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Les Rouges et les Noirs: French Communism, African Nationalism, and the Creation of Post-War Anti-Colonialism

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AEF: *Afrique-Équatoriale français* (French Equatorial Africa)

AOF: *Afrique-Occidentale Française* (French West Africa)

CGT: *Confédération générale du travail* (General Confederation of Labour)

GEC: *Groupes d'études communistes* (Communist Study Groups)

IOM: *Indépendants d'outre-mer* (Overseas Independents)

MRP: *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* (Popular Republican Movement)

PCF: *Parti Communiste Français* (French Communist Party)

PDCI: *Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire* (Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire)

PDG: *Parti Démocratique de Guinée-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (Democratic Party of Guinea, Democratic Party of Guinea – African Democratic Rally)

RDA: *Rassemblement démocratique africain* (African Democratic Rally)

SAA: *Syndicat Agricole Africain* (African Agricultural Union)

SFIO: *Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière* (French Section of the Workers' International)

US-RDA: *Union Soudanaise-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (Sudanese Union – African Democratic Rally)

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1960, the paths of Félix Houphouët-Boigny and Gabriel d'Arboussier crossed for the second time. Independence made winners and losers, and if Houphouët, the president of Côte d'Ivoire, was undeniably among the former, d'Arboussier, Senegal's first minister of justice, should have considered himself lucky that he was not one of the latter. It had not seemed so certain in 1950, when their fortunes had so radically diverged. In 1946, Houphouët, the wealthy cocoa plantation owner, drafted a manifesto with d'Arboussier, the son of a French colonial governor and a Malian *aristocrate*, calling the parties of Africa to join in a great political union. Affinities of sentiment and convenience drove the party that emerged from this appeal, the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA), into the eager arms of the French Communist Party (PCF)[1], but by 1950, colonial repression and parliamentary isolation loosened these bonds. Houphouët severed the ties between African anti-colonialism and European communism, and d'Arboussier clung on. For this, he was expelled from the party that he had founded and directed.

For Houphouët, the 1950s were a decade of institutionalization and ascension. Purged of its left, the RDA became the engine for gradual and conciliatory reforms in French West Africa. From his position in Paris, where he held ministerial postings in six governments, Houphouet was able to influence the form and speed of devolution, and as he consolidated his political base in Côte d'Ivoire, he came to oppose any sort of federalist union between the various states of the former AOF. He was elected first prime minister and then president of the territory; at his

[1] French: *Parti communiste français*.

inauguration in 1960, he declared to French and Ivorian dignitaries that independence would not be a traumatic break but a new stage in the Franco-Ivorian relationship.[2]

For d'Arboussier, however, the 1950s were a decade in the political wilderness. In the negotiations and debates of the late imperial period, he came to believe that the best chance for the social and political well-being of the people of French West Africa in a post-colonial period lay in the kinds of federal bonds that the reforms of the mid-1950s rendered obsolete.[3] As he secured his position in Senegal, he worked with Léopold Senghor to establish the Mali Federation, a union that was intended to group together French Soudan, Senegal, Upper Volta, and Dahomey. But under pressure from France and the Côte d'Ivoire, the latter two backed out, and when the two-state Mali Federation gained its independence on June 20, 1960, it fell apart within two months. Soudan kept the name, and d'Aroubssier took up the post as Senegal's first minister of justice.

By the end of 1960, Houphouët and d'Arboussier found themselves in positions of power within their respective states. The circumstances of independence were the product of past struggles and choices, and the ways in which they framed the limits of possibility were derived from long years of political and ideological development. This thesis aims to show how in the early moments of this development, these two rather different statesmen, along with the broader West African ruling class that emerged from the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*, formed a politics of anti-colonialism through their collaborations with the French Communist Party.

From before the founding of the RDA in October 1946, the leading sections of the indigenous African political class shared the same social and cultural spaces as a small core of

[2] Félix Houphouët, "Discours de Monsieur Houphouët-Boigny Chef de l'État de Côte d'Ivoire à l'occasion de la proclamation de l'indépendance," August 7, 1960, in *Anthologie des Discours 1948-1978* (Abidjan: Éditions CEDA, 1978), 348.
[3] d'Arboussier presents his views on the federal question in *L'Afrique vers l'unité* (Paris: Éditions Saint-Paul, 1961).

French communists living and working in the major cities of the AOF. French communists and African militants worked together in trade unions and studied together in *groupes d'études communistes*. These groups emerged more or less spontaneously in the final months of the Second World War, but the colonial section of the PCF quickly incorporated them into its African strategy; in the absence of a proper industrial working class, communists considered French West Africa to be at an inadequate level of social development for formal Communist party sections. The role of the GECs was to serve as incubators for mass militancy and as schools for the ideological development of African political and intellectual leaders.[4] Many of the people who filtered in and out of these GECs formed no lasting links to the PCF, but the African students and instructors that passed through these groups developed an economistic critique of colonialism that derived its language from orthodox Marxist-Leninist analysis. Unlike other contemporary critiques of colonialism, the one that emerged from the GECs was race-blind, and its discourse of African *originalité* derived from Stalinist dogmas on the national question. Histories of anti-colonial thought that privilege the social and intellectual salons of the major colonial metropoles may overstate the extent to which systems of thought such as *négritude* impacted the development of an independent African politics.[5] By returning to the colonies, I attempt to show how the material and sentimental ties between French communism and African anti-colonialism influenced the ways in which the two systems of thought evolved.

In the *Assemblée Nationale*, African deputies brought the experiences and strategies of the GECs to bear on metropolitan debates over the colonial question. The broad outlines of this story are known to any historian of French decolonization. When the brief enthusiastic phase of

[4] Syllabus from the Dakar GEC "Cours n. 2: La Politique Communiste en Afrique Noire," no date, ADSSD 229 J/65.
[5] See, for example, Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

colonial reformism soured by mid-1946, African deputies were willing and able to chart a new political path; the manifesto that Houphouët and d'Arboussier drafted was close in rhetoric to the colonial policy of the PCF, and when African politicians descended on Bamako, in French Soudan, in October 1946, the PCF was the only French party to attend to the birth of the RDA.[6] The ten RDA deputies that won a seat in Paris after the November 10 elections joined the communist parliamentary group. When, in 1947, the PCF was kicked out of government, the colonial administration in French West Africa unleashed a wave of repression against the RDA; within two years, the party's best and brightest were in jail or awaiting trial, and the RDA found itself on the brink of extinction. In September 1950, Houphouët announced the disaffiliation of the RDA from the PCF, and in the years following the *désapparentement*, the RDA and Houphouët established themselves as key intermediaries between France and the West African political class.

The history of the links between the PCF and the RDA has been framed as a marginal and largely inconsequential chapter in the early history of post-war African politics. In 1964, Ruth Morgenthau suggested that the alliance was an instrumental marriage of convenience:[7] the RDA benefited from the political weight and financial largesse of the PCF, while the PCF gained a foothold in the colonies from which to challenge the position of the French Socialist Party French (SFIO).[8] Morgenthau and the scholars who have followed her interpretation arrived at this assessment by reading through the speeches and declarations of RDA leaders that frame the alliance as a tactical and contingent relationship. This interpretation diverges from some of the

[6] The manifesto is reproduced in Joseph Roger de Benoist, *L'Afrique occidentale française, de la conférence de Brazzaville (1944) à l'indépendance (1960)* (Dakar: Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1982), 559-61.
[7] Ruth Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964).
[8] French: *Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière*.

more insightful memoirs of former RDA leaders, who argue that communism was a sort of siren call for a generation of African intellectuals.[9]

Indeed, historians of West African decolonization understand the PCF as a party that seized the opportunity to grow the ranks of its parliamentary supporters in the context of tight political competition. It was committed to colonial reforms and a progressive federation, but largely ambivalent on the question of independence.[10] And although historians have long examined the nexus between nationalism, opportunism, Soviet direction, and anti-colonialism in the colonial policy of the PCF, they have concentrated primarily on Algeria or Indochina.[11] With regards to West Africa, scholars easily suppose a discontinuity between this moment of alliance and the later turn to the Soviet Union undertaken by African statesmen such as Sékou Touré of Guinea or Modibo Keïta in the early years of independence.[12] One key exception is Elizabeth Schmidt, who has emphasized the degree to which the radical path towards Guinean independence was a consequence of the grassroots mobilization of the politicized masses.[13] More recently, an edited volume has gathered several scholars working to demonstrate the ways in which Western communist parties served as bridges between the Soviet Union and African anti-colonial movements and post-colonial states[14] This new literature is part of a now

[9] Doudou Guèye, *Sur les sentiers du temple: ma rencontre avec Félix Houphouët-Boigny* (Ventabren: Les Rouyat, 1975), 82-86.
[10] Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 133.
[11] Allison Drew, *We are no longer in France: Communists in colonial Algeria* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), Alain Ruscio, *Les Communistes et l'Algérie: des origines à la guerre d'indépendance, 1920–1962* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019). An older and more polemical literature has critiqued the PCF position. See the critique of the Trotskyist Jakob Moneta in *La politique du Parti communiste français dans la question coloniale, 1920-1963* (Paris: François Maspero, 1971) and a PCF response in Pierre Durand, *Cette mystérieuse section coloniale: Le PCF et les colonies, 1920-1962* (Paris: Éditions Messidor, 1986).
[12] See Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development : The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955-1968* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022) and Sergey Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo, 1956-1964* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
[13] Elizabeth Schmidt, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946-1958* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), Elizabeth Schmidt, "Cold War In Guinea: The Rassemblement Démocratique Africain and the Struggle Over Communism, 1950–1958," *Journal of African History,* 48 (2007), pp. 95–121.
[14] Françoise Blum, Marco Di Maggio, Gabriele Siracusano, and Serge Wolikow ed, *Les partis communistes occidentaux et l'Afrique: Une histoire mineure?* (Paris: Hémisphères, 2022).

decades-long shift towards a global history of the Cold War, one that integrates the relationship between principle and praxis in the communist approach to decolonization.[15]

The basic argument of this thesis is that the history of the formation of an independent African political class must engage with the ideological, political, and material ties that tied it to the communist movement in the first years of its existence. If scholars like Frederick Cooper have emphasized the degree to which the postwar wave of anti-colonial agitation aimed to stretch the meaning of citizenship to encompass and enrich the African territories, then we must add that the communist presence determined the ways in which this citizenship was imagined.[16] African thought and politics in the period between the end of the Second World War and the early 1950s developed through and with the marking of communist political, ideological, and organizational models, as developed in the shared cultural and social sphere of the GECs.

Structurally, this thesis charts the rise and fall of this alliance with a loose chronology; it organizes itself around three main themes: language, social networks, and historical evolution. Chapter two contextualizes the post-war communist position in Africa and it examines how a particular language of anti-colonialism emerged within the GECs. Chapter three frames the establishment of the RDA and the beginning of the alliance through the study of social networks. Chapter four suggests the productive role of a language of ambiguity. Chapter five interrogates the communist perspective on African political development. Chapter six looks at the end of the alliance and the ways in which RDA members made sense of it. The final chapter concludes with reflections on the place of communism in African political history.

[15] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[16] Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation*.

