, Communists Stanley Silwana and Thomas Mbeki established the first Witwatersrand branch of the ICU in 1924.³⁵

Initially, the Communists and ICU members saw no conflict in holding positions in both organizations. Comrade Mamelela, delivering a speech in Johannesburg in 1926 told the crowd that the "ICU is at one with the Communist Party. The Communist Party will go to the landlords and say 'Get out of it!' It will go to the workers and say, 'You men who are fast asleep, get up and demand the products of your labour!'"³⁶ T.W. Keable 'Mote,' an ICU leader, as well as a member of the Local Native Advisory Board in Bloemfontein, initially took a militant, anti-capitalist stance. In an article covering the Wages Board and the increasing persecution of the ICU, 'Mote' demanded that "white and black unite for the overthrow of capitalist domination."³⁷

It is clear that the ideological influences of a good number of ICU militants, though eclectic, consisted of a mixture of African nationalism and class analysis. The ICU to a great extent closely associated itself with the Garvey movement in South Africa. In 1925 its president was J. Gumbs, a West Indian from Cape Town who was active in the local UNIA.³⁸ James Thaele, another Garveyite was listed as sub-editor of the Workers' Herald (the ICU's organ) in April of 1925. Furthermore, though the ICU avoided giving support to political organizations, in 1925 it officially recognized the African National Congress as the only political body fighting for the rights of African people.³⁹ Its acceptance of class struggle is evident in the ICU's preamble, adopted in 1925. The preamble clearly stated that the interests of labour and capital were diametrically opposed since the existence of the capitalist depended on the exploitation of the working class.⁴⁰

The nationalist militancy of the ICU predated the so-called “infiltration” by the Communists. (In fact, if any organization was infiltrated, it was the CPSA by militant African ICU leaders)! Before 1926, ICU leaders had been extremely hostile to white liberals and missionaries. Even moderate African leaders such as the Rev. John L. Dube and R. V. Selope Thema were regarded as “good boys” of the dupes of the Chamber of Mines.⁴¹ Yet, by fall of 1926, Clements Kadalie began to look upon white liberals in a more favourable light. First of all, he hoped to use his recent English liberal friends, whom he had contact with in the British labour movement, as an avenue to integrate the ICU into the mainstream white labour movement in South Africa.⁴² Secondly, he hoped to achieve some legitimacy for the rapidly growing union in order to neutralize the growing repression directed at his movement.

White liberals and the Communist Party, however, did not make good bedfellows. As the ICU’s ‘moderate’ leadership began to steer the organization farther and farther away from its original militant stance, conflicts began to emerge. The conflict was exacerbated by J.A. La Guma’s inquiry into the union’s finances in March 1926. The African party members, along with the rank and file, constantly criticized the ICU leaders for corruption, especially prominent figures such as A.P.K. Maduna, J.B. Mancoe, and W.W.G. Champion.⁴³

By the end of 1926, a sharp rift emerged over Kadalie’s decision to affiliate the union with the International Federation of Trade Unions in Amsterdam. The CPSA had hoped the ICU would affiliate to the Communist International’s trade union body, the Red International of Labour Unions, or the Profintern. The decision came as surprise to the Communists. The *South African Worker* advised the ICU to “think twice before it takes any steps that would bring South Africa’s militant native workers under the banner of reactionary reformism.”⁴⁴

But Kadalie was careful not to rock the boat of his new found alliance. In fact, he received warnings from the British trade unionists with whom he collaborated. Arthur Creech-Jones warned Kadalie that the ICU “must not be side-tracked by communism.”⁴⁵ Kadalie had to reassess the ICU’s relationship with the CPSA. Consequently, at the national council meeting in December of 1926, the Communists were expelled from the ICU. Those expelled included James La Guma, E.J. Khalie, R. de Norman and

John Gomas--over a quarter of the ICU's national council. The only Communist of the national council to remain in the ICU was Thomas Mbeki.⁴⁶

