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Collective Security or Colonial Revolution? The 1938 Conference on Peace and Empire, Anticolonialism and the Popular Front

Abstract: *The 1938 Conference on Peace and Empire was emblematic of the deep divisions within the British socialist movement over the inseparable issues of fascism, war, capitalism and colonialism. One grouping, around the Communist Party, the Labour left, and the India League, espoused a reformist anticolonialism tied to a Popular Front of socialists and liberals and the collective security of the democratic powers against the menace of fascism. Another grouping, around the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the International African Service Bureau (IASB), believed distinctions between ‘democratic’ and fascist colonialism to be flawed, and instead advocated anticolonial revolution while rejecting what they saw as pleas to support colonialist policies under the guise of antifascism. This article advances three overlapping arguments. First, that the Popular Front strategy led Communists to promote antifascist alliances that necessarily diminished their anticolonialist activism. Second, that the IASB-ILP coalition was the most consistently militant anticolonialist force in Britain during the second half of the 1930s. Third, that we need to more thoroughly integrate both the history of anticolonialism and the ideas and activism of people of colour into our understandings of inter-war British socialism.*

Keywords: socialism, anticolonialism, antifascism, Popular Front

The Conference on Peace and Empire, held at Friends House on Euston Road in London on Friday 15 and Saturday 16 July 1938, was emblematic of the deep divisions within British

anticolonialist thinking during the second half of the 1930s. Organized by the India League in collaboration with the London Federation of Peace Councils (both organizations in which Communist¹ opinion predominated), the conference brought together a veritable who's who of socialists and anticolonialists. It was presided over by Jawaharlal Nehru, who toured Europe in 1938 to promote the cause of Indian nationalism and, in little under a decade, would become India's first Prime Minister. The keynote speech was delivered by Stafford Cripps, a left-wing Labour MP and leader of the recently dissolved Socialist League. His life and legacy would become increasingly entangled with the colonial struggle through his 'mission' to India in 1942 and the marriage of his daughter, Peggy, to the Gold Coast anticolonialist, Joe Appiah, shortly after his death in 1952. There were 587 delegates representing 254 organizations, as well as 380 observers. British socialist parties were well represented, with seventy-seven Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) delegates, sixty-three Labour Party delegates, and thirty-four Independent Labour Party (ILP) delegates. A sole Liberal Party delegate also attended. Fifteen colonial organizations were represented by thirty-nine delegates, including two from the India League, four from the International African Service Bureau (IASB), and four from the Communist-aligned Negro Welfare Association (NWA).²

¹ Throughout this article, I use the term 'Communism' with an upper-case 'C' to describe the organized movement of Communist Parties loyal to the Soviet Union and the Communist International, and to distinguish it from a broader 'communist' ideology.

² 'Conference on Peace and Empire: Report of the Credentials Committee', Papers of Reginald Francis Orlando Bridgeman, Hull History Centre, DBN/27/3, 1-3. It should be noted that several of these 'colonial' organizations were white British solidarity groups. Also represented were the Indian Swaraj League, London Majlis, Ceylon Samaja Party, Cyprus Autonomy Committee, Arab Centre and League of Coloured Peoples. In addition, there were

The conference exposed deep divisions within the British socialist movement over the issue of colonial liberation, yet too many histories of the British left have overlooked the significance of anticolonial ideas and activism, and neglected the presence of socialists of colonial origin.³ This article, conversely, demonstrates that anticolonialism played a key role in shaping alliances and divisions within the British socialist movement during the 1930s, and that activists of metropolitan and colonial origin were part of highly imbricated networks in Britain. One grouping, around the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Labour left, the Negro Welfare Association, and the India League, espoused a reformist anticolonialism tied to a ‘Popular Front’ of socialists and liberals and the collective security of the democratic powers against the menace of fascism. Another grouping, around the Independent Labour Party and the pan-Africanist

seventy trade union delegates, 101 youth organization delegates, fourteen teachers’ delegates, forty-seven co-operative delegates, seventy-seven peace organization delegates, forty Left Book Club delegates, and twenty-four ‘miscellaneous’ delegates. It is unclear how exactly delegates were invited and selected — while every section of the British left was represented at the conference there was clearly a bias towards those with Communist sympathies, but it is unclear if this was because of intentional gerrymandering or simply a natural byproduct of the conference having been organized by CPGB members and supporters. Although the conference left little in the way of an archive, the conference’s debates were much reported in the left-wing press, and later recorded in activists’ memoirs. While each individual report is marked by partiality and partisanship, taken together they provide a lively record of the conference.

³ See, for example, Ian Bullock, *Under Siege: The Independent Labour Party in Interwar Britain* (Edmonton, AB, 2017); John Callaghan, *Socialism in Britain since 1884* (Oxford, 1990); Paul Corthorn, *In the Shadow of the Dictators: The British Left in the 1930s* (New York, 2006); James Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (London, 1982).