Chapter 2: Communist study groups and the theory of colonialism

"Un peuple qui en opprime un autre ne saurait être libre"
Karl Marx[17]

I. The Communists and Africa

From the moment of its founding in 1920, the French Communist Party sought to resolve the long-standing tension at the heart of the national left regarding the character of the French colonial empire. While the dominant wing within the French left identified with some version of a progressive *mission civilisatrice*, those who termed themselves communists in the wake of the October Revolution understood imperialism to be the latest and final stage in the historical evolution of the capitalist mode of production. Consequently, for a national party to join this new Communist International, it had to

> support—in deed, not merely in word—every colonial liberation movement, demand the expulsion of its compatriot imperialists from the colonies, inculcate in the hearts of the workers of its own country an attitude of true brotherhood with the working population of the colonies and the oppressed nations.[18]

To this end, the PCF established a colonial section in August 1921 to manage its relationship to the colonies.[19] The party set up sections across the French empire, but never in sub-Saharan Africa. Following the line laid out by Joseph Stalin in a 1925 speech at the University of the Toilers of the East, the task for communists organizing within territories that

[17] "A people that oppresses another will not know how to be free." Cited in "Cours n. 1: Les Communistes et le Problème Colonial," May 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65. This quote opens the first of four GEC courses held in May 1948 in Dakar. They are discussed at length below.
[18] Lenin, Vladimir. "Terms of Admission into Communist International," in *The Second Congress of the Communist International, Verbatum Report*, 1920, Marxist Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jul/x01.htmm>
[19] Drew, *We Are No Longer in France*, 31.

lacked a developed working class was to create a national front against imperialism. A communist party could emerge only in the course of the struggle against imperialism as the compromised elements of the national bourgeoisie split from the revolutionary party.[20]

1. Interwar activity (or the lack thereof...)

To the extent that the PCF engaged with West Africa, it limited its activity to propaganda, particularly among Africans working in France. These workers were encouraged to "return home in Africa or the Antilles to organize on the ground."[21] Party officials made efforts to recruit "*propagandistes*" among sailors arriving from Africa in the hopes that they might bring communist literature back to their communities.[22]

In the absence of sustained efforts on the part of the metropolitan communist, Dakar was likely the only point in French sub-Saharan Africa to witness sustained communist activity before the war. There, a very minoritarian core of left-wing Europeans had filled posts in the colonial administration as teachers, technicians, and military officers.[23] Indeed, Dakar was host to a *groupe d'études sociales* during the Popular Front days (1936-1938) that functioned similarly to the later GECs.[24] This group, which gathered local socialists and communists,

[20] Joseph Stalin, "The Political Tasks of the University of the Peoples of the East" (May 18, 1925) in *Marxism and the National Question* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), 206-207.
[21] Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, speaking at a PCF rally in Paris, in "Un meeting grandiose et vibrant pour la libération de Tao en faveur de l'indépendance de l'Indochine," *L'Humanité*, May 20, 1931.
[22] "Propagande Communiste en Côte d'Ivoire," June 2, 1931, ANS 17 G 67. As early as 1930, a number of anti-imperialist texts published by the *Ligue de la Défense de la Race Nègre* were seized by the police at Grand Popo, Dimbokro, and Grand Bassam in Dahomey and Côte d'Ivoire. See Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa*, 22. The *Ligue de la Défense de la Race Nègre* was independent of the PCF, but the two groups existed in a broader metropolitan sphere of anti-racist organizing, and the personal and political ties between the two were extensive. See Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919-1939* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2013), particularly 130-131.
[23] Schmidt, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea*, 14.
[24] Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa*, 23. For the role of European communists in French West Africa during the Popular Front (1936-1938), see Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, ed. *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), particularly Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "The Popular Front and the Colonial Question. French West Africa: An Example of Reformist Colonialism," (155-169).

maintained a satellite at the *École Normale William Ponty* in Sébikotane. A police report from 1946 suggests that around the same time, an indigenous head of the Air France radio service set up a short-lived section of the communist party in Dakar.[25] An issue of the PCF newspaper *L'Humanité* from July 31, 1936 suggests that the section was chartered by the colonial government and recognized by the PCF.[26] In September, the section allegedly had 97 members, mostly indigenous locals, but it dissolved by the end of that year, supposedly due to the "indifference and the inactivity" of its leadership.[27]

Although anti-colonial rhetoric formed a core pillar of the party line, the PCF did not invest many monetary, political, or personal resources in sub-Saharan Africa. Between the mid-1930s and the end of the war, the fight against Nazism took priority over the colonial policies of the European liberal states.[28] With the end of the war, decolonization became the order of the day across Asia and Africa, and the links that communists had established with independence movements over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, however tentative, became critical in the struggle to determine the politics of decolonization.

2. Post-war politics and the turn to Africa

The end of the Second World War inaugurated the period of crisis and reform among the colonial powers. At the same time, the French Communist Party emerged as the largest party in France, and between 1944 and 1947, it was a pillar of the unstable tripartite government.[29] As a party of government directing the affairs of a declining but extensive empire, the PCF was forced to adjust its colonial policy. Even as it upheld a basic commitment to anti-colonialism, it

[25] Renseignements a/s Partis politiques constitués au Sénégal," July 24, 1946, ANS 17 G 267.
[26] "Salut aux communistes du Sénégal!" *L'Humanité*, July 31, 1936.
[27] Renseignements a/s Partis politiques constitués au Sénégal," July 24, 1946, ANS 17 G 267.
[28] Coquery-Vidrovitch, "The Popular Front and the Colonial Question," 156.
[29] John Bulaitis, *Maurice Thorez: A Biography* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 162-175.

understood decolonization through the frame of a growing Cold War rift between the United States and the Soviet blocs.

In March 1946, Henri Lozeray, the former longtime head of the PCF colonial section, delivered a speech before the *Assemblée Nationale* explicating the communist position: in the speech, which was printed and exported widely for propagandistic purposes, Lozeray decried the abuses of the past and rejected assimilation, which tried to strip Africans of their "indiscutable personnalité".[30] He advocated for a series of reforms, including the immediate abolition of forced labor and the *indigénat*, and although he sought to modify the ties uniting France and its territories, he did not seek to sever them altogether. The new French Union would have to be a social and democratic union based on the free consent of all its members, a force for progress and a bulwark against American influence. In 1944, the journal of the PCF, *L'Humanité*, rejected an American proposal to establish international oversight on colonies under the logic that

> France could not accept any arrangement whatsoever that would undermine its sovereignty as a great power, nor its strict right to administer the overseas territories entrusted to its charge, with the aim of emancipating the peoples living there, nor, above all, its right to defend them against any imperialist designs.[31]

The PCF was ready to articulate clear demands for reforms but in the immediate post-war period, at the height of its political power, the party found it very difficult to advance an unambiguous program of independence for the colonies. It clung to the formulation advanced by

[30] Henri Lozeray, *Pour une union française fraternelle et démocratique* (Paris: Éditions du Parti communiste français, 1946). See also Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes*, 23.
[31] "L'Indochine, trahie par Vichy sera défendue avec fermeté par le peuple de France," *L'Humanité*, August 30, 1944, cited in Elizabeth Rechniewski, "1947: Decolonisation in the Shadow of the Cold War: The Case of French Cameroon," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 9, no. 3 (2021), 55.

Maurice Thorez in 1937 that "the right to divorce does not imply the obligation to divorce".[32] This policy was much easier to carry out in sub-Saharan Africa than in Algeria and especially in Indochina, where the speed with which events were unfolding threatened to leave local communists behind in the growing struggles for independence.

While the party struggled to reconcile its traditions of "proletarian internationalism and French quasi-Jacobin patriotism," as Gabriele Siracusano puts it,[33] its politics of anti-colonialism were largely animated by a fear that non-communist nationalist leaders were puppets of the Americans and that the departure of the French would drop their territories into the American sphere of influence.[34]

When Lozeray stepped down from his position as the head of the party's colonial section in September 1945 to take charge of the parliamentary group of the commission of the Overseas Territories, he was replaced by Raymond Barbé, a professor with a "cold, mathematical spirit."[35] Barbé had joined the PCF in 1932 while studying mathematics at the *École normale supérieure* de Saint-Cloud; during the war, he participated in the Resistance, was arrested, escaped prison, and took charge of the *maquis* in the Azergues Valley north of Lyon. He was gravely injured, for which he won the *Croix de guerre* and the *Légion d'honneur*. At the time of his appointment in August 1945, Barbé had no experience with colonial affairs. His main task concerning sub-Saharan Africa was the establishment of schools for colonial militants.[36] These took the form of the *groupes d'études communistes*.

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[32] Maurice Thorez, cited in "La Mission de la France dans le Monde," *L'Humanité*, December 27, 1937.
[33] Gabriele Siracusano, "I comunisti francesi e il Rassemblement démocratique africain negli archivi del Pcf (1946-1951)," *Studi storici* 3 (2018), 713.
[34] Yahia Zoubir, "The United States, the Soviet Union and Decolonization of the Maghreb, 1945-62," *Middle Eastern Studies* 31, no. 1 (1995), 59.
[35] Durand, *Cette mystérieuse section coloniale*, 193.
[36] Raymond Barbé served as head of the colonial section of the PCF until 1950. He quit the party in 1968 in protest of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. See Jean Sagnes and Claude Pennetier, "Barbé Raymond, Jean, Léon. Pseudonyme: Cauquil," *Le Maitron Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier français*, Paris: Maitron, 2015. <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article15637>.

II. The *Groupes d'études communistes*

1. The first book clubs

Raymond Barbé wasn't approaching a blank slate. The end of Vichy rule in French West Africa in 1943 led to an explosion in political organizing, and amidst the collapse of the right, a series of left-wing social clubs began to spring up across the major cities of the AOF. While these so-called *associations patriotiques* were a rather marginal tendency among the overwhelmingly right-wing European settlers, they were part of a broader moment of philo-communism that identified the regeneration of French society with some element of the Soviet model. Curious Europeans joined ad hoc study groups to read about communism and Stalin. Critically, until a series of reforms in 1945 extended the metropolitan law of freedom of association to the colonies, groups seeking official recognition had to agree to "abstain from all propaganda action among the autochthonous masses."[37] By 1946, the resurrection of regular party politics brought about the quick disintegration of these irregular social groups, and the names of the members of the *associations* do not appear in later police reports on GECs.[38]

The GECs emerged during the late war years more or less spontaneously, initially without links to each other or the PCF. They were not, for the most part, thought-out efforts by a revolutionary vanguard to carry forth propaganda efforts among the native populations, but rather, social settings in which Europeans could meet and discuss the canonical texts of the surging communist movement. The character of the cities shaped the form of the various groups.

[37] "Réponse à la demande du GAR d'extension de ses activités à toute l'AOF," July 16, 1943, ANS 21 G 85, cited in Jean Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes (G.E.C.) en Afrique Noire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994), 19.
[38] Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes*, 18-19.

A brief sketch of the genesis of the Brazzaville group suggests how these groups emerged and evolved.

The Brazzaville GEC was registered by the local administration on February 20, 1945, but Suret-Canale, a member of the Dakar GEC and the main historian of these groups, suggests that it likely existed in a semi-clandestine state since mid-1943.[39] Unlike in the AOF, and particularly in Senegal, where a local African political elite had existed since the beginning of the twentieth century, in the AEF, and even in Brazzaville, a political, cultural, and geographical gulf separated the European and African populations. In its early phases, the group did not actively recruit among the autochthonous population, even though its journal, *En avant*, the only GEC paper that we know of, was widely distributed among the local *évolué* elite.[40] In the months straddling the end of the war, at the peak of the philo-communist moment, the Brazzaville GEC attracted moderates, including members of the administration. In his diary entry from July 25, 1945, visiting professor Jean Dresch lists among the audience André Soucadaux and Laurent Péchoux; the former was, at the time, the governor-general of the AEF, who would go on to lead the government repression against the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* in the 1950s, while the latter organized the repression against the RDA in Côte d'Ivoire in 1949-1950.[41] On the eve of liberation, government officials made shows of politeness to the PCF in the hopes of hedging their bets and advancing their careers. All this would end by the end of 1945.

By the end of 1945, GECs had emerged in the major cities of the French African colonies, and they managed to draw in a wide swath of the European population even as they largely ignored Africans and African political concerns. Over the course of the next few months,

[39] Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes*, 27-32.
[40] Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes*, 28. No copies of this paper are extant.
[41] Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes*, 28.

at the same time as the colonial state worked to Africanize its administration, the PCF pressured the GECs to change their orientation and their role within West African society.

2. Africanizing the GECs

As Barbé and the colonial section of the PCF worked to integrate African students, communist organizers on the ground found that a fertile soil for this exchange already existed. African *évolués*, educated in the *lycées* with the standard French curriculum, met and discussed African and international politics.[42] Some turned to communism, and a number of them requested admission into the PCF; however, the party did not recruit members outside of the national territory, and it directed them to join the various *groupes d'études communiste*s of the AOF and the AEF in order to organize within local African democratic parties.[43] Like other metropolitan parties, the PCF hoped to shape the character and politics of the emergent African political class, and it identified the GECs as the best tool to form a national front in the absence of a proper communist party. This strategy, however, required a total change in the character of the existing groups, and in September 1945, the secretariat of the PCF laid out the new tasks of the GECs: first, to "turn to Africans;" secondly, to "coordinate and unify French and African trade union organizations;" finally, to "create a democratic (or progressive) party in each territory to unite Africans (with some Frenchmen)."[44] Across the AOF and the AEF, as the return of regular politics depressed European participation in the GECs, the leadership of these groups fell to Africans.