Immediately following the expulsion, an open air meeting of rank and file members in Port Elizabeth passed a resolution which called for the unconditional reinstatement of the expelled Communists and an end to interference in the political views of the ICU members. The resolution also called on the ICU to engage in passive resistance "in conjunction with other bodies of Africa people against pass laws and other oppressive legislation."⁴⁷ What is revealing about the Port Elizabeth resolution is militancy of the rank file. By 1927, many African workers began to lose faith in the ICU and a number of spontaneous strikes not authorized by the ICU, erupted throughout South Africa. On June 15, 1500 African dock workers in Durban walked off their jobs for one-hour to protest the arrest of twenty of their fellow workers who failed to pay the poll tax. In northern Natal, African coal miners struck, and the ICU attempted to persuade striking railway workers in Johannesburg to return to work.⁴⁸

The expulsion of the Communists from the ICU was undoubtedly a loss to both organizations. Many of those expelled had been organizers for the ICU long before the CPSA began to take an interest in Africans. Within two years of the expulsion, the ICU was split three ways and had lost its efficacy as a mass organization. Nonetheless, the African Communists came to the realization that the movement for national liberation had to be united under a revolutionary program.

The Sixth World Congress: Toward Self-Determination

With their expulsion from the ICU, the African Communists devoted more energy to direct party work. By this time, the party had not made many gains among Africans. In January of 1927 the CPSA had only 400 dues paying members, about fifty of whom were Africans.⁴⁹ Criticizing the South African party, the Communist Party of Great Britain commented that "the European Party members, influenced to a certain extent by old traditions, failed fully to appreciate the necessity for the Party to develop into a vanguard of the native masses."⁵⁰ The British Communists' criticisms were both accurate and timely. A good number of

white South African Communists adamantly held onto the false notion that only whites were capable of leading the struggle for socialism.⁵¹

Since the white Communists were not prepared to accept Africans to lead the party, they certainly were not ready to adopt a resolution calling for African rule in South Africa. With the advent of the Brussels Congress held under the auspices of the League Against Colonial Oppression in 1927, the African communists seized the opportunity to articulate their own analysis of the situation in South Africa. The League was originally founded in 1926 by the German Communist Party (KDP) to combat pro-colonial sentiments emerging in Germany in the mid-twenties. The Brussels Congress was a first step toward coordinating various struggles for national liberation in the colonies and “semi-colonies,” and it served as an intermediary between the Communist International and the anti-colonial movement.⁵²

The three delegates from South Africa were James La Guma of the CPSA, Dan Colrairie of the Trade Union Council and Josiah T. Gumede, then president of the Natal Provincial African National Congress. The resolution on South Africa submitted by the delegates was based on six demands, the first being “the right to self-determination, by the complete overthrow of the capitalist and imperialist domination.”⁵³ The other demands were the abolition of oppressive taxation; the establishment of full educational facilities; the right to organize; freedom of speech, assembly, etc. The demand for self-determination was reinforced by the League’s “Resolution on the Negro Question.” Receiving full support from both Gumede and La Guma, the resolution called for the “control of the land and governments of Africa by the Africans.”⁵⁴

Following the Brussels Congress, La Guma and Gumede were invited to the Soviet Union to attend the anniversary celebration of the October Revolution. While there, La Guma was able to meet with ECCI representatives, especially Nicolai Bukharin whom he talked to at length, to discuss the struggle in South Africa. La Guma’s presence at the Brussels Congress led to a renewed interest in South Africa. In addition, La Guma had hooked up with a black Communist from the U.S. named Harry Haywood (Haywood Hall). Haywood was delighted to meet La Guma, and through his discussions with the South African Communist, he saw “striking similarities between the struggles”

of African-Americans and Africans in South Africa. Moreover, Haywood also noted that in both countries the white leadership of their respective parties “underestimated the revolutionary potential of the Black Movement.”⁵⁵ La Guma then produced the preliminary draft resolution on the South African question. The draft resolution called for the return of land to the Africans and for “an independent native South African Republic with full equal rights for all races.”⁵⁶

When La Guma returned to South Africa and presented this resolution to the Central Executive of the party, it received strong opposition from white Communists as well as some of the Africans. Bunting, E.S. Sachs, B.W. Weinbren, T.W. Thibedi, Gana Makabeni and V. Danchin all opposed the draft, while Douglas and Molly Wolton supported it. What hurt the white communists most was La Guma’s statement that the white workers in South Africa “soaked as they were with imperialist ideology were not of primary revolutionary importance in this country.”⁵⁷