International African Service Bureau, believed distinctions between ‘democratic’ and fascist colonialism to be flawed, and instead advocated colonial revolution while rejecting what they saw as pleas to support capitalist and colonialist policies under the guise of antifascism. Socialist proponents of the Popular Front viewed the League of Nations and alliances with liberals as appropriate vehicles to achieve their goals; the socialists of the ILP and IASB, conversely, viewed these other socialists as willing to sacrifice revolutionary politics for the sake of combating a fascism not ultimately distinct from capitalist-imperialism.

This article therefore advances three overlapping arguments. First, that the Popular Front strategy led Communists to promote antifascist alliances that necessarily diminished their anticolonialist activism. Second, that the IASB-ILP coalition was the most consistently militant anticolonialist force in Britain during the second half of the 1930s. Third, that we need to more thoroughly integrate both the history of anticolonialism and the ideas and activism of people of colour into our understandings of inter-war British socialism. The Conference on Peace and Empire presents the most illuminating case study of left-wing British anticolonialism in the age of the Popular Front through which to demonstrate these arguments. It highlighted divisions within the British socialist movement over the inseparable issues of fascism, war, capitalism and colonialism. We must shift our understanding of this movement to recognize its multiracial character, and its global as well as domestic preoccupations. In this sense, Gidon Cohen’s observation that the conference showcased a debate between the ILP and CPGB ‘over the nature of the relative threat posed by fascism and imperialism’ is correct but substantially incomplete.⁴

⁴ Gidon Cohen, *The Failure of a Dream: The Independent Labour Party from Disaffiliation to World War II* (London: Tauris, 2007), 143.

The history of left-wing British anticolonialism in the inter-war period must have people of colour, and their relationships with and influence upon the political ideologies of white activists, at its core. The article begins with a discussion of the alliance between the IASB and ILP, and shows how the IASB helped to push the ILP's anticolonialism into more radical channels during the second half of the 1930s. This is followed by a discussion of the Popular Front strategy that demonstrates the compromise to anticolonialism inherent in the strategy. The second half of the article shows how these forces collided at the 1938 Conference on Peace and Empire, before discussing the legacies of the alliance between the IASB and ILP.

The International African Service Bureau and the Independent Labour Party

Much of the limited historiography addressing the Conference on Peace and Empire concerns Nehru's involvement as chair. However, one aspect of the conference that most historians have neglected is the involvement of the International African Service Bureau.⁵ This is significant, as

⁵ See, for example, Cohen, *Failure of a Dream*, 143; Maria Framke, 'Political humanitarianism in the 1930s: Indian aid for Republican Spain', *European Review of History*, 28 (2016), 63-81; Chinmaya R. Gharekhan, 'India-Israel: Retrospective and prospective', *Strategic Analysis*, 41 (2017), 314-24; T.A. Keenleyside, 'The inception of Indian foreign policy: The non-Nehru contribution', *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 4 (1981), 63-78; Miroslav Krasa, 'Jawaharlal Nehru and Czechoslovakia at the time of the 1938 European crisis', *India Quarterly*, 45 (1989), 333-66; S.P. Singh, 'Indo-Arab relations in the light of Palestine problem (1930 to 1945)', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 45 (2004), 1025-30. For exceptions, see John McLeod, 'A night at "The Cosmopolitan": Axes of transnational encounter in the 1930s and 1940s', *Interventions*, 4 (2002), 53-67; Christian Høgsbjerg, "'The fever and the fret": C.L.R. James, the Spanish Civil War and the writing of *The Black Jacobins*', *Critique*, 44 (2016), 161-77.

it means that the role of black activists in shaping left-wing opposition to the Popular Front has been ignored. The IASB was formed in early 1937 out of the remnants of the International African Friends of Ethiopia, a single-issue group opposed to the Italian invasion and occupation of Ethiopia. It had an informal structure, but at its core were the most prominent black socialists in Britain: C.L.R. James, George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta, T. Ras Makonnen, I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, and Chris Jones.⁶ Its main objective was:

to serve as a medium of information between the Colonial and European public — the British in particular — as well as to create a connecting link between the Africans at home (in Africa) and the Africans abroad (in the West Indies, United States of America and other Western countries) by the transmission of messages and informations, news and views, from one to another, in the most accurate and concise forms.⁷

Several historians have illustrated the ways in which inter-war British political culture was multiracial. Most of these historians have pointed to the fact that the IASB worked closely with the Independent Labour Party, though this has previously been examined in only a cursory

⁶ The Jamaican pan-Africanist Amy Ashwood Garvey had earlier been central to founding the International African Friends of Ethiopia, but was a more peripheral figure to the IASB's activism. For more on Ashwood Garvey, see Minkah Makalani, 'An international African opinion: Amy Ashwood Garvey and C. L. R. James in black radical London', in Davarian L. Baldwin and Minkah Makalani (eds), *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem* (Minneapolis, 2013), 77-101. While women did not have formal leadership roles within the IASB, the intellectual labour of British women like Dorothy Pizer and Dinah Stock was nevertheless an important factor in the publications and activism of its male figureheads.