[42] Guèye, *Sur les sentiers du temple*, 15-17.
[43] "Letter from Raymond Barbé to Saïfoullaye Diallo," December 27, 1946, cited in Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes*, 42.
[44] Cited in Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes*, 24.



Members of the Dakar groupe d'études communistes *in 1948. Among the people in the photo, we recognize, in the back row, Jean Suret-Canale and Gabriel d'Arboussier, second from the left and first on the right respectively.*[45]

The lessons shifted in focus from political developments in France to those in colonies in general and French Africa in particular. Under Barbé's direction, the GECs were tasked with providing their members a Marxist-Leninist education that allowed them to develop the strategy and the tactics of the anti-imperialist mass movement. To the extent that it was possible, GEC leaders had to "popularize the French Communist Party and the Soviet Union, particularly with regards to the national and colonial question".[46] In his memoir, Gaston Donnat, the French founder of the Yaoundé *Cercle d'études marxistes*, recalls the mentality of the time:

> I was convinced of the necessity of assistance from the working class of advanced countries in training cadres, providing economic and technological support, and

[45] Photo from Joseph Roger de Benoist, "Cinq années avec le Parti communiste (1945-1950)," in Rassemblement Démocratique Africain, *Actes du colloque international sur l'histoire du RDA, Yamoussoukro, 18–25 octobre 1986* (Abidjan: CEDA Hatier, 1987), 399.
[46] "Cours n. 2: La Politique Communiste en Afrique Noire," May 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.

> guaranteeing the political and economic independence of former colonies. At the time, I believed that the French working class was on the verge of playing a decisive historical role, and that it would be the best ally of the African peoples.[47]

The aim of the PCF was to transform the GECs into incubators for unions and local political movements, gathering and developing the best elements of the anti-colonial movement. These groups were not and did not seek to become mass movements. Rather, their task was to

> gradually bring together, through the anti-imperialist struggle, the best elements, both European and African, who have demonstrated their political ability in mass movements. Otherwise, the GECs run the risk of remaining cut off from mass organizations […] and turning into a *cenacle* where Europeans who are communists in word and colonialists in deed rub shoulders with unstable Africans who join the GEC without serious conviction. Communists can only be formed and become worthy of the name through action: 'not just anyone can be a communist' (Félix Houphouet-Boigny).[48]

Critically, the policy of "Africanization" was developed in the context of the emergence of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* as the major oppositional force in African politics. It is significant, then, that this statement of purpose ended with a quote from Félix Houphouët, the president of the RDA. To a large extent, the success of the various GEC groups was conditioned on the strength of the local African political movement.[49] French militants believed that the role of the GECs was to "determine the line of action of the RDA, based on Marxist

[47] Gaston Donnat, *Afin que nul n'oublie: L'itinéraire d'un anticolonialiste: Algérie, Cameroun, Afrique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986), 134.
[48] "Cours n. 2," May 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.
[49] Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes*, 32.

principles [...] by proving that the arguments they put forward are the most suitable for the triumph of the RDA".

3. Reading through the lesson plans

Over the course of a weekend in May 1948, a mixed group of European and Senegalese workers, administrators, and intellectuals met in Thiaroye, in the suburbs of Dakar, to attend a four-part lecture series organized by the Dakar *groupe d'études communistes* on the nature of colonialism and the role of communists in the African struggle. These lesson plans show how communists understood and communicated their position in Africa and within the anti-imperialist movement. Students of the GECs were taught a language of Marxism-Leninism that connected the political situation on the ground in Senegal and the AOF with international events, all through a communist framework. The courses were not intended to serve as "general overviews of communist theory," but to "illuminate the problems of the moment by the light of our proven theory," and the material sought to "provide each GEC member with the concepts that are immediately essential for them to carry out their militant task in mass action."[50]

The first course was a general guide to the communist interpretation of the colonial question. Thick with quotes from Lenin and Stalin, the material identified the "colonial trusts" as the main agents of economic exploitation in the colonies. This theory of colonialism was not racialized, and it contrasted sharply for the critiques based in the language of *négritude* that emerged in Paris. Political and cultural oppression flowed from this economic condition, and the success of the anti-colonial movement was linked to the success of the democratic movement in the metropole. The course suggested that

[50] "Introduction aux Cours Élémentaires des Groupes d'Études Communistes du Senegal," May 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.

> at the present moment, when French imperialism is being undermined by the rise of a powerful democratic movement in France, the separation of French Black Africa - whose backward state of its economy did not allow it real independence — would almost immediately make it a dependency of the strongest imperialism today, that of the USA, which would thus be strengthened in its struggle against the democratic forces of the world. At the same time, Black Africa would lose the chances of emancipation and genuine progress that the coming victory of the democratic movement in France may provide[51]

The courses rejected the notion of independence, and they identified nationalist movements as premature and dangerous.[52] Instead, they framed cultural resentments in a language of "African personality." Colonial problems, ultimately, required communist solutions.

The second course, addressing this question, presented the range of allies and opponents in terms of classes; against the colonial trusts, the colonized peoples waged a common struggle with the working people of the metropole. Critically, colonial oppression victimized not just African workers and the peasantry but also the "tribal and feudal" chieftains and the emergent African bourgeoisie.[53] Citing Stalin's 1925 speech on the national question, the lesson plan concluded that the task of communists was to fight within a united front, grouping together the various elements of African society in alliance with the French working class. This front already existed in the form of the RDA, which stood for African originality ("originalité africaine"), the

[51] "Cours n. 1," May 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.
[52] "Cours n. 1," May 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.
[53] "Cours n. 2," May 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.

gathering of all Africans in the fight against colonialism, and the alliance between French and African democrats.[54]

These lesson plans suggest how the GECs functioned as cadre schools for the leadership of the RDA. The third course described the communist theory of the vanguard as applied to the African context; cadres would be selected based on their personal skills, as well as for their ability to integrate their actions within mass organizations such as the RDA or the unions.[55]

Gabriel d'Arboussier ran the fourth course, which reflected on the relationship between the RDA and the PCF. It rejected the "illusion of independence," and the "illusion of the black movement [*mouvement négriste*] while warning against a "penchant for opportunism".[56] The lesson plan for this final course is more sparse than the others, but it indicates the degree of cross-pollination between the GECs and the RDA; the former functioned as a space in which to think through solutions to the various sorts of problems assailing the party.

More than just a parliamentary alliance, French communists saw the RDA as an opportunity to engage in mass politics among the African population. Speaking to an African audience, oftentimes with African instructors, the GECs, by 1948, were essentially laboratories for the development of communist organizers who would integrate their activities with those of the RDA. The courses provided their African students with the vocabulary of Marxism-Leninism and a framework through which to elaborate their politics.

The names of the students and the leadership is in many ways a "who's who" of the future African ruling class: Sekou Touré was the secretary of the Conakry GEC, Léon M'ba was an active member of the Libreville section, Ruben Um Nyobé was a member of the Yaoundé section, Gabriel Lisette was the secretary of Chad's territorial section, of which François

[54] "Cours n. 4: Le Rassemblement Démocratique Africain," May 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.
[55] "Cours n. 3: Les Communistes à la tâche," May 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.
[56] "Cours n. 4," May 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.

Tombalbaye was a member, Ouezzin Coulibaly was a member of the executive committee of the Bobo-Dioulasso section, Gabriel d'Arboussier was an active member of the Dakar section, and although Houphouët was not a member, he frequently attended meetings in Dakar and Abidjan.[57] Even those statesmen who were not themselves members of the GECs surrounded themselves with their alumni: Modibo Keita's brother was a member of the Bamako *groupe*, Hamani Diori's second-in-command in the *Parti Progressiste Nigérien*, Boubou Hama, was a member of the Niamey Groupe, and Niger's future interior minister, Djamballa Yansambou, was its president.[58]

And yet, by and large, all key leaders of the RDA, reflecting on this period years after the end of the alliance, rejected the notion that communists shaped the direction of the RDA at any point in its development. Doudou Guèye, a key figure in the Senegalese section of the RDA would claim, in his 1975 memoir, that "it was not only exaggerated, it was inaccurate to think that the GEC had a profound influence on the RDA. It was the RDA that used certain GEC militants to provide its cadres with an education and training that initially seemed to meet its objectives and goals."[59] Gueye, by this point hostile to the communists and reticent to admit that the RDA was at one point a *filiale* of the PCF, nonetheless suggested, in a nuanced fashion, that RDA leaders exploited their relationship with European communists to form the ideologies and strategies of their cadres. Even if we argue, following the suggestions of these interested actors, that the GECs failed to instill a rather orthodox Marxist-Leninist education in its African members, we can see that for the generation of the African ruling class, the GECs functioned as early spaces in which to develop their politics.

[57] Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes*.
[58] Tony Chafer, "Education and Political Socialisation of a National-Colonial Political Elite in French West Africa, 1936 –47," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 35, no. 3 (September 2007), 450.
[59] Guèye, *Sur les sentiers du temple*, 29.

Chapter 3: The founding of the RDA

The African students that passed through the *groupes d'études communistes* in the years stradling the end of the Second World War integrated European communism into their existing languages of politics. In a post-war climate marked by a growing Western hostility to colonial rule, the French state sought to identify colonial rule with progress and development; thus, the rights of African representation were gradually but radically expanded, and in 1945, large numbers of voters across the AOF and the AEF were able to select their metropolitan representatives for the first time. New political parties emerged to respond to the challenges of this opportunity, and the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* developed in a fertile post-war West African environment of ideological and political cross-pollination.

I. Creating an African Politics

The origins of the *Rassemblement Democratique Africain* lie in Côte d'Ivoire, where, by the 1940s, cocoa and coffee had transformed "la plus belle colonie" into the most dynamic economy in the AOF by the 1940s.[60] The brisk commodities trade attracted a significant population of European settlers, particularly in the rich agricultural zones in the south. Alongside the Europeans, Africans set up their own plantations, quickly outstripping the production of the former.[61] This plantation economy required large quantities of cheap labor, and African and European planters both relied on forced labor. However, during the period of Vichy rule in French West Africa the administration allocated import goods and labor in a way that explicitly favored European planters. European crops received higher prices, and European planters had

[60] "Evolution du RDA de 1946 a 1951," March 1951, ANOM AFFPOL 2180.
[61] Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa*, 169.

priority rights on rationed imported goods. At the same time, the administration cut off African planters from their supply of forced labor, and wealthy African plantation owners were not only forced to abandon their plantations but at times even compelled to work on those of the European planters.[62]

In response, African planters established an independent *Syndicat Agricole Africain* (SAA) in 1944, electing as their president Félix Houphouët, a physician and *chef de canton* who had amassed considerable wealth through cocoa plantations. Initially, the SAA favored the equitable distribution of forced labor, but they soon came to take a stance against the practice on principle; they proceeded to recruit workers directly with wages exceeding four times the Europeans paid. The success of SAA planters during the 1944-5 harvest served as an effective case for free labor in the French Assembly.[63]

For communists living in or reflecting on West Africa, this emergent African bourgeoisie, alienated from the colonial state, represented the foundation for an anti-colonial national front of the kind that Stalin had described in 1925. So, as the SAA was establishing its network, they found the eager and active support of communists, including those within the colonial government. In particular, Jean Lambert, the *chef de cabinet* and closest advisor of Governor André Latrille, provided them with the cars and gasoline that enabled the SAA to spread rapidly across the territory, growing from 1,600 members in 1944 to nearly 20,000 by 1946.[64]

As indigenous party politics emerged in French West Africa, the SAA was able to translate its reach in the rural coastal and forest regions into political success. In connection with the various radical groups of the main cities, such as the Abidjan *groupe d'études communistes*,

[62] Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 83-85.
[63] Morgenthau, *Political Parties*, 177.
[64] Morgenthau, *Political Parties*, 177.

the SAA established the *Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire* (PDCI). The first major success of this political alliance came in 1945 when they managed to get Houphouët elected to the First Constituent Assembly.

Similar stories to that of the PDCI repeated across West Africa in the months following the end of the Second World War. In Senegal, organized party life had existed since the beginning of the century, but in other territories, and particularly in places with developed industry, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), the trade union federation linked to the PCF, served as a crucible for African political parties. Through the GECs and early negotiations with the French colonial state, African cadres developed a political sophistication that preceded their arrival in Paris in 1945.