What emerged from discussion was a minority report in support of the resolution drafted by Wolton and a majority report drafted by Bunting. Both reports were sent to the ECCI in preparation for the Sixth World Congress. Bunting adhered to the notion that black/white unity and class struggle “pure and simple” was the only way Africans could liberate themselves. What is the most disappointing about Bunting’s report, however, was his underestimation of nationalism as a revolutionary ideology.⁵⁸

Wolton’s fourteen page report agreed with the draft resolution that whites were “proportionately less a revolutionary factor in the class struggle in South Africa.” Moreover, he stressed the fact that Africans had to play a vanguard role in the struggle for national liberation. He even gave support to the African nationalist movement, which he viewed as a “conscious desire of the African people to one day possess power and constitute a very strong national expression of the people towards independent action.”⁵⁹

Outside the Executive Committee, the resolution was overwhelmingly accepted. The entire Cape branch of the CPSA, with one exception, supported the resolution. The party was also making rapid gains. African membership increased from 200 in 1927 to 1600 out of 1750 total members in 1928.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, a factional struggle was in the making. On the eve of Bunting’s trip

to Moscow to participate in the Sixth World Congress, La Guma summed up the nature of the coming struggle in a letter to the ECCI. Critical of Bunting's report, La Guma wrote, "These arguments drive the non-European comrades to the conclusion that the Central Executive of the South African Party considers the mass movement of the natives, should be held up until such time as the white workers is ready to extend his favour."⁶¹

The Sixth World Congress was a major disappointment to the white South African Communists. Nearly all the delegates could not accept the fact that the CPSA sent three white delegates—Bunting, his wife Rebecca, and Eddie Roux-- to speak on behalf of the South African people.⁶² Surrounded by an air of hostility, Bunting desperately tried to defend his position against the 'Native Republic' thesis. What becomes clear by looking at Bunting's remarks at the Congress is the fact that his concern was not really over the theoretical applicability or correctness of the slogan. Instead, he was more concerned over the position of whites in the movement. More than anything else, the new slogan theoretically stripped the white Communists from their position as the "vanguard" of the revolution. Bunting argued that,

...expressions like 'South Africa is a black country,' the return of the country and the land back to the black population, etc. . . invited criticism by the white working and peasant minority who will have to fight with black workers and peasants if the bourgeoisie is to be overthrown. . .⁶³

More significantly, Bunting underestimated African workers' revolutionary potential. He held fast to the notion that a revolutionary movement without white support would disintegrate in the face of repression.⁶⁴

In the end, the COMINTERN went over the heads of the South African delegation and adopted the "Draft Resolution on the South African Question." Upon the insistence of Bunting, however, one alteration was made. Instead of the resolution calling for an independent "native republic" with guarantees for national minorities, the resolution was changed to read "an independent native republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' republic."⁶⁵

The final draft of the resolution differed little from La Guma's original draft. South Africa still was characterized as a semi-colony under the hegemony of British imperialism. The development of an indigenous capitalism led British imperialists to form an alliance with the white (mainly Afrikaner) bourgeoisie in order to fully exploit the African working class. The size of the African proletariat, as well as the level of exploitation, objectively placed it in the vanguard role.

In order to accomplish the agrarian revolution, the resolution called on the party to work out an agrarian program. The program, the ECCI maintained, was not only to concentrate on "expropriating the expropriators," but was also to include concrete partial demands of the South African peasantry. It also emphasized that efforts had to be made to organize the peasants and agricultural workers into unions.

The other angle of the 'native republic' was that South Africa belonged to the majority--the African people. In no way did the slogan call for the creation of a separated state for Africans. Nor did it suggest that Whites, Indians, or 'Coloureds' be placed in a separate state. Instead, South Africa was to be ruled by the majority Africans and independent of British imperialism. Moreover, the resolution specifically stated that all national minorities, namely the "non-exploiting elements of the white population" had to be given full and equal rights.

Above all, the COMINTERN resolution rejected the CPSA's longstanding political position that the struggle in South Africa was first and foremost a struggle for socialism. The new position maintained that a "national agrarian movement," or a struggle for national liberation had to precede socialist transformation. Thus, the nationalist movement, under the organized pressure of the rural and industrial African toilers, was now regarded as the backbone of the struggle.

In the end, La Guma's position was finally adopted, but only through the pressure of the COMINTERN. Because Europeans retained their leadership position in the party, La Guma's position calling for self-determination of African peoples had to be adopted over the heads of the CPSA's leadership.