⁷ 'Our Policy', *African Sentinel*, October-November 1937, 1.

manner.⁸ Moreover, further attention needs to be paid to how the IASB helped to influence and create the ILP's revolutionary anticolonialism during the late 1930s. As Priyamvada Gopal has argued, Asian and black anticolonialists in the metropole 'not only internationalized British opposition to empire, but also pushed it in more radical directions.'⁹ It was this alliance between the IASB and ILP that produced the radical dissenting voice at the Conference on Peace and Empire.

The ILP was one of the founding groups of the Labour Representation Committee (later the Labour Party) in 1900, but disaffiliated in 1932 in a dispute about parliamentary standing orders. They moved further to the left over the course of the 1930s, to the extent of advocating socialist revolution. During the late 1930s, they had three-to-four thousand members and four

⁸ Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919-1945* (London, 1999); Christian Høgsbjerg, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain* (Durham, NC, 2014); Stephen Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire, 1918-1964* (Oxford, 1993); Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke, 2015); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011); W.O. Maloba, *Kenyatta and Britain: An Account of Political Transformation, 1929-1963* (Cham, 2018); Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, 2015); Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton, NJ, 2009); Carol Polsgrove, *Ending British Rule in Africa: Writers in a Common Cause* (Manchester, 2009); Daniel Whittall, 'Creolising London: Black West Indian activism and the politics of race and empire in Britain, 1931-1948' (doctoral thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2012).

⁹ Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London, 2019), 212-13.

MPs, remaining a small but potent force in British politics.¹⁰ There was a crucial debate towards the beginning of this radical transition. After much infighting, the party settled on a policy of opposing the imposition of sanctions against Italy during the 1935-6 Italo-Ethiopian War. ILP members agreed that League of Nations sanctions were inappropriate, as the League was an organ of imperialism. However, the party's parliamentary group and much of the membership also opposed the imposition of sanctions through working-class self-organization, such as workers refusing to handle goods bound for Italy. This position was justified on the grounds that sanctions of any kind were in the interests of British imperialism and that Haile Selassie was as much a dictator as Benito Mussolini.¹¹ However, advocates of workers' sanctions, including the Trinidadian Trotskyist and founding IASB member, C.L.R. James, initially won a majority of delegates to their position at the party's 1936 annual conference.¹² When the conference, after some cynical maneuvering by the parliamentary party, voted to withdraw its support of workers' sanctions and defer the decision to a party-wide plebiscite, James was one of three ILP members to put forward the case for sanctions in a special edition of the party's journal.¹³ James's side ultimately lost the plebiscite, but had succeeded in placing the question of colonialism at the top of the ILP's agenda.

¹⁰ Cohen, *Failure of a Dream*, ch. 3.

¹¹ For an example of the competing perspectives on the Italian invasion within the ILP, see Independent Labour Party, *Italy and Abyssinia: Should British Workers Take Sides?* (London, 1936).

¹² Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left: Thirty Years of Platform, Press, Prison and Parliament* (1942; Leicester, 1947), 327; Independent Labour Party, *Official Report of the 44th Annual Conference, 1936* (London, 1936).

¹³ Independent Labour Party, *Italy and Abyssinia*.

The ILP's anti-sanctions position drew the ire of colonial activists and played a large part in James's decision to leave the party in late 1936. Most of the IASB's members had arrived in Britain during the first half of the 1930s, and the debates over Ethiopia thus served as their induction into the factional politics of the British left. While their initial encounter with the ILP was inauspicious, by 1938 James's fellow Trinidadian Marxist, George Padmore, wrote in the party's newspaper, the *New Leader*, that the ILP was

the only working-class party in Britain that has a correct theoretical approach on the questions of Imperialist war and colonies. It must be stated that the I.L.P. has only recently arrived at this clear Marxist position, for even up to the Italo-Abyssinian War the Party displayed a lamentable confusion. And this was no accident. It was due to the fact that several leading members of the party were themselves not clear on these basic questions.¹⁴

Padmore's criticism of the ILP's Ethiopia decision is unsurprising, but this passage is indicative of the hardening of the ILP's anticolonialism in the intervening two years and colonial activists' vastly improved relationship with them. Padmore's statement, which positions him as a legitimate adjudicator of British socialists' Marxism and uses anticolonialism as the key measure of this Marxism (all while being published in the newspaper of the party he is judging), provides an insight into the ways in which pan-Africanism and other forms of colonial radicalism need to be more thoroughly integrated into the history of British socialism. Padmore and other black activists were reshaping British socialism *from within*, positioning themselves as the defenders of

¹⁴ George Padmore, 'Hands off the Colonies', *New Leader*, 25 February 1938, 2.

an intellectual and political inheritance passed down from Marx and Lenin. The interventions of these black radicals were in large part responsible for the ILP's new anticolonialist militancy.