1. Africans in Parliament

When African deputies arrived in Paris for the first time in 1945, they were not, as Houphouët would later write in his autobiography, ignorant of all things political, simply looking out for the best interests of their constituents.[65] Unlike most of the second college deputies from Algeria and Madagascar, who refused to join any parliamentary group to maintain their political autonomy, African deputies from the AOF and the AEF who arrived in Paris in 1945 took advantage of the razor-thin margins of the Constituent Assembly to advance their interests and those of their constituents. For a bit, this strategy of *tripartisme* was a success, and they won a series of spectacular reforms: on February 20, 1946, key provisions of the *indigénat* were abolished, and on April 11, 1946, following an impassioned speech from Houphouët, deputies voted almost unanimously to outlaw forced labor. The law banning the hated practice bore his

[65] Houphouët, *Mes premiers combats*, 100.

name, laying the foundations for the myth of Houphouët-Boigny, "Houphouët the battering ram" in his native Baoulé language.[66]

The constitution that emerged from the first Constituent Assembly would have radically altered the relationship between France and the colonies. Voters rejected it. Under the shadow of the emergent Cold War, the "no" campaign had cast the constitution as a gift to the communists. The new Constituent Assembly, which had shifted sharply to the right, was far less favorable to colonial reform. African deputies — particularly those new to Paris politics — recognized that *tripartisme* had failed.

II. Founding the RDA

In September 1946, Houphouët and d'Arboussier drafted a manifesto calling for the organizations of *Afrique Noire* to group themselves into a new political union. They rejected "false federalism" in favor of a free and democratic French union of equals that guaranteed the development of the "African genius."[67] The manifesto, signed by Houphouët, d'Arboussier, Lamine Guèye of Senegal, Jean Félix-Tchicaya of Gabon-Congo, Sourou Migan Apithy of Dahomey-Togo, Fily Dabo Sissoko from Sudan-Niger, and Yacine Diallo of Guinea, summoned the "men who carry the message of unity and fidelity for Africans" to Bamako, in Soudan, for a *rassemblement*.[68]

All French political parties were invited. None but the communists accepted the offer. At first, Marious Moutet, the Overseas Minister, had hoped that this new movement would become a SFIO proxy under the experienced leadership of Lamine Guèye, but the manifesto, close in

[66] Jean Benilan,"Evolution du RDA de 1946 a 1951," March 1951, ANOM AFFPOL 2280.
[67] "Manifeste du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain," September 1946, cited in *Le Rassemblement démocratique africain dans la lutte anti-impérialiste* (Abidjan: CEDA, 1986), 27-29.
[68] "Manifeste du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain," 29. See also Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation*, 165-166, and Pierre Kipré, *Le Congrès de Bamako, ou, La naissance du RDA en 1946* (Paris: Chaka, 1989), 64-94.

rhetoric to the communist line, worried him, and he used his influence to pressure Guèye and Leopold Senghor into skipping the congress.

Without these moderating elements, d'Arboussier and the communist line dominated at Bamako. The SFIO left the field open for the PCF; it was the communists, and not the socialists, who attended to the birth of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*. Despite the administration's opposition, some 800 delegates descended on Bamako between October 19-21. The specter of communism haunted the colonial and metropolitan reaction to the congress, and *Rue Oudinot*, the address and metonym for the Ministry of the Colonies, took it for granted that Raymond Barbé, the "notorious communist," drafted many of the resolutions of the young *rassemblement*.[69] Certainly, the PCF provided essential support, leveraging its networks in the African GECs to provide funds. In a particularly colorful episode, Charles Tillon, the Communist Minister of Armaments, lent Houphouët, d'Arboussier, and Apithy the personal airplane of Hermann Goering, seized after the end of the war, to fly from Dakar to Bamako without any sort of administrative funny business.[70]

1. Paris

The seven RDA deputies elected in November 1946 to the first National Assembly of the Fourth Republic joined the communist parliamentary group. After the end of the alliance, RDA leaders would emphasize that they had joined the group because they had "thought it advantageous to be able to count on 180 Communist votes every time we had a demand to make. My three Malgasy colleagues were always alone […] I always had the automatic backing of the

[69] "Evolution du RDA de 1946 a 1951," March 1951, 1AFFPOL2180.
[70] Suret-Canale, *Les Groupes d'études communistes*, 25.

Communist Party every time I had some demand to make for AOF."[71] But beyond simple parliamentary convenience, African deputies leaned on their communist partners as they acclimatized to the Assembly and to Paris. The PCF provided them with funds, machinery, and technicians, as well as training and speaker's classes; through this fraternalistic[72] relationship of tutor and mentee, PCF staffers taught deputies how to present reports, how to criticize texts in proper French, and how to exploit the metropolitan press. These relations were also personal, and when African delegates found their lodgings cold or inadequate, communists housed them while they found them better places to stay. Communist deputies even took their colleagues on sight-seeing excursions around France.[73] The personal ties of friendship that defined the shared political space of the GECs were reproduced in Paris.

Among the personal papers of Jean Suret-Canale, held at the archives of the French Communist Party in Seine-Saint-Denis, one finds PCF biographical questionnaires filled out by Jean Félix-Tchicaya,[74] Gabriel d'Arobussier,[75] and Félix Houphouët,[76] dated, respectively, August 3, August 27, and September 21, 1946.[77] In the same file, there is a typed and signed piece of paper dated October 24, 1945, from Fily Dabo Sissoko, requesting his adherence to the communist party.[78] His biographical questionnaire is not attached. Similar questionnaires were handed out to every person who applied to join the PCF in order to track the social, political, and cultural backgrounds of potential members. First developed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s,

[71] Houphouët, cited by Georges Monnet, the European territorial councilor of Côte d'Ivoire, in Morgenthau, *Political Parties*, 85.
[72] I use here the expression of the PCF deputy from Martinique, Aimé Césaire, in his letter resigning from the party. Aimé Césaire, *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1956), 7.
[73] Mortimer, *France and the Africans*, 73.
[74] "Questionnaire Biographique de Jean Félix Tchicaya," August 3, 1946, 261 J7/420.
[75] "Questionnaire Biographique de Gabriel d'Arboussier," August 27, 1946, 261 J7/420.
[76] "Questionnaire Biographique de Félix Houphouët-Boigny," September 21, 1946, 261 J7/420.
[77] The files are held in ADSSD, 261 J7/420. Other members of the RDA leadership may have compiled similar forms, but I was unable to find them. It is worthwhile to remember that the archives of the colonial section of the PCF have disappeared. See Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes*, 5.
[78] "Demande d'adhésion au PCF de Fily Dabo Sissoko," October 24, 1945, 261 J7/420.

communist parties across the world used these autobiographical sketches, and for historians of these movements, they represent invaluable sources with which to understand the experience of party life for rank and file members.[79]

These remarkable documents were part of the process by which the PCF integrated its African allies into the network, and they show a clear tension as French communists worked to fit their African counterparts into an existing model of politics. The questionnaires begin with basic questions about name, birthdate, nationality, education, profession, and family life. As the questions progress, they become more and more political in nature, and they ask respondents to give their opinions on topics ranging from the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact to the "provocative actions of the agents of the trusts." None of these questionnaires are entirely filled out, though d'Arboussier was much more extensive in his answers than Houphouët or Tchicaya.

At the end of the files, PCF bureaucrats provided their reflections. They claimed that, while d'Arboussier was a "steadfast student" at the party school, Tchicaya had much to learn politically; he was, nonetheless, "susceptible to making progress."[80] The latter half of Houphouët's questionnaire is more or less empty, save for a note stapled to the final page from the *Ecole céntrale Coloniale*: in it, Houphouët was described as a diligent student, "very simple and likable," but also "very cultured," and with a "keen intelligence and a great facility for assimilation."[81] This very brief report follows up on a note written by Barbé two months prior in which he had recommended Houphouët as a student for the *école centrale coloniale*.[82] Barbé

[79] There is a wide literature on this subject. See Claude Pennetier and Bernard Pudal, "La «vérification»: l'encadrement biographique communiste dans l'entre-deux-guerres)," *Genèses* 23 (June 1996): pp. 145-163 and Mauro Boarelli, Claude Pennetier, and Bernard Pudal, *Autobiographies, autocritiques, aveux dans le monde communiste* (Paris: Belin, 2002). Gabriele Siracusano mentions Houphouët's questionnaire in "I comunisti francesi e il Rassemblement démocratique africain," 719.
[80] "Questionnaire Biographique de Jean Félix Tchicaya," August 3, 1946, 261 J7/420.
[81] "Questionnaire Biographique de Gabriel d'Arboussier," August 27, 1946, 261 J7/420.
[82] "Note sur Félix Houphouët-Boigny, proposé comme élève pour l'école centrale coloniale," August 3, 1946, 261 J7/420.

heaped praise on the deputy from Côte d'Ivoire in this fascinating memo. Despite early conflicts between the Ivorian *Syndicat Agricole Africain* and the French representatives of the communist colonial section — conflicts, Barbé noted, that may have risen as a consequence of the racist attitudes of the French comrades — Houphouët had grown closer to the PCF just before his November 1945 election. His party, the PDCI, had since then grown into "the strongest organization of its type that we [the PCF] possess in Black Africa (and in any of the colonies)." Houphouët, the most capable and decisive colonial deputy, had "made great progress from a political point of view," and as of August 1946, he was the deputy who best understood and followed the Party's colonial policy. Even though he came from aristocratic stock, with landholdings that brought in millions every year, "one must nonetheless keep in mind that one is dealing with a colonial country at a very primitive stage in its economic evolution." As such, the emergent bourgeoisie was linked to the popular masses in a common struggle to emancipate themselves from the yoke of colonialism. Houphouët himself was personally "absolument incorruptible." Indeed, upon his arrival to France, Houphouët was said to have asked to join the communist party: He joined his communist-aligned parliamentary group at their request, and "[s]ince then, he has steadily moved closer to the Party politically, and has come to trust it more and more."[83]

This is a remarkable document, but its contents must be understood as the prejudiced analysis of a functionary only one year into his mandate, under pressure from the party leadership to find ways to integrate the PCF into the growing anti-colonial movement in sub-Saharan Africa. Even with these qualifiers, the text challenges dominant threads in the historiography that argue for a purely functional relationship between the PCF and the RDA.

[83] Note sur Félix Houphouët-Boigny, proposé comme élève pour l'école centrale coloniale," August 3, 1946, 261 J7/420.

Seen together, these three sources — the memo, the questionnaire, and the "report card" — show how even before the founding of the RDA, in the wake of the failure of the May referendum, the PCF was working to groom African deputies into reliable and sophisticated agents of the communist strategy in French Africa.

The long blank pages speak eloquently to the difficulties that emerged from this intersection of political forms. In a sense, these questionnaires are how the PCF bureaucracy sought to make different forms of politics visible. In another sense, they give us an insight into the degree to which the activity of the RDA, particularly in its early stages, was coextensive with that of the PCF. Finally, they are a critical part of our effort to see how French communists understood the development of independent politics in sub-Saharan Africa.

Chapter 4: Productive ambiguity and the practice of politics

As the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* established itself as the dominant political force in French West Africa, its alliance with the PCF offered, simultaneously, a road to political relevance and social marginalization. Proximity to the PCF offered the new party political support in Paris, material assistance in Africa, and an ideological framework that provided the movement with a legitimizing narrative in the course of local and metropolitan political struggles. To understand how the RDA rooted itself, this chapter traces the history of the Guinean branch of the RDA, the *Parti Démocratique de Guinée* (PDG). At the same time, throughout this chapter, we see how RDA leaders couched their activity in terms that echo the language we found in the courses of the *groupes d'études communistes*.

I. Creating structures

Unlike Senegal, Guinea did not have a significant tradition of political parties predating the Second World War. Neither did it have, like Côte d'Ivoir, a large and powerful class of African agricultural capitalists. Its territorial section of the RDA, the *Parti Démocratique de Guinée* (PDG), emerged in May 1947 out of the political and social milieu of the Conakry *groupe d'études communistes*. The group, at the time of the Bamako Congress in October 1946, was led by Sékou Touré, the secretary general of the Guinean branch of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* and Madeira Keita, a young archivist working at the Conakry office of the *Institute Français de l'Afrique Noire*.[84] Keita, the leader of the party, its chief ideologue, and its main spokesman, was recognized both by the PCF and by the administration to be a convinced communist. In a report from the territorial head of police, he was described as

[84] Jean Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes*, 57-59. See also Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 18-21.