Conclusion

The role of the COMINTERN in the development of the 'Native Republic' thesis cannot be denied. But to reduce the 1928 resolution to the 'heavy hand of Stalin' would be an inaccurate interpretation of South African history.

A clear understanding of the national liberation movement was in the making even before the CPSA was formed. The activities of the nationalist movement began to concentrate on the land issue as well as the extension of democratic rights to people of colour. Moreover, the rising militancy of the African working class placed pressure on the nationalist movement, and in some cases, radicalized its structure. The fact that the ICU combined the tenets of nationalism, Marxism, and industrial unionism is an indication of the character of the national liberation movement in South Africa. The 1928 resolution encompassed most of these elements.

Obviously, the "Resolution on the South African Question" was not an end-all document. The original resolution reduced the national liberation movement to economic factors, not really dealing with the question of African consciousness and the dialectic of national oppression. In other words, issues such as cultural oppression, language and the psychological effects of racism were not incorporated in the COMINTERN's view of the nature of national liberation in South Africa.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the resolution not only reflected the ECCI's understanding of the nature of South African society; it also reflected the real aspirations of the African people--the return of the land and self-determination.

Endnotes

¹ An earlier version of the paper was presented to Professor B.I. Obichere's African History Seminar at UCLA, Spring 1985. The author is grateful to Dr. Obichere, Kyalo Mativo, Conco Seshi, P. Godfrey Okoth, Sid Lemelle, Steve Rubert, Dr. Robert Hill, and Dr. C. Robinson for their scholarly contributions in and outside the seminar.

² See for instance, Edward Roux, *S.P. Bunting: A Political Biography* (Cape Town, 1944), pp. 87-89____, *Time Longer Than Rope: History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (London, 1966), pp. 255-269; Eddie Win Roux, *Rebel Pity: The Life of Eddie Roux* (Harmondsworth, 1970), pp.73-76; George Padmore, *Pan Africanism or Communism?: The Coming Struggle for Africa* (London, 1956),

p.364; Sheridan Johns, "The Comintern, South African and the Black Diaspora," *Review of Politics* 37/2 (1975), p. 2014; _____, "Marxism-Leninism in a Multi-Racial Environment: The Origins and Early History of the Communist Party of South Africa, 1914-1932," Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, 1965; Roger Kanet, "The Comintern and the 'Negro Question': Communist Policy in the United States and Africa, 1921-1941," *Survey* 19/4 (Autum, 1973), p. 99 and p. 107. Two exceptions who have tried to revise this mechanistic interpretation are Martin Legassick's occasional paper entitled, *Class and Nationalism in South African Protest: The South African Communist Party and the 'Native Republic,' 1928-1934* (Syracuse, 1973); and Thomas Ranuga, "Marxism and Black Nationalism in South Africa (Azania): "A Comparative and Critical Analysis of the Ideological Conflict and Consensus Between Marxism and Nationalism in the ANC, the PAC and the BCM, 1920-1980," Ph.D. Thesis, Brandeis University, 1982.

³ See Arnold Kuzwayo, "A History of Ethiopianism in South Africa with Particular Reference to the American Zulu Mission from 1835-1908," M.A. Thesis, University of South Africa, 1979; George Shepperson, "Ethiopianism and African Nationalism," *Phylon* 14/1 (1953), pp. 9-18.

⁴ This process and the emergence of the Act itself is dealt with in greater detail in Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London, 1979); and M.L. Morris, "The Development of Capitalism in South Africans Agriculture: Class Struggle in the Countryside," *Economy and Society* 5/3 (1976).

⁵ Peter Walshe, *The Rise and African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress, 1912-1952* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971), p. 47.

⁶ "Resolution Against the Native Land Act 1913 and the Report of the Natives Land Commission," by the South African Native National Congress, October 2, 1916, in Gwendolyn Carter and Thomas Karis (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa*, vol. I (Stanford, 1972), pp. 86-88.

⁷ These conditions are vividly described in W.M. Macmillian, *The Land, the Native and Unemployment* (Johannesburg, 1924).

⁸ See F.A. Johnston, *Class, Race, and Gold: A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa* (London, 1976), pp. 180-83; Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope*, p. 132.

⁹ "The Exclusion of the Bantus," address by the Rev. Z.R. Mahabene, President, Cape Province National Congress, 1921, in Carter and Karis (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge*, vol. I, pp. 290-291.