Articles by IASB members appeared in the *New Leader* with increasing frequency during the late 1930s, and Chris Jones, Kenyatta and Padmore were also regular fixtures at ILP summer schools and branch meetings across Britain from 1937 onwards.¹⁵ The *New Leader* even published an 'Empire Special' on 29 April 1938 — crucially, the edition that would be available on May Day — featuring contributions from Kenyatta and Padmore. Fenner Brockway, the party's general secretary, contributed a comparison between fascism and colonialism that owed much to the IASB's political theory, concluding: 'Fascism is Capitalist dictatorship in developed countries. Imperialism is Capitalist dictatorship in underdeveloped countries.'¹⁶ This political development can be traced directly to IASB influence in the ILP, as the IASB's understanding of the equivalence of colonialism and fascism (discussed more thoroughly below) began to find frequent expression among ILP members immediately after Padmore attended the ILP's international group's congress in Paris in February 1938.¹⁷ The ILP sold and promoted the IASB's journal *International African Opinion*, featured Padmore's work in its study guides, and even let the IASB move into their offices from late 1938.¹⁸ This was a deep institutional

¹⁵ Regular reports of these meetings can be found in the *New Leader*.

¹⁶ Fenner Brockway, 'Has Hitler Anything to Teach Our Ruling Class?', *New Leader*, 29 April 1938, iv.

¹⁷ See the *New Leader* and numerous other ILP publications from 1938 onwards.

¹⁸ Arthur Ballard, 'West Indian Workers are Uniting While British Fascism Spreads to Guinea', *New Leader*, 8 July 1938, 4; Arthur Ballard, 'Round the Empire', *New Leader*, 10 March 1939, 6; 'In Brief', *Controversy*, August 1938,

relationship. Moreover, IASB members developed close personal friendships with ILP members, especially Ethel Mannin and Reginald Reynolds. Mannin and Reynolds regularly hosted IASB members at their Wimbledon home, and Mannin even became godmother to one of Jones's children.¹⁹ The ILP's political philosophy was shaped by the IASB's revolutionary anticolonialism. In turn, the ILP provided support to a group of pan-Africanists who, after James left the party in the aftermath of the Ethiopia decision, were not even formal members of the party.

Thinking about the 1930s as a decade of inter-racial socialist collaboration therefore reveals the extent of Britain's (and especially London's) role as, in Ian Duffield's formulation, a 'junction-box' for colonial activists. As Duffield argues: 'Until the 1950s, it was easier for blacks to make contact with others and develop common viewpoints and strategies in Britain than in their diverse homelands.'²⁰ Similarly, Marc Matera in his work on 'black London' has argued that 'the conversations, alliances, and boundary crossings that [the metropole] made possible, as well as the tensions and conflicts such encounters produced, influenced the changing political

inside back cover; 'Study Guide No. 5: The British Empire', *Controversy*, December 1938, inside back cover; 5 March 1939, The National Archives (TNA), CO 323/1690/5.

¹⁹ Ethel Mannin, *Privileged Spectator* (London, 1939); Reginald Reynolds, *My Life and Crimes* (London, 1956); Ralph Bunche, '1937 Annual Diary', Ralph J. Bunche papers, box 279 folder 1, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

²⁰ Ian Duffield, 'Black People in Britain: History and the Historians', *History Today*, 31/9 (1981), 35. This has been echoed in Howe, *Anticolonialism*, 25; Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*.

commitments and personal identifications of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans.²¹ Michael Goebel has correspondingly demonstrated that inter-war Paris facilitated intellectual exchanges between Africans, Asians and Latin Americans that became crucial to Third World anti-imperialism.²² The geography of the IASB, however, was not simply that of ‘black London’. Certainly, there were hubs of black radical congregation, such as Padmore’s flat in Camden and Amy Ashwood Garvey’s restaurant on New Oxford Street, but this geography was also more diffuse and fluid. IASB members inserted themselves into the spaces of London’s broader left. Matera’s ‘black London’ clearly existed, but there is an alternative way of mapping radical black political activity by demonstrating its imbrication with a broader socialist London (and socialist Britain more widely). Britain’s ‘junction-box’ not only housed connections between colonial radicals, but also connections between radicals of metropolitan and colonial origin.

Furthermore, examining the anticolonial politics of the metropolitan left challenges the popular historiographical trope of the ILP’s unmitigated decline into irrelevance following its disaffiliation from the Labour Party in 1932.²³ This narrative of decline has led historians to

²¹ Matera, *Black London*, 2.