> very intelligent, subtle, and an ardent partisan of the Communist doctrine, Madeira is indisputably the soul and the brains of the group [i.e., the RDA], and it seems certain that, if he were transferred to another territory in the Federation […] the RDA could not easily find in Guinea a leader and a coordinator who would be his equal.[85]

In the party's early days, Keita and Touré leveraged their connections with the PCF and with the CGT to secure much-needed support that went beyond funds: PDG members were given access to travel funds, political training, political support, and metropolitan allies against the local administration. Under French law, trade unionists were also granted a degree of legal immunity.[86] The PCF eagerly supported the fledgling party, allocating substantial resources to help the RDA spread propaganda across French Africa. They bought typewriters, mimeograph machines, and stencils for the RDA, which enabled it to produce and distribute its own newspapers and pamphlets.[87]

1. Forming the cadre

At every level, the RDA, like Western communist parties, sought to structure the social and political life of its members to create a counter-society. The RDA devoted considerable time and energy to the ideological formation of its cadre, and particularly in the larger cities, party sections held cadre schools that resemble the GECs in content and in structure. A series of reports from the Guinean security services sketch the basic content of a weeks-long course

[85] Pierre Ottavy, Chef de Service de la Sûreté de la Guinée Française, to M. l'Inspecteur Général de la Sûreté en AOF, November 5, 1948, ANS 17 G 573, cited in Gregory Mann, "Anti-Colonialism and Social Science: Georges Balandier, Madeira Keita, and 'the Colonial Situation' in French Africa," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 1 (2013): 98. Suffice to say, Sekou Touré would more than fill this role in the years to come.
[86] Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa*, 227.
[87] Elizabeth Schmidt, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea*, 32.

offered by the Conakry section of the RDA in the spring of 1950. During the April 19 meeting, Amara Soumah, a founding member of the RDA, spoke of the unfair trading conditions that the United States imposed on France, which was becoming "la colonie de l'Amérique". He spoke of Ouezzin Coulibaly's trip to China, of international politics, of local colonial politics, and of the state of the "democratic forces of the world" (i.e., of communist-aligned movements). He concluded with a summary of the situation of workers in France and Africa.[88] It is useful to cite the agenda for the subsequent meetings in full:

> - Domestic situation after the Second World War.
> - National and colonial issues of the French Union.
> - National and colonial issues of the Soviet Nation.
> - Colonialist oppression in its political, administrative and cultural form (this question will be dealt with by Sékou TOURÉ).
> - Colonialist oppression and its economic bases in French Black Africa. (This question will be addressed by Sékou TOURÉ).
> - The people of Africa and their development prospects (to be addressed by Madeira KEITA).
> - Political formations other than the RDA in Black Africa (metropolitan parties and ethnic groupings) (Amara SOUMAH).
> - The peasantry and the working class, the fundamental basis of the RDA (addressed by Sékou TOURÉ).
> - Some problems of the *Union Française* by Amara SOUMÁH.
> - The anti-colonialist struggle of trade union forces by Sékou TOURÉ.
> - How to initiate and lead a mass action by Madeira KEITA.[89]

[88] "Rens. a/s Ecole de cadres du RDA à Conakry," April 20, 1950, ANS 17 G 573.
[89] "Rens. a/s Cours du R.D.A.," April 24, 1950, ANS 17 G 573.

We may recall Doudou Gueye's argument that "the RDA that used certain GEC militants to provide its cadres with an education and training that initially seemed to meet its objectives and goals."[90] At the highest levels of the Guinean RDA, men and women examined their political and social conditions in a language derived from the GECs. They framed their strategy through an analysis of the place of Africa within the post-war global order. By juxtaposing French and Soviet responses to the colonial question, the courses presented the Soviet Central Asian republics as a model for what underdeveloped African territories could look like within a social and democratic French Union.[91] Colonial oppression was presented as a consequence of economic exploitation; the language of the trusts defined the analysis of the RDA leadership.

II. Defining politics

While the RDA leadership was composed of intellectuals and *evolués*, "Ponty boys" with similar backgrounds and with shared Western conceptions of democracy, self-determination, and historical progress, the strength of the organization, particularly in Guinea, lay in its ability to form broad-based class, gender, and ethnic alliances deeply rooted in the nonliterate masses. For d'Arboussier, the task of the RDA was to be "at once the expression of the mass and the mass itself."[92]

There is an inherent difficulty in any attempt to offer a history of the changing ideologies of any political grouping. The ideology of the RDA was a dynamic product of local struggles, international developments, and personal calculations. Even as the leadership of the RDA was

[90] Guèye, *Sur les sentiers du temple*, 29.
[91] For the place of the Soviet Central Asian republics in the Soviet discourses on anti-imperialism, see Artemy Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).
[92] Gabriel d'Arboussier, cited in Edward Mortimer, *France and the Africans 1944-1960: A Political History* (London: Faber, 1969), 142.

split and fragmented over critical questions of strategy and tactics, the rank and file stood as a creative force that did not always passively accept party lines. Any effort to suggest that the PCF or any other outside group determined the character of the RDA is bound to run into serious trouble. It is nonetheless useful to examine the extent to which the RDA aimed to be everything for everyone.

1. Producing ambiguity among the cadre

In a letter to Fily Dabo Sissoko from May 10, 1947 — amidst the crisis that culminated in the exit of the PCF from the tripartite government — Gabriel d'Arboussier felt the need to recall the basic spirit of the *Rassemblement*.[93] He began by citing the threefold mandate the young RDA had laid out at Bamako the year prior. The first task was to elaborate a politics that recognized and advanced the free expression and *originalié* of Africans, "rejecting all other forms of false assimilation"; the second was to unite all Africans, regardless of their religious or philosophical convictions, in the fight against colonialism; the third point was to unite Africans with French democrats in the common struggle against imperialist forces. The RDA did not follow this or that ideology because in this phase in the development of Africa's democratic forces, the historical task lay in the formation of a wide alliance, one that held a place for syndicalists as well as landed capitalists. Furthermore, autonomy was a matter of principle that derived from the positive value of "African originality"; the adoption of any form of metropolitan political organization would be prejudicial to the progress of Africans, and the RDA, d'Arboussier insisted, "is an African organization adopted to African conditions, led by Africans, at the service of Black Africa."[94] By allying themselves with the communists, the RDA

[93] "Lettre du d'Arboussier et Sissoko a/s Bamako Congress," May 10, 1947, ANS 17 G 572.
[94] "Lettre du d'Arboussier et Sissoko a/s Bamako Congress," May 10, 1947, ANS 17 G 572.

was not turning the RDA into an African section of the PCF. Indeed, the RDA retained its freedom of action.[95] What united the RDA with the communists was not a common ideology but a common interest and a common enemy. Under the present historical and political conditions, he argued, the alliance was an imperative element of the African anti-colonial strategy.

2. Producing ambiguity among the rank and file

In a series of public meetings over the course of 1947, the leadership of the Guinean section of the RDA elaborated on this relationship with the communists. The minutes of these meetings offer a critical lens into how the *apparentement* was delivered to the rank and file in ways that diverged, in some ways, from the way in which it was delivered to the cadre.

Although members at the grassroots were themselves an active political force, the rank and file, even those active in unions or popular organizations, received their understanding of communism through the mediation of the leadership. The terms in which the problems of the day were placed within a broader context and connected to the parliamentary struggle derived from the syllabi of the GECs; in a manichean opposition between the forces of good and the forces of evil, the list of enemies identified by the RDA deputies matched the one provided in the GECs: the RDA fought against the forces of reaction, "forces without a homeland. Their name is irrelevant: capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, but their form is the same, their goal is the same: oppression."[96] Madeira Keita spoke directly with the terms of the GEC when he expressed his great pity for the "valets of colonialism" who "capitulate to the trusts" that "hide behind colonialism to accrue their profits."[97]

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[95] "Lettre du d'Arboussier et Sissoko a/s Bamako Congress," May 10, 1947, ANS 17 G 572.
[96] Doudou Guèye, speaking in "Compte-Rendu de la Réunion Publique tenu par la Section Guinéenne du RDA," September 21, 1947, ANS 17 G 573.
[97] Madeira Keita, speaking in "Compte-Rendu de la Réunion Publique tenu par la Section Guinéenne du RDA," September 21, 1947, ANS 17 G 573.

In this unequal access to language, party leaders could police the boundaries of legitimate political thought tactics of obscurantism. At a public meeting of the PDG at a mosque in Kankan, Mamadou Konaté, the US-RDA deputy from Soudan, turned to the crowd with a basic question: "First of all, do you know what communism is? Even I don't know what communism is. It only exists in Europe, and when we want to speak in Paris on behalf of Africa, we want to do so on behalf of all Africans."[98] Konaté was part of the moderate faction of the RDA, and we have no evidence that he participated in any GEC sessions, at least in Africa. However, as a deputy in the French National Assembly, and as a member of the communist parliamentary group, we may say, with some degree of confidence, that he probably had at least a general sense of what communism entailed. RDA leaders presented communism as a European particularity in order to sidestep questions of their ties to the PCF. It was of no real concern for Africans, one way or another. Furthermore, this rhetorical device showed a certain kind of disconnect between the leadership and the "illiterate, ignorant, and indecisive" rank and file of this "Rassemblement Des Ânes" (Assembly of Donkeys), as one hostile African referred to the RDA.[99]

This tension between the "bilingual" leadership and the ignorant rank and file emerges frequently in the speeches of the cadres; in a particularly provocative statement, Doudou Gueye not only denied that the RDA was a "filiale" of the PCF, but that it was a "party of *evolué* extremists": while he recognized that many *evolués* belonged to it, he stated that "they are there to steer the ignorant masses in the right direction."[100] And against the accusation of extremism, he declared that the "RDA does not want to sacrifice customs and religion for unbridled progress."[101]

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[98] Mamadou Konaté, speaking in "Discourse Mamadou Konaté à la mosquée de Kankan," November 28, 1947, ANS 17 G 573.
[99] "Lettre d'Alassane Dia à Paul Coste-Floret a/s la Visite Président Union Française en Côte d'Ivoire," January 16, 1948, ANOM AFFPOL 2174.
[100] Doudou Guèye, speaking in "Rens. a/s Session du Conseil Général," February 21, 1947, ANS 17 G 573.
[101] Doudou Guèye, speaking in "Rens. a/s Session du Conseil Général," February 21, 1947, ANS 17 G 573.

Every figure within the various parties of the RDA had his own perspective on a largely similar strategic outlook; thus, while more or less everyone emphasized that the alliance was a contingent union based on the fractured nature of the African parliamentary bloc, we understand, reading between the lines, the contours of this perspective. Mamba Sano, the PDG-RDA deputy from Guinea, emphasized that the RDA was not communist, and that it voted with the PCF because the communists were the only ones that respected the legitimate demands of Africans. And, he underlined, "if tomorrow the MRP [*Mouvement Républicain Populaire*] should make itself the defender of the African cause, we'd be going with the MRP."[102] Madeira Keita, on the other hand, said that the basis of the alliance lay in the "community of views" and the "defense of common interests".[103] Keita, the product of the GECs, appears in this phase as a "true believer," as a convinced fellow-traveler to the communists.