¹⁰ *Cape Times* July 10, 1923

¹¹ Sheridan Johns, "The British of the Communist Party of South Africa," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 9/3 (1976), p. 374; H.J. Simons and R.E. Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950 (Baltimore, 1969), pp. 260-261.

¹² For more on the IWA, see F.A. Johnstone, "The IWA on the Rand: Socialist Organizing among Black Workers on the Rand, 1917-1918," in B. Bozzoli (ed.),

Labour, Townships and Protest (Johannesburg, 1979); Johns, "The British of the Communist Party of South Africa," pp. 376-85.

¹³ *International* August 19, 1921

¹⁴ Brutus, *Never Again! The Rand Revolt, 1922* (n.d., n.p.); S.P. Bunting, *Red Revolt and the Rand Strike* (Johannesburg, 1922); N. Heard, *1922: The Revolt on the Rand* (Johannesburg, 1966); R.K. Cope, *Comrade Bill: The Life and Times of W.H. Andrews, Workers' Leader* (Cape Town, 19-?).

¹⁵ *International* February 17, 1922

¹⁶ *Bulletin of the IV Congress of the Communist International* no. 13 (November 23, 1922), p. 4

¹⁷ V.I. Lenin, "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination" (Theses), in *Lenin on the National and colonial Questions: Three Articles* (Peking, 1967), p.5

¹⁸ "Theses on the National and Colonial Question Adopted by the Second Congress of the Comintern Congress," in Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International, 1919-1943 Documents*, vol. I (London, 1956), p. 142.

¹⁹ Manabendra Nath Roy, *M.N. Roy's Memoirs* (Bombay, 1964), p. 378; see also John Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India: M.N. Roy and Comintern Policy, 1920-1939* (Princeton, 1971), pp. 14-15; D.C. Grover, *M.N. Roy: A Study of Revolution and Reason in Indian Politics* (Calcutta, 1973), pp. 2-13. A copy of Roy's theses are available in V.B. Karnik, "M.N. Roy: A Political Biography" (Bombay, 1978), pp. 107-110. For Lenin's views on Roy's supplementary theses, see "The Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions, July 26, 1920," in *Lenin on the National and Colonial Questions*, pp. 30-37.

²⁰ *International* September 16, 1921; David Jones, "Communism in South Africa," Part II, *Communist Review* 1.4 (August, 1921), pp.70-71; Edward T. Wilson, *Russia and Black Africa Before World War II* (New York and London, 1974), p. 126.

²¹ Cope, *Comrade Bill*, p. 296

²² Johns, "The Comintern," p. 211. For more on McKay and Huiswoud at the 4th Congress, see Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: 1960), pp. 25, 67, 165-6; Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: The Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago, 1978), p. 225; Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (New York, 1937), pp. 177-80; Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London, 1983), pp. 304-306.

²³ The full text of the "Theses on the Negro Question" is available in *Bulletin of the IV Congress of the Communist International* no. 27 (December 7, 1922), pp. 8-10; and Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International, 1919-1943*, vol. I. pp. 398-401

²⁴ Johns, "Marxism-Leninism," p. 294

²⁵ *International* January 2, 1925

²⁶ *International* May 29, 1925; Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope*, p. 201; Roux, S.P. Bunting, p. 68.; Nathaniel Weyl, *Traitor's End: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Movement in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1970), p. 64