²² Michael Goebel, *Anti-imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge, 2015). For a review of several recent books about internationalist anti-imperialist activists in Europe, see Daniel Brückenhaus, ‘Challenging imperialism across borders: Recent studies of twentieth-century internationalist networks against empire’, *Contemporary European History*, 29 (2020), 104-15.

²³ For examples of this trope, see Robert E. Dowse, *Left in the Centre: The Independent Labour Party, 1893-1940* (London, 1966); David James, Tony Jowitt and Keith Laybourn (eds), *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party* (Halifax, 1992); Jupp, *Radical Left*.

overlook the post-disaffiliation ILP and, as a corollary of this, the most significant anticolonialist formation in Britain during the second half of the 1930s. Gidon Cohen is the historian to have most directly challenged the narrative of ILP decline, yet domestic and European affairs still dominate his analysis.²⁴ By looking beyond the domestic concerns and electoral politics discussed by most historians of the British left, the ILP's position in a transnational network of anticolonialists (many of whom, such as Kenyatta, Nehru and Kwame Nkrumah, would lead countries to independence in the post-war period) becomes apparent. The ILP was a constituent part of a global movement; the ultimate success of this global anticolonialist movement — while not achieving the concomitant overthrow of global capitalism sought by many of its members — represents perhaps the left's most significant victory of the twentieth century (although, of course, this was not the victory of the left alone).²⁵ The history of anticolonial networks should therefore not be overlooked in discussions of the post-disaffiliation ILP, or of the British and European left more broadly.

The Popular Front and anticolonialism

The Conference on Peace and Empire needs to be understood in the context of the Popular Front. The Popular Front was a form of alliance with 'progressive capitalists' sought for, and sometimes achieved, by certain groups on the left, and especially Communists, during the 1930s. Calls for a Popular Front of socialists and liberals against fascism began after Adolf Hitler's rise

²⁴ Cohen, *Failure of a Dream*.

²⁵ While, for example, the ILP's friends Nehru and Nkrumah were of the left, it might be more difficult to include Mohandas Gandhi or the Mau Mau insurgents in this category.

to power in 1933. The Sixth Congress of the Communist International (Comintern), held in the summer of 1928, had declared that capitalism was entering its 'Third Period' since the end of the First World War, in which economic crisis and collapse was imminent, and therefore that revolutionary class struggle by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie ('Class against Class') was the only acceptable form of socialist activity. Social democrats, who did not support this revolutionary strategy, were tarred as 'social fascists' and as great an enemy as the bourgeoisie. Another aspect of Third Period policy was the demand for the immediate national independence of colonial peoples and increased material support for anticolonial struggles. During the Third Period, the Comintern enthusiastically if crudely supported left-wing anticolonial movements almost unconditionally, but Hitler's ascent alarmed Moscow. The Comintern was dominated by the foreign policy interests of the Soviet Union, which turned increasingly to Western liberal democracies to form antifascist alliances. The Soviet Union joined the League of Nations in September 1934 and signed a treaty of mutual assistance with France in May 1935. As part of this realignment, it began to moderate its anticolonialism in order to preserve its relationships with broader antifascist elements in the colonial powers of Britain and France.

At the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, held during the summer of 1935, the 'Class against Class' policy was officially abandoned in favour of pursuing a Popular Front of socialists and liberals against fascism. In Britain, the CPGB followed the analysis that the national government was sympathetic to fascism and becoming increasingly fascistic itself. During the general election campaign of that autumn, the party called for a 'redoubling' of efforts to defeat

the government and secure the return of a Labour government.²⁶ The party's embrace of the Popular Front shaped the relationship between British-based colonial activists and the CPGB for the remainder of the 1930s and beyond. The first test of the new policy was the impending Italo-Ethiopian War, during which the CPGB advocated the implementation of economic sanctions against Italy through the League of Nations. The antifascist Popular Front gained support from individual Liberal and Labour party members and a handful of Conservatives, but no institutional support from any major party.

There is considerable historiographical debate about the Popular Front, and widely diverging analysis of its flaws and merits. The Popular Front, both in Britain and globally, is generally seen as a more appropriate and nuanced strategy for combating fascism than the blunt instrument of the 'Class against Class' policy.²⁷ However, what many of these accounts miss is the implication of the Comintern's new prioritization of antifascist struggles for Communist anticolonial work. Some historians who are sympathetic to the Comintern's shift in 1935 do in

²⁶ 'What the Communists Stand For', *Daily Worker*, 2 October 1935, 1.