As the party expanded its base and pushed out of the cities into the villages, figures within the leadership came to adopt different forms of rhetoric. Against the previous notions that the workers were the vanguard of the revolution, Sékou Touré began to advance the thesis, in the mid-1950s, that "the first great industry of Africa is agriculture".[104] The great exploiter, in the RDA imagination, ceased to be so much the capitalist or the industrialist, but instead, the feudal chief. Morgenthau overstates the extent to which the shift in rhetoric represented a total turn in the broader political direction of the PDG-RDA; Gregory Mann has drawn our attention to how a particular radical critique of the system of chiefs emerged out of the fruitful intersection of African and French intellectuals.[105] Indeed, following Marxist theories of historical development,

[102] Mamba Sano, speaking in "Rens. a/s Session du Conseil Général," February 21, 1947, ANS 17 G 573.
[103] Madeira Keita, speaking in "Compte-Rendu de la Réunion Publique tenue par la Section Guinéenne du RDA," September 21, 1947, ANS 17 G 573.
[104] Sekou Tourés's maiden speech to the French National Assembly, in March 1956, cited in Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa*, 231
[105] In particular, he examines the relationship between Mamadou Madeira Keita and Georges Balandier in "Chapter 1: Knowing the Postcolony," in *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel*, 15-42.

this critique can be understood as a call for bourgeois revolution. However, the PDG-RDA leadership did work to integrate a secular revolutionary message with Islam; party meetings began with the reciting of the *Fātiḥa*, and the party leadership refused to drink alcohol and attended religious services on Fridays.[106]

Despite ambiguous directives from the cadre, the rank-and-file seemed to hold a rather strong emotional attachment to the communist party. Before a large crowd at the Rialto theater in Conakry, Bekaye Fall posed a series of rhetorical questions:

> 'When we've been struggling to secure our freedoms, who defended us in the Metropole?'
>
> The audience answers in chorus: 'The Communist Party'.
>
> 'When Germany held us all under its power, who knew best how to fight for the victory of justice over force?'
>
> The audience: 'The Communist Party'
>
> 'Even today,' continues Fall, 'there are countries where force prevails over right. Who speaks out against this?'
>
> The audience: 'The Communist Party'.[107]

Although much of the historiography on this period argues that the alliance was one of convenience and that it fell apart in the face of administrative repression, there is clear evidence to suggest that the repression against the party pushed its cadre and its members closer to the

[106] Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa*, 236. The RDA operated across confessional lines, and the leadership came from Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious backgrounds.
[107] "Rens. a/s réunion publique organisée par le RDA (03/13/47) dans Salle du Cinéma 'Rialto'," March 14, 1947, ANS 17 G 573.

French communists, who were, at the time, undergoing a similar marginalization as a result of their exit from government.

Finally, we get a sense of the lived rituals of the alliance period through a note from August 1950, months after the split between the RDA and the PCF; at a public meeting in Bamako, a colonial informer notes that at "Unlike at previous meetings, there was no apologism for the [communist party], and no singing of the Internationale."[108] This, of course, implies that until as late as August 1950, meetings of the RDA frequently ended with the singing of the Internationale. At the intersection of the French left and the African anti-colonial movement, rank-and-file members of the RDA formed and elaborated a distinct political and cultural pageantry.

The alliance between the two parties was both a marriage of convenience and a marriage of love. As a large coalition of disparate social and political blocks, the RDA was unable and unwilling to advance a unified strategy or message regarding its alliance PCF. In part as a deliberate strategy elaborated within the GECs, in part as a natural consequence of the diversity of views within the interterritorial coalition, in part as a reaction to domestic resistance and metropolitan challenges, the various speeches and declarations of RDA leaders express a variety of nuanced views on the relationship between African anti-colonialism and European communism.

And yet, despite the social and intellectual proximity in which the Africans of the RDA and the Europeans of the GECs developed their politics of anti-colonialism in the immediate postwar period, the two approached the question of colonial reform in different ways and with different aims. The following chapter aims to explain what the communists hoped to get out of the alliance and to elucidate the practice of *apparentement*.

[108] "Situation dans la fédération," August 26, 1950, 17 G 572.

Chapter 5: Communist reflections on the alliance

I. The nature of the alliance

In a meeting between the French diplomat M. de la Tournelle and his American counterpart, George McGhee, on September 25, 1950, the Frenchman warned that the Americans were severely underestimating the communist threat in Africa. Faced with American calls for decolonization, the French reminded their interlocutors that a rushed independence would lead the new states to move towards the Soviets; until recently, they noted, the RDA had been solidly in the hands of the communists, and its secretary general, Gabriel d'Arboussier, traveled to Moscow so much that he "is bound to be a communist agent."[109] In a memo drafted up in preparation for this meeting, the French noted that

> To date, the activity of the French Communist Party in French Africa has been that of the RDA, into which it has been incorporated; the slogans followed and the methods employed are ample proof of this. The aim of the former is to combat colonialism, support the powers fighting Western imperialism, organize the masses, etc. The latter implement the usual communist organization: local sections, neighborhood committees, cells, infiltration of administrations and unions, study groups, cadre schools, law enforcement, women's, student and youth committees, etc.[110]

While this note may reveal more about the mentalities of the French security state than the reality of the relationship between the two parties, it offers a useful way of framing the nature of the alliance: as the RDA worked to incorporate disparate and disenfranchised populations into

[109] "Conversations entre M. de la Tournelle et M. Mac Ghee," September 25, 1950. ANOM AFFPOL 2246.
[110] "Visite de M. Mac Ghee," 09/15/1950, ANOM AFFPOL 2246

its networks, party leaders adopted communist organizational structures that they had seen and discussed with their partners in the PCF. As a consequence of the similarities in how the two parties operated, RDA leaders were constantly accused of setting up a PCF *filiale* in Africa. This was a lasting source of tension. Gabriel d'Arboussier, at the peak of his ideological proximity to the PCF, argued in a May 1949 report to the Coordinating Committee of the RDA that the

> GECs are seen as a kind of RDA headquarters, dictating the RDA's course of action. Certainly, if this were the case, we would have to admit the subordination of our movement to the PCF, since the GECs, without being organizations of the PCF, are nonetheless the grouping of communist elements living in Black Africa […] But we must state quite clearly that the GECs are in no way RDA organizations; they have no right to dictate any conduct to our movement's governing bodies, nor do the latter have any instructions to give them.[111]

This should not be read as a rejection of the communist influence, but an assertion of autonomy. In the period of African political development, communists could provide a language, but they could not direct the struggle. Jean Suret-Canale, in a letter to a local GEC activist in Thiès, Senegal, offered a similar analysis:

> The public still confuses the RDA with communism, which can be explained by the fact that all the RDA leaders, or almost all of them, belong to the GECs. I myself contributed to this confusion during my visit to Thiès (where, incidentally, a comrade asked me whether I was speaking on behalf of the GEC or the RDA). I think it's in your interest to

[111] Gabriel d'Arboussier, "Rapport au Comité de coordination," May 1, 1949, cited in de Benoist, "Cinq années avec le Parti communiste," 377.

> keep GEC activity to a minimum for the moment. The most important thing right now is to broaden the RDA, to bring into it (including on its governing bodies) non-Communists committed to the struggle against colonialism.[112]

As with d'Arboussier, Suret-Canale frames his analysis through a language of perception. Particularly in the big cities of the AOF, the social and political ties between the two organizations were so tight that the leaders of one were the leaders of the other; Suret-Canale was appointed secretary of the Dakar GEC in 1946 after its former secretary, the Casamançais syndicalist Joseph Corréa, resigned from his post to establish and lead the Senegalese section of the RDA in 1946.[113] Rank and file members of these groups heard the same things said by the same people in the meetings of the different organizations. Communists such as Suret-Canale — people who dedicated their energies to establishing an anti-colonial movement in French Africa — tried to underplay the links so as to not compromise the RDA. And although they sought to foster these relationships, investing a great deal of financial, logistical, and personal resources into the project, they struggled to obscure the links through a rhetoric of productive ambiguity.

II. Communist conceptions of the role of the RDA

Throughout the period of alliance, communist deputies and members of the colonial section of the PCF went to Africa to meet with RDA leaders and to appraise the political developments on the continent. Raymond Barbé, the head of the colonial section of the PCF, was a constant, notorious presence at the various RDA congresses. In October 1948, he attended the meetings of the RDA's Coordinating Committee as it prepared for its 1949 congress; afterwards,

[112] Jean Suret-Canale, "Lettre à Gbaguidi Sossa a/s confusion entre RDA et communisme," March 1, 1947, ANS 17 G 267.
[113] Suret-Canale, cited in Pascal Bianchini, *Suret Canale, de la Résistance à l'anticolonialisme* (Paris: L'Esprit Frappeur, 2011), 61.

he set out on a tour of French West Africa, speaking at a series of joint PCF-RDA rallies. His experiences and his conversations with RDA militants, both before and after the tour, informed a series of *circulaires* that he sent out in July 1948 and February 1949 in which he examined the orientation of political forces in Africa and their relationship with the communists.

As always, the analyses were framed through a rather dogmatic reading of Stalin's theory of national development. Following Stalin, Barbé had argued, since the start of his tenure at the head of the colonial section, that without an industrial proletariat, it would be impossible for communists to form their own party. The task of local communists in French West Africa was to assist in the formation and development of a national front against imperialism. By 1948, however, Barbé insisted on the existence of an intensifying class conflict, a perspective that set him apart from many of the leaders of the RDA, who argued, during and after the break, that Africa did not have classes. As the African economy evolved, Barbé suggested that these differences would continue to gain political and social significance, and imperial forces would foment and exploit these class divisions.

In the *circulaire*, Barbé identified the risk of left wing and right wing deviations. By the former, he meant sectarianism and an overestimation of class contradictions within African society. The latter consisted of opportunism, the underestimation of class differences, and the overestimation of national differences. He examined the risks of these deviations in the first of these two *circulaires*, dated July 20, 1948.[114] The truncated version of this analysis is repeated almost verbatim in Gabriel d'Arboussier's October 1948 report to the Coordinating Committee of the RDA.[115]

[114] Raymond Barbé, "Circulaire a/s de l'Orientation de la Direction des Organisations Politiques en Afrique Noire," July 20, 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.
[115] Gabriel d'Arboussier, "Rapport: La situation actuelle du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain," in *Le Rassemblement Démocratique Africain dans la lutte impérialiste* (Dakar, 1986), 64-66.

In the July text, Barbé laid out a sketch of the emergence of the African anti-colonial movement. In its infancy, as a consequence of the "extreme political youth" of the indigenous cadre, French communists and African workers had played an outsized role; the former wrongly imposed organizational methods derived from the European context to the African political scene, while the latter overemphasized the class nature of the movement and adopted a position of excessive hostility towards the bourgeoisie and the chiefs. The role of the communists was to fix these early defects. Barbé listed the various contexts in which local communists oriented the emergent African political movements: to give one example, he described how Ivorian communists "pushed for the formation of a broad democratic party, which ensured that the planters' union, an organization of the indigenous bourgeoisie, did not have sole control of Ivorian politics."[116]

Political conditions changed as the Cold War divided the world into two camps. Furthermore, as the African bourgeoisie evolved, it developed a sense of class consciousness, and it began to abandon its historical duty; fearful of the masses, certain RDA sections failed to observe the most basic principles of organizational democracy.[117] More than that, the RDA failed to incorporate the peasantry, or to empower the democratic activity of the village sub-sections. In Paris, deputies showed signs of "parliamentary cretinism," and the leadership was too quick to make unprincipled compromises with the administration. An illustrative example of the growing rot was the refusal on the part of the Ivorian section of the RDA, dominated by planter interests,

[116] Raymond Barbé, "Circulaire a/s de l'Orientation de la Direction des Organisations Politiques en Afrique Noire," July 20, 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.
[117] RDA leaders used a language of party democracy to challenge the personalization of rule under Félix Houphouët: in a letter to Gabriel d'Arobussier from October 1947, Ouezzin Coulibaly complained that "Felix needs to be a little more democratic and bend to the majority, instead of believing that the majority will continue to worship him. Africans are moving too fast to delude themselves about their capacity for self-criticism." "Lettre de Ouezzin à d'Arboussier," October 1947. ADSSD 261 J7/420.

to back the famous AOF railway strike of 1947-1948.[118] Barbé was fearful that the African anti-colonial movement would follow the example of the Yugoslavs, who had broken with their internationalist traditions in favor of a politics of nationalism.[119]

The task of drawing out the particular implications of this change as they applied to each territory fell on each GEC section and every communist. Ultimately, however, Barbé warned of

> the tendency of a number of RDA elected representatives to abandon the common struggle with the French working class and its Communist Party, to renounce their membership in the Communist parliamentary group and to take refuge in an African, territorial or even regional autonomism; these elements undoubtedly believe they are strong enough to lead the struggle alone for the emancipation of the African people; they forget what Black Africa owes to the forces of the anti-imperialist camp worldwide, and to the French Communist Party in particular; they don't want to understand that the free development of Black Africa, its national emancipation in keeping with its particular originality ["originalité particulière"], is closely linked to the international united front of workers worldwide, and to the common struggle of all the peoples of the French Union.[120]

This, Barbé concluded wryly, went "contrairement aux indications de Staline". In this analysis, he suggested that the global communist movement, through its French agent, elevated the role of African developments to a partial but essential element in the emancipation of mankind. Its peoples and the parties that represented them were engaged in a world-historic

[118] For more on this story, see Frederick Cooper, "'Our Strike': Equality, Anticolonial Politics and the 1947-48 Railway Strike in French West Africa," *The Journal of African History* 37, no. 1 (1996): 81-118. The strike was dramatized in Ousmane Sembène, *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (Paris: Le Livre contemporain, 1960).
[119] "Cominform Resolution of the Information Bureau Concerning the Situation in the Communist Party of Yugoslavia," June 28, 1948, cited in Raymond Barbé, "Circulaire a/s de l'Orientation de la Direction des Organisations Politiques en Afrique Noire," July 20, 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.
[120] Raymond Barbé, "Circulaire a/s de l'Orientation de la Direction des Organisations Politiques en Afrique Noire," July 20, 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.

struggle, but they could not, as it were, lay claim to their own destiny. Africa could not be for Africans, because it owed more to mankind.