- ²⁷ Quoted in Brian Bunting, Moses Kotane, *South African Revolutionary: A Political Biography* (London, 1979), pp. 28-29
- ²⁸ *South African Worker* July 23, 1926
- ²⁹ *South African Worker* July 19, 1926
- ³⁰ *South African Worker* April 13, 1928
- ³¹ *South African Worker* July 2, 1926
- ³² S.P. Bunting, "The Labour Movement in South Africa," *International Press Correspondence* 2/98 (November 22, 1922), pp. 787-88.
- ³³ *International* September 18, 1922.
- ³⁴ *South African Worker* August 27, 1926.
- ³⁵ Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope*, p. 202.
- ³⁶ *South African Worker* July 19, 1926.
- ³⁷ *South African Worker* July 19, 1926.
- ³⁸ Johns, "Marxism-Leninism," p. 341; For a biography of Gumbs, see *New Africa* July 29, 1929.
- ³⁹ *Workers' Herald* May 15, 1925.
- ⁴⁰ "Constitution and Rules of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa, ICU, as adopted by the 7th congress, December, 1927. "*South African Political Materials: Collection of Documents* (comp.) G. Carter and T. Karis, CAMP. File 2:Li1: 11/3, microfilm, reel 138. Hereafter cited *Carter-Karis Collection*.
- ⁴¹ See for instance *Workers' Herald* August 15, 1925, and January 9, 1925; and P.L. Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union* (Cape Town, 1978), pp. 102-103.
- ⁴² Some of these "friends" included Winifred Holtby of the British Independent Labour Party, Mrs. Ethelreda Lewis, Mrs. Palmer, who was a prominent Fabian socialist at one time, and Arthur Creech-Jones of the Transport and General Workers' Union in Britain.
- ⁴³ *South African Worker* August 6, 1926, September 3, 1926, August 20, 1926; Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Unions*, p. 197; S.W. Johns, "Trade Union, Political Group, or Mass Movement?: The Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa," in R.I. Rotberg and Ali Mazrui (eds.), *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York, 1970), pp. 723-725; Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope*, pp. 163-64.
- ⁴⁴ *South African Worker* November 19, 1926.
- ⁴⁵ A Creech-Johnes to Clements Kadalie, September 15, 1927, *Carter-Karis Collection*, file 2:Li1; 41-27, microfilm reel 138. See also Vera Brittain and Geoffrey Handley-Taylor (eds.), *Selected Letters of Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain (1920-1935)* (London, 1960), pp. 136-37 for more examples of their virulent anti-communism.
- ⁴⁶ *South African Worker* December 24, 1926; Helen Bradford, "Mass Movements and the Petty-Bourgeoisie: The Social Origins of ICU Leadership, 1924-1929," *Journal of African History* 26 (1985), p. 308; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 74-75; Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope*, p. 163; Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers'*

Union, pp. 106-107; and for a rather tainted account, see Clements Kadalie, *My Life in the ICU: The Autobiography of a Black Trade Unionist in South Africa* (London, 1970), pp. 99-100.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope*, pp. 164-65.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴⁹ Communist Party of Great Britain, *The Communist International Between the Fifth and Sixth World Congresses, 1924-28* (London, 1928), p. 491.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 491.

⁵¹ *South African Worker* November 4, 1927.

⁵² Willy Munzenberg, "Pour une Conference Coloniale," *Correspondence Internationale* 6/9 (August, 1926), p. 1011; Munzenberg, "La Premiere Conference Mondiale Contre la Politique Coloniale Imperialist," *Correspondence Internationale* 7/17 (February 5, 1927), p. 232; Wilson, *Russia and Black Africa*, p. 151.

⁵³ *South African Worker* June 24, 1927.

⁵⁴ *South African Worker* April 1, 1927. The Resolution was presented by Richard B. Moore, an African-American delegate who was a member of the CPUSA as well as an original member of the all-Black revolutionary organization called the African Blood Brotherhood. He officially represented the American Negro Labor Congress. "Les Decisions du Congres: Resolution Commune sur la Question Negre," *La Voix des Negres* 1/3 (March, 1927), p. 3.

⁵⁵ Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, pp. 235-36.

⁵⁶ Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, pp. 392-93; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, p. 236; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 33.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 31.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶⁰ "Sixth World Congress of the Communist International: Full Report," *International Press Correspondence* 8/78 (November 8, 1928), p. 1452. This is a transcript from the actual proceedings, August 20, 1929. See also A. Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years: The Communist Party of South Africa, 1921-1980* (London, 1980 2nd ed.), p. 57.

⁶¹ Quoted in Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 39.

⁶² Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, p. 91; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, p. 271.

⁶³ "Sixth World Congress of the Communist International: Full Report," *International Press Correspondence* 8/78 (November 8, 1928), p. 1452.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1453.

⁶⁵ The following analysis is based on the text of the Resolution. For a copy, see *The Communist International* 6/2 (December 15, 1928); and A. Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, pp. 126-32.

⁶⁶ This is suggested by Martin Legassick, *Class and Nationalism in South Africa*, pp. 54-55. A penetrating analysis of the African-American experience in this context is Cedric Robinson's masterful study, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London, 1983). The so-called "radical" scholars of South African history should perhaps study Professor Robinson's findings and begin to incorporate his insights into the actual experience of Black South Africans.