²⁷ Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-41* (Manchester, 1989), 15; Robert Service, *Comrades: A World History of Communism* (London, 2007), 174; David Priestland, *The Red Flag: Communism and the Making of the Modern World* (London, 2009), ch. 5; Silvio Pons, *The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism, 1917-1991*, trans. Allan Cameron (Oxford, 2014), 75.

fact wrestle with the question of how this shift impacted Communist anticolonialism, but they are the exception.²⁸

Other historians are more critical, and from a left-wing perspective argue that the Popular Front blunted class struggle. While in Britain the Popular Front was an aspiration rather than a reality, in 1936 Popular Front governments were formed in France and Spain. This resulted in Communists siding with capitalist and colonialist governments in struggles against more revolutionary elements of the socialist movement, most notably in the repression of Trotskyist and anarchist forces during the Catalonia May Days of 1937, but also during the French general strike of 1936. Again, some of these accounts focus on the implications for European revolutionary activity, rather than for Communist anticolonial work.²⁹ However, some historians have examined how the Popular Front remapped anticolonial politics in Britain, while

²⁸ Hakim Adi and Sobhanlal Datta Gupta both argue that the Popular Front strategy allowed Communists to make alliances with a wider range of anticolonial nationalists and to expand their influence in movements in Africa and Asia. Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919-1939* (Trenton, NJ, 2013), xxiv; Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, 'Communism and the crisis of the colonial system', in Silvio Pons and Stephen A. Smith (eds), *The Cambridge History of Communism, Volume 1: World Revolution and Socialism in One Country 1917-1941* (Cambridge, 2017), 228-9. However, elsewhere Datta Gupta has observed that it was 'a difficult task for the CPI [Communist Party of India] leadership to convince its cadres of the rationale of this switch over'. Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India, 1919-1943: Dialectics of Real and a Possible History* (Kolkata, 2006), 41.

²⁹ Hugo Dewar, *Communist Politics in Britain: The CPGB from its Origins to the Second World War* (London, 1976), 109; James Eaden and David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920* (Basingstoke, 2002), 52.

other scholarship shows that the softening of Communist anticolonialism was a global story.³⁰ Tom Buchanan, writing about Britain and France during the late 1930s, has observed that ‘anti-fascism might well be thought of as, in a sense, antithetical to anti-imperialism’.³¹ Neil Redfern notes that the CPGB now ‘stressed a liberal programme of democratic reform’ that ‘would placate middle-class elements in the colonies and render them more likely to support the British against its rivals.’³² However, Redfern does not discuss alternative currents of anticolonialism in Britain. Buchanan, unlike Redfern, to a limited extent discusses black criticisms of the Popular Front, but does not examine the impact of black activism on the wider British socialist movement and instead treats it as a somewhat separate sphere of activism. There is, therefore, much to be learned from conversely centring left-wing opposition to the Popular Front and examining the importance of a coalition of black and white socialists to this opposition. The opposition to the Popular Front by the IASB and ILP should be understood as part of a global debate on the left about how to combat colonialism.

³⁰ For scholarship that argues that the Popular Front constrained Communist anticolonialism in Algeria and the black Atlantic, respectively, see, Martin Thomas, *The French Empire between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society* (Manchester, 2005), chs 8-9; Holger Weiss, *Framing an Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (Leiden, 2014), 720.

³¹ Tom Buchanan, “‘The dark millions in the colonies are unavenged’: Anti-fascism and anti-imperialism in the 1930s’, *Contemporary European History*, 25 (2016), 645-6.

³² Neil Redfern, *Class or Nation: Communists, Imperialism and Two World Wars* (London, 2005), 80.

Debates over the Popular Front also contribute to our understanding of the various ways in which people in Britain engaged with the role of the League of Nations in world politics, as the League's ideal of collective security became a rallying cry for supporters of the Popular Front. Susan Pedersen argues that although the League's mandates system (through which territories were transferred from one colonial power to another after the First World War) eventually undermined imperial rule, the system had not been devised to serve the purpose of 'extending the right of national self-determination', and mandated territories 'were not better governed than colonies across the board and in some cases were governed more oppressively'.³³ Helen McCarthy, studying the League of Nations Union (LNU), has demonstrated that 'the League's champions in Britain mobilised broad sections of the population in support of a collective security of international relations.'³⁴ As McCarthy makes clear, the LNU never seriously questioned British imperial rule, and its conscious non-partisanship helped to shield it from 'divisive class politics.'³⁵ Of course, for many socialists, whose entire political analysis rested on class, this was anathema. One can understand, then, why when Communists began working with the LNU leader Robert Cecil in the name of collective security through an organization that upheld colonialism and had failed to prevent the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, many socialists were appalled that supposed comrades could contemplate attempting to combat colonialism or fascism in such a manner. Liberal antifascism during the inter-war period embraced and was even enabled by the possession of colonial empires.

³³ Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford, 2015), 3-4.

³⁴ Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, c.1918-45* (Manchester, 2011), 2.

³⁵ McCarthy, *British People and the League of Nations*, 9.