In this *circulaire*, Barbé rang the alarm, but he did so as one would criticize a wayward element of a common front. These problems were symptoms — serious, to be clear — but he did not suggest the need for a retreat or a new kind of alliance. Instead, he maintained that in order to invigorate the democratic anti-imperialist movement in Africa, African communists had to continue elevating the ideological level of the masses and their leaders. The PCF and the RDA had to strengthen their alliance and push it beyond a simple parliamentary *apparentement.* The militants of the GECs had to take up a systemic collaboration with the leaders of the African mass movements, "a collaboration that already exists in some territories". Only this way would it be possible for Africa to proceed on her "guaranteed Forward march [...] toward democracy, freedom and progress."[121]

The second *circulaire*, dated February 21, 1949, was a much bleaker document. The problems laid out in July 1948 were indeed threatening the communist position in the AOF, but "for many months, we analyzed these cases as isolated phenomena: and during this period, we did not have a clear picture of the situation."[122] Unlike in the previous *circulaire*, Barbé made explicit reference to the Cold War, which had divided the world into two opposing camps: on one side, the oppressed peoples of Africa, solidly in the camp of the democratic forces and the Soviet Union. On the other side, the forces of imperialism, led by the Americans and their "Marshalized" satellites. Furthermore, rapid and uneven development expanded the ranks of the African proletariat even as it hewed elements of the African bourgeoisie from the national

[121] Raymond Barbé, "Circulaire a/s de l'Orientation de la Direction des Organisations Politiques en Afrique Noire," July 20, 1948, ADSSD 229 J/65.
[122] Raymond Barbé, "Circulaire de Barbé a/s le Rôle de la Bourgeoisie Autochtone au Sein du Mouvement National en Afrique Noire," February 21, 1949, ADSSD 229 J/65.

movement. Corrupted by American imports, flattered by their invitations into the colonial Chambers of Commerce, the bourgeoisie,

> in the midst of an economic boom ["essor"], thinks above all of its own affairs. Faced with the struggle waged by colonialism as part of the imperialist camp, it trembles and increasingly lends itself to all kinds of compromises, compromises which, moreover, are eagerly sought by colonialists seeking to thwart the rise ["essor"] of the emancipation movement.[123]

In a language that draws remarkable parallels to that used by colonial thinkers and ideologues, "development" in Africa was linked to the emergence of a hostile social force — in the case of Barbé, a bourgeoisie that abandoned its historic task, for these colonial ideologies, a proletariat that foments social unrest.[124] To be sure, these elements remained a minority, but Barbé suggested that the time was approaching when the African proletariat would have to take the lead in the national movement. Implicitly, this revealed a lack of confidence with bourgeois leaders such as Houphouët.

By 1947, the Cold War quashed the uneasy post-war truce between the communists and the other ruling parties, and amidst a massive strike wave and rising pressures from the United States, the Socialist prime minister Paul Ramadier expelled his communist ministers on May 5 of that year. While the PCF remained a leading force in French politics, it entered its decades-long period of systemic opposition. All of a sudden, the young RDA found itself stuck in a poisoned partnership, and factions in the party rejected the alliance with the communists. Through

[123] Raymond Barbé, "Circulaire de Barbé a/s le Rôle de la Bourgeoisie Autochtone au Sein du Mouvement National en Afrique Noire," February 21, 1949, ADSSD 229 J/65.
[124] M.P. Cowen and R.W. Shenton, "Agrarian doctrines of development: Part I," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 25, no. 2 (1998): 49-76.

analyses derived from Stalin's reflections on the evolution of the anti-colonial movement, French communists reflected on the natural limits of the national alliance well before the political realities turned against them.

Chapter 6: The RDA at the brink

I. The Repression

From the start of his mandate, Paul Coste-Floret, the new Christian Democrat Overseas Minister, placed his sights on the RDA, Moscow's "Trojan horse" in the heart of French West Africa.[125] This story is well-known but it deserves to be repeated: *Rue Oudinot* openly supported the RDA's political opponents, and it rigged elections as late as 1951; teachers, clerks, functionaries, and medical personnel who belonged to the party were transferred from the cities to remote areas, sometimes even to other territories;[126] administrators deported European leftists from the colonies,[127] and they blocked the RDA from booking public meeting halls, or from publishing their newspapers. In February 1950, the party itself was officially — though briefly — outlawed.

Those who lived through the repression of 1947-1951 did not understand it as a series of isolated outbursts but as a simmering civil war that threatened to boil over at any moment.[128] By one count, over the course of this period, police in Côte d'Ivoire alone shot and killed fifty-two demonstrators and jailed as many as three thousand people.[129] Many of these people remained in

[125] "Cheval de Troie ou Enfant Prodigue?," October 26, 1950, ANS 17 G 572.
[126] Schmidt, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea*, 34-35
[127] "Renseignement à toutes fins utiles pour Monsieur le Directeur des Affaires Politiques de la FOM," October 10, 1951, AFFPOL 2246. One such case was that of Jean Suret-Canale, a protagonist of this thesis: in the early hours of the morning of February 20, 1949, police seized him from his home in Dakar, and with two hours to pack his bags, he was placed on a special military plane back to France. He would not return to Africa until 1959. See Suret-Canale, *Groupes d'études communistes* 48.
[128] The fear was not paranoia: in Madagascar, an open uprising across much of the island had led to the deaths of hundreds of Frenchmen and tens of thousands of Malagasys. See Douglas Little, "Cold War and Colonialism in Africa: The United States, France, and the Madagascar Revolt of 1947," *Pacific Historical Review* 59, no. 4 (1990): 527–552. In Cameroun, five years after the *désapparentement*, the recalcitrant local section of the RDA, the *Union des populations du Cameroun*, turned to a disastrous guerrilla war. See Rechniewski, "Decolonisation in the Shadow of the Cold War." See also Abel Eyinga, *L'U.P.C. : une révolution manquée?* (Paris: Editions Chaka, 1991).
[129] Cooper, *Citizenship Between Empire and Nation*, 172-174.

jail well after the *désapparentement*.[130] Bloody clashes between RDA militants and their African political opponents gave the state pretext with which to criminalize the party.[131]

Along with the stick, developments in Paris dangled a carrot in front of the RDA deputies. In 1948, seven non-RDA deputies and RDA defectors formed the parliamentary group *Indépendants d'outre-mer* (IOM). Led by Léopold Senghor of Senegal, the IOM was supported by Coste-Floret's colonial administration, and within a year, the RDA lost three of its seven deputies to the new group.[132]

1. Consequences of the repression

The coincidence of pressure against the communists in France and the anti-colonial movement in Africa reinforced their shared understanding that only a PCF government could guarantee political emancipation for Africans.[133] In the sharply Manichean Cold War context, the two parties were increasingly bound by a "common fight against imperialism of the democratic forces of Africa with the democratic and progressive forces of the entire world, and primarily with those of the French people, in their common fight against imperialism".[134] Even Félix Houphouët, as late as February 2, 1950, was confiding in Gabriel d'Arboussier that "the anti-imperialist camp will win," and that the heavy sacrifices of the party only confirmed the "nobility of the cause that we defend."[135] In Africa, away from the parliamentary negotiations in

[130] "Gigantesque parodie de justice en Côte d'Ivoire: Près de 400 AFRICAINS traduits en Cour criminelle," *L'Humanité*, August 18, 1951.
[131] "Proposition de Résolution Tendant à inviter l'Assemblée de l'Union Française à envoyer une mission d'information avec pouvoir d'investigation pour s'enquérir de la situation générale dans le territoire de la Côte d'Ivoire [Annexe au procès-verbal de la séance du 16 février 1949]," February 16, 1949, ANOM AFFPOL 2174.
[132] Christine Ramsis, "France and the Parti Démocratique de Guinée." PhD diss., SOAS, 1993. 101.
[133] Schmidt, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea*, 33-34
[134] Gabriel d'Arboussier, "Rapport: La situation actuelle du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain," in *Le Rassemblement Démocratique Africain dans la lutte impérialiste* (Dakar, 1986), 75.
[135] "Lettre de Houphouët à d'Arboussier," February 2, 1950, cited in Siracusano, "I comunisti francesi e il Rassemblement démocratique africain," 731.

Paris, the territorial sections reaffirmed their dedication to the communist movement and its notion of struggle. In April 1950, at the height of the repression, Madeira Keita said this regarding the relationship between the two parties:

> It is a total alliance of your leaders for the struggle against the colonialists, the exploiters, the blood-suckers; as you see we have chosen the clan of Stalin, Ho-Chi-Minh, Mao Tse-Tung; it is the clan which tomorrow will be victorious, the RDA is an offshoot of the French Communist Party.[136]

And yet, by late 1949, the effect of the dual pressures had devastated the structures of the RDA, and as thousands of cadres were jailed or abandoned the movement, RDA sections disappeared in all but the main cities of the AOF. Over the course of the repression — the arrests, the murders, the intimidations — the party lost nearly all of its most radical cadre.[137]

II. The Split

By 1950, Houphouët feared imprisonment and the imminent destruction of his party. At the same time, cooler heads in the colonial administration saw the abyss and steered away. Over the course of the year, the new Overseas Minister, the Socialist François Mitterand,[138] met privately with Houphouët in his office on *Rue Oudinot* to convince him to abandon the domestically isolated and politically poisonous communist party: it was not too late to end this

[136] "Compte-Rendu de la Reunion RDA," May 7, 1950, cited in Ramsis, “France and the Parti Démocratique de Guinée,” 119.
[137] In a series of personal letters to his friend and fellow PCF leader, Léon Feix, the communist deputy Louis Odru described what he saw and understood from the trials of a number of RDA militants that he observed in October and November 1951. These letters, held in the PCF archives in Seine-Saint-Denis, present one communist perspective on the repression, its consequences, and the *désapparentement*. Gabriele Siracusano has examined these letters in “I comunisti francesi e il Rassemblement démocratique africain,” 726-734.
[138] Of some later note.

"tragic misunderstanding," and Africans could continue to struggle for their security, their liberty, and their dignity without risking war.[139] Houphouët, for his part, wanted the ban on the RDA to be lifted; allegedly, he offered to give up the alliance in exchange.[140]

Gradually Houphouët and the RDA parliamentary delegation began to sideline those elements of the party leadership that remained attached to the communists. In June 1950, Houphouët asked d'Arboussier to resign from the Coordinating Committee of the RDA, justifying this move as a "tactical retreat" intended to dissipate government actions against the party.[141] Later, d'Arboussier accused Houphouët that he had "sworn by the spirits of your ancestors and on the tombs of your brother and eldest sons that you would remain loyal to our common struggle for the liberation of Black Africa".[142] But despite Houphouët's assurances that d'Arboussier would retain power unofficially, he had effectively been ousted from the leadership of the party he had helped to found.