The IASB therefore made the case for an equivalence, and a profound relationship, between fascism and colonialism (which, as discussed above, informed the ILP's anticolonialism). In 1937, Padmore argued that ““Democratic” Imperialism and “Fascist” Imperialism are merely interchanging ideologies corresponding to the economic and political conditions of capitalism within a given country on the one hand, and the degree to which the class struggle has developed on the other.”³⁶ Colonialism acted as a safety valve against fascism at home, but also as a prop to capitalism and the primary cause of war. Therefore, the struggle against colonialism and for socialism was central to the struggles against fascism and war. This approach dissolved distinctions between fascist powers, such as Germany and Italy, and ‘democratic’ colonialist powers, such as Britain and France.³⁷ In this sense, Buchanan’s observation that ‘anti-fascism might well be thought of as, in a sense, antithetical to anti-imperialism’, while true of Popular Front supporters, does not apply to the ILP and IASB.³⁸ To them, anticolonialism and antifascism were two sides of the same anticapitalist coin.

C.L.R. James regarded the period as one of open hostility between black activists and the CPGB. He acknowledged that before the Popular Front period the CPGB had taken up many colonial issues, and often granted a platform to grateful colonial nationalists.³⁹ Several of his

³⁶ George Padmore, *Africa and World Peace* (London, 1937), 252.

³⁷ For a more thorough discussion of Padmore’s analysis, see Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, ch. 9.

³⁸ Buchanan, ‘The dark millions’, 645-6.

³⁹ C.L.R. James, ‘Autobiography, 1932-38’, C.L.R. James papers, Columbia University, box 4 folder 7, 48-9.

However, James was also critical of the effect of the Third Period on the CPGB, saying that the proclamation of

fellow pan-Africanists, including Padmore and Kenyatta, were deeply involved with Communist politics before 1935, but broke from the Comintern around this time. James recalled that another pan-Africanist, the Barbadian trade unionist, Chris Jones, had also previously been a Communist, but was 'very bitter' about the Popular Front strategy, and would join James and Padmore in going to Communist meetings in order to criticize the new position.⁴⁰

James was correct in arguing that Communist anticolonialism was compromised by the Popular Front, as the Comintern and CPGB became willing to sacrifice aspects of their programme in the name of maintaining or creating antifascist alliances. However, it should be noted that where there was a confluence between anticolonialism and antifascism, such as in the case of the Ethiopia crisis, the CPGB retained much of its old anticolonialism. Even though large sections of the Communist movement were probably more motivated by waging an antifascist struggle against Mussolini's Italy than they were by concern for the sovereignty of Ethiopia, from a Communist perspective these issues converged. James may have been critical of Communist appeals to the League of Nations and suspected ulterior motives, but other colonial activists, such as Kenyatta, found in the Communist press an outlet to express revolutionary anticolonialism during the crisis.⁴¹ However, as the 1930s progressed, there was generally no such confluence between Communist antifascism and anticolonialism. Instead, there was often

'imminent revolution' was a 'glaring absurdity'. C.L.R. James, *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (London, 1937), 312.

⁴⁰ Alan J. Mackenzie, 'Marxism and black nationalism: A discussion with C.L.R. James' (c. 1975), James papers, box 12 folder 8, 5.

⁴¹ J.M. Kenyatta, 'Hands off Abyssinia!', *Labour Monthly*, September 1935, 532-6.

conflict between the two, meaning Communist anticolonialism accordingly softened during the late 1930s.

The 1938 Conference on Peace and Empire

The political goals of the India League in organizing the Conference on Peace and Empire were informed by the CPGB's statement 'Peace and the Colonial Question', submitted to the National Peace Congress held in Bristol on 28 and 29 May 1938.⁴² Both this statement and the conference were attempts to reconcile anticolonialism with the strategic imperatives of the Popular Front. Hakim Adi has argued that the statement prompted 'unity amongst the African and Caribbean organisations in Britain', and that its call for a charter for colonial peoples 'by the end of the war was the universal demand of all the main African and Caribbean organisations in Britain.'⁴³ However, while the CPGB indeed found support from some black activists, such as the Barbadian Peter Blackman, as well as those in the India League around V.K. Krishna Menon, the statement was undeniably divisive due to its unapologetic reformism.

The statement argued against colonial concessions to the fascist powers, and stated that there 'can be no "just" or "harmonious" division of colonies between the Imperialist Powers'.⁴⁴ This argument followed both the Leninist idea that the imperialist division of colonies reflected

⁴² *Labour Monthly*, June 1938, 384.

⁴³ Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism*, 291.

⁴⁴ 'Peace and the Colonial Question', in Communist Party of Great Britain, *Report of the Central Committee to the 15th Party Congress* (London, 1938), 138.

only a temporary, relative balance of national forces, and the Popular Front logic that fascism was a significantly greater threat to peace (and, importantly, the Soviet Union) than was liberal capitalism. The CPGB, seeking an antifascist alliance with liberals and social democrats, stated that the ‘Peace Movement should regard the colonial peoples and their national liberation movements as allies in the struggle for peace’, but stopped short of calling for anticolonial revolution, which it had called for during the Comintern’s Third Period.⁴⁵ Instead, it argued that the British labour and peace movements should agree on a ‘minimum Charter of Rights of Colonial Peoples’, including, for instance, universal adult suffrage, free universal education, freedom of speech, press and organization, and trade union rights.⁴⁶ The statement was jubilantly printed in the *Colonial Information Bulletin*, the mimeographed organ of the CPGB’s Colonial Information Bureau run by former Meerut prisoner Ben Bradley.⁴⁷ It was instantly criticized by the ILP in the *New Leader*, however. The article declared that ‘[o]ne of the worst features of the Popular Front Policy advocated by the Communist Party is the betrayal of the colonial workers which it involves.’ The ILP said that the ‘proposed capitalist allies’ of the Popular Front would not accept it (as the ‘Liberal Party or the Tory “democrats”’ would not extend universal suffrage to Africa), nor would colonial peoples ‘be content with it.’⁴⁸ The ILP’s criticism illustrates the ways in which the politics of anticolonialism need to be taken more seriously as a leading cause of divisions within the British left during the 1930s.

⁴⁵ ‘Peace and the Colonial Question’, 140.

⁴⁶ ‘Peace and the Colonial Question’, 143.

⁴⁷ *Colonial Information Bulletin*, 1 June 1938, 2-5.

⁴⁸ ‘Communists and Colonial Workers’, *New Leader*, 3 June 1938, 4.

The India League, under whose auspices the Conference on Peace and Empire was held, was a British-based organization that protested British colonialism in India. Since the late 1920s it had been led by Krishna Menon, who could claim primary responsibility for the group's radicalism and would later become a key figure shaping India's foreign policy under Nehru. Nicholas Owen notes that Menon attempted to forge a position on India independent of the CPGB, but that with the collapse of the left-wing Unity Campaign between the CPGB, Socialist League and ILP over the Spanish Civil War, as well as the Labour Party's tightening discipline, 'he found himself orbiting the Communist Party.'⁴⁹ Writing in the CPGB journal *Labour Monthly* in June 1938, Menon explained Indian National Congress policy in as radical a manner as possible while still aligning it with the antifascism of the Comintern:

Collective security, co-operation with peace powers, opposition to Fascism and the pro-fascist policy of the British Government, resistance by every means to imperialist war, refusal to participate in Britain's wars without her own express consent, an active participation in international peace efforts — these are to-day the guiding principles of Congress policy.⁵⁰

Although Menon privately expressed his concerns that the CPGB 'had not taken up a strong enough line with regard to the colonial question', the ideas contained in 'Peace and the Colonial Question' thus permeated the general resolution proposed at the Conference on Peace

⁴⁹ Nicholas Owen, *The British Left and India: Metropolitan Anti-Imperialism, 1885-1947* (Oxford, 2007), 242-3.

⁵⁰ V.K. Krishna Menon, 'India and World Peace', *Labour Monthly*, June 1938, 375.

and Empire.⁵¹ As Owen observes, the CPGB statement ‘offered British colonies interim democratic charter rights, but not independence’, leading to a loss of support for the CPGB and the India League ‘among expatriate Indians, as well as the expatriates of other colonised countries in London’.⁵²

For instance, mere days before the publication of ‘Peace and the Colonial Question’, Padmore, himself a former Communist, published the article ‘Why Moors Help Franco’ in the *New Leader*. Padmore responded to left-wing criticisms of North African troops fighting in Francisco Franco’s forces, and stated that it was in fact the Republican government that, ‘in attempting to continue the policy of Spanish Imperialism’, should be held responsible.⁵³ This analysis was part of a wider cautionary tale, warning the British working class that any left-wing government that failed to break with the policy of colonialism could suffer the same fate. In a superficially similar manner to Padmore, the CPGB in ‘Peace and the Colonial Question’ stated that their own proposed break from colonial policy would lead to colonial peoples aiding the European workers in ‘the struggle against Fascist aggression’.⁵⁴ However, the CPGB couched this anticolonialism in terms of its benefits to antifascism, and also encouraged colonial support for the League of Nations and collective security, whereas for Padmore and other radical anticolonialists, the League of Nations and its sympathizers offered no fundamental break from

⁵¹ Buchanan, ‘The dark millions’, 648.

⁵² Owen, *British Left and India*, 244.

⁵³ George Padmore, ‘Why Moors Help Franco’, *New Leader*, 20 May 1938, 4.

⁵⁴ ‘