That same month, at his home in Villepinte, in the northeastern banlieues of Paris, Houphouët hosted PCF and RDA leaders, including Maurice Thorez and Jacques Duclos. Over the course of this stormy evening, the president of the RDA made clear to his interlocutors that his party would be unable to continue blindly following the orders of the PCF, and that he was determined to dissolve the party, should he fail to do so.[143] This, in effect, marked the point at which the *désapparentement* became a political reality.

On October 18, 1950, the RDA severed all ties to the PCF. That day, the party deputies put out a declaration stating that the "best formula for the defense of the higher interests of

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[139] François Mitterrand, cited in Pierre Nandjui, *Houphouët-Boigny: L'homme de la France en Afrique* (Paris: Harmattan, 1995), 39.
[140] Georges Chaffard, *Les carnets secrets de la décolonisation* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1965), 121-124.
[141] Elizabeth Schmidt, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea*, 48.
[142] Gabriel d'Arboussier, *Le RDA est toujours anticolonialiste: lettres ouvertes à Félix Houphouët-Boigny* (Dakar, 1952), 5-6.
[143] "Fin prochaine du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain," September 28, 1950, ANS 17 G 572.

Africa" consisted in the disaffiliation of the RDA from the PCF's parliamentary group.[144] A few days later, RDA deputies stated in a second declaration that their party had never been communist, and that "the class struggle at the center of communism has no *raison d'être* in a country where society is not compartmentalized".[145] Two months later, Félix Tchicaya announced before the National Assembly that the RDA would vote confidence in the Pleven government. Amid general applause, Pleven thanked the RDA for their "ralliement à la cause nationale".[146] The communist delegation, unlike the journalists of *L'Humanité*, is said to have responded courteously.[147]

News of the *désapparentement* reached the local branches of the RDA at the height of the confusion that followed the breakdown of organized party life in the wake of the repression. The responses differed from section to section, sometimes even within the various territorial parties. Some organizations split from the RDA altogether.[148] In the months after the October declaration, both the colonial administration and the PCF struggled to make sense of the various responses of the different sections. So, while the Ivorian[149] and the Soudanese[150] RDA parties followed the turn and severed ties with their former communist partners, the *Parti Démocratique de la Guinée* seemed to be the "avant-garde of the communist tendency in the Federation."[151] Following d'Arboussier, Touré had declared that the *désapparentement* was prejudicial to the interests of

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[144] The text of the manifesto is reproduced in de Benoist, *L'Afrique occidentale française*, 125.
[145] The text of the manifesto is reproduced in de Benoist, *L'Afrique occidentale française*, 563.
[146] Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa*, 99,
[147] Gabriel Lisette, *Le combat du Rassemblement démocratique africain pour la décolonisation pacifique de l'Afrique noire* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1983), 160.
[148] Namely, the Paris-based *Étudiants du RDA*, led by the Senegalese Cheikh Anta Diop, retained its leftist attachments well after the *désapparentement*, and it represented a thorn in the side of the RDA. See Jose Do Nascimento, *La pensée politique de Cheikh Anta Diop* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021), 52-53.
[149] "Note sur l'évolution politique actuelle du RDA," August 31, 1951, ANS 17 G 572.
[150] "Situation dans la fédération," August 26, 1950, ANS 17 G 572.
[151] "Note sur l'évolution politique actuelle du RDA," August 31, 1951, ANS 17 G 572. Elizabeth Schmidt has written at length on the difficulty in imposing the turn on the Guinean section of the RDA. See *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939-1958* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2005).

the RDA, and that only the Directing Committees could approve the *rapprochement* with the *Indépendants*. The other members of the Guinean leadership supported his position.[152] Even as the party gradually moved away from the PCF, it retained a degree of independence from the Central Committee of the RDA, and in 1958, when voters across the AOF decided whether to remain within the French Union, Guinea alone bucked Houphouët and voted to leave.

III. Distancing

In the years following the *désapparentement*, nearly every single person to have risen to a position of leadership within the RDA rejected, in some form or another, the notion that the party had ever been truly communist. The rhetorical framing with which an individual might sublimate past communist affinities is a fruitful source for reflections on the nature of the relationship.[153] Soon after the end of the alliance, Houphouët began to frame himself as a shield against communist efforts to fragment Ivorian society and to endanger the fundamental unity between West Africans and France.[154] As he personalized his rule in Côte d'Ivoire and secured his relationship vis-à-vis the French establishment, he sought to obscure his past participation in the social circles that orbited the GECs, and to portray his early maneuvers in the *Assemblé* as the instinctive moves of a clever but ignorant natural leader. The story of a tactical marriage of convenience could fit comfortably within this constructed image of the wise national father. This narrative found wide currency, and even the highest representatives of the French colonial administration, who from *Rue Oudinot* had directed the repression against the Soviet Trojan

[152] "Renseignements a/s position de Sékou Toure face au 'désapparentement du RDA'," October 21, 1950. ANS 17 G 573.
[153] One thinks here of the 1949 collection of essays from prominent former communists. See Richard Crossman, ed, *The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism* (London: Hamilton, 1950).
[154] See, for example, his speech on the eve of the September 28, 1958 referendum, "Discours prononcé au Stade Géo-André," September 8, 1958, in *Anthologie des Discours*, 216-217.

horse in Africa, could ask, forty years later, "need we remind you once again that the *Rassemblement* has never been an ally of the PCF as such?[155]

But the alliance — and, by consequence, its end — could never mean one thing to every person who passed through it. Perhaps the most interesting of these post mortems appears in the 1975 memoir of Doudou Gueye. The communist encounter functions as the narrative foil against which to chart a history of independence that forms itself around the concept of *foi*. While the dominant scholarly interpretation supposes that the phase of communist affinities was brief and limited to a few select figures, Gueye suggests that to this generation of African intellectuals and RDA cadres, communism offered "a closed system of action and thought, with rules of life, morals, ethics, interpretation of the world, aesthetic laws, artistic canons".[156] For Gueye, this abstract and impractical philosophy of anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, and philo-communism separated the cadres from the millions of rank and file members; nonetheless, he suggests that these modes of thinking influenced the politics and perspectives of party leaders and the organizational work of several sections of the RDA.[157] The *désapparentement*, then, was not a loss of faith but a "operation of disalienation."[158]

[155] Paul-Henri Siriex, "Le désapparentement du RDA d'avec le Parti communist français," in Rassemblement Démocratique Africain, *Actes du colloque international sur l'histoire du RDA, Yamoussoukro, 18–25 octobre 1986* (Abidjan: CEDA Hatier, 1987), 409.
[156] Gueye, *Sur les sentiers du temple*, 86.
[157] Gueye, *Sur les sentiers du temple*, 83.
[158] Gueye, *Sur les sentiers du temple*, 115.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

"C'est du sang qu'il a bu, que mourra le moustique."
Amany Diori[159]

On October 24, 1956, six years after the *désapparentement*, eight months after Khrushchev's secret speech, one day before Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest, the poet, playwright, and PCF deputy from Martinique Aimé Césaire published an open letter to Maurice Thorez tendering his resignation from the French Communist Party. In this bitter letter, Césaire offered more than a rejection of the Stalinist catastrophe; he delivered a declaration of independence. "We men of color," he wrote, "at this precise moment in historical evolution, have, in our consciousness, grasped the full breadth of our singularity".[160] This singularity precluded the notion that the struggle of colonial people against colonialism and racism was a fragment of the struggle of the French worker against French capitalism. In the ferment of the mid-1950s, Césaire was arguing that colonized peoples would have to tend to their own gardens.

The *désapparentement* marked the end of the political relationship between African anti-colonialism and French communism (at least until the resurgences on the eve of independence). This end was not clean but it was, to a large extent, irreversible. However, 1950 did not, despite Houphouët's efforts, sever the affective bonds between the two movements. They persisted, in the absence of a strong material foundation, well after 1950, and it is in this sense that Césaire's letter represents a more convincing end of the philo-communist movement in West African anti-colonialism.

In the very short period between the end of Vichy rule in West Africa and the end of the alliance between the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* and the French Communist Party, Africans and Europeans living and working in French West Africa built a shared politics of

[159] "Rens. a/s Conférence Publique par les Parlementaires du RDA á Daloa," January 24, 1951, ANS 17 G 572.
[160] Césaire, *Lettre à Maurice Thorez*, 4.

anti-colonialism. This politics used the language of communism, a language developed in *groupes d'études communistes*. The GECs were only one of many social groups for political reflection that emerged across African cities in the months following the end of the war, and their membership among Africans was limited to the urban intellectual and professional elite. The rather dogmatic and abstract content of the courses might also have sunk shallow roots in the minds of its students. However, the GECs functioned as cadre schools for anti-colonial Africans at a time when few other similar opportunities existed on the continent. For some, such as Gabriel d'Arboussier, a communist framework proved convincing, while others, such as Félix Houphouët, Sekou Touré, and Léopold Senghor, formed different critiques through which they articulated their own distinct politics.

After the *désapparentement* in 1950, the leadership of the RDA moved quickly and definitively to dispel any doubt that the party was not and had never been communist. Those who resisted the new line, such as d'Arboussier, the co-founder and vice-president of the party, were purged and expelled. Indeed, over the course of the 1950s, the RDA was an institutional party through and through, an ally of the French that moved forcefully against radical or revolutionary movements on the continent.[161]

And yet, for a generation of African men and women working and living in the RDA, to be communist was to be French. It was, as Houphouët wrote in 1948, to tie the destiny of the African peoples to the France of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Paris Commune, the France of Joan of Arc, Diderot, Robespierre, Juarès, and Maurice Thorez.[162] The French Communist Party was a deeply national party, a party that imagined itself as an heir to a long

[161] Rechniewski, "Decolonisation in the Shadow of the Cold War," 58. See also Pierre Nandjui, *Houphouët-Boigny: L'homme de la France en Afrique* (Paris: Harmattan, 1995).
[162] Félix Houphouët, "Les conditions historiques du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain," in *Le Rassemblement Démocratique Africain dans la lutte impérialiste* (Abidjan: CEDA, 1986), 20.

national drama, and in the first years of the *Union Français*, before Mao Zedong's alternative to proletarian Marxism triumphed, before the black star of Kwame Nkrumah rose over Africa, before Bandung turned the gaze of the Third World away from Soviet communism, this national drama held a strong appeal for a great number of French Africans. It represented a version of an abstract and universalized France to be thrown in the face of the "really existing French."

At the birth of an independent African politics, communists in West Africa and the metropole provided a model of politics that encompassed a powerful critique of colonial abuse, a radical vision of social and economic development, and a valorization of the place of Africa in a unified world history. For the "Ponty Men" that lived through the half measures of the Popular Front and the reversals under Vichy rule, communism was a political and ideological discovery, one that structured the formation of a new model of politics. Arnold Hughes said in 1992 that the appeal of Marxism in Africa always lay in a "mixture of idealism and instrumentalism."[163] Is this all so different from the marriage of love and convenience between the national left and the October Revolution that birthed every communist party, as Eric Hobsbawm wrote in 1969?[164]

The appeal of communism was that it alone, among the various political shades of French and European political thought in the first half of the twentieth century, understood Africans not as savages outside of history, but as peoples at a determinate but evolving stage in a universal historical progression from primitive communism through feudalism, capitalism, and communism. The men and women who developed their ideologies through the intersection of GEC and autochthonous politics were marked by this teleology. The discourse of an "African socialism," with its rejection of classes and their struggle, was the product of a different sort of cultural formation, but when people such as Sekou Touré adopted it, they were modifying a

[163] Arnold Hughes, "The Appeal of Marxism to Africans," *The Journal of Communist Studies* 8, no. 2 (1992), 4.
[164] Eric Hobsbawm, "Problems of Communist History." *New Left Review*, no. 54 (1969), 85.

known quantity. Africans could adopt communist teleologies to imagine directing the anti-colonial movement past the immediate (though imposing) concerns of the *indigénat* or the second college to world historic concerns of social evolution.

And while Houphouët could laugh, forty years after the founding of the RDA, that he was always too bourgeois for the communists,[165] the Stalinist model of colonial development, as applied by party ideologues in the *groupes d'études communistes* and in the RDA party schools, extended the boundaries of legitimate political activity to include the whole of West African anti-colonial activity. Communism gave a role in this national drama to the proletarian unionists in the cities, the peasant farmers of the countryside, and, yes, to the bourgeois fathers of the *Rassemblement*.

[165] Houphouët, *Mes premiers combats*, 109.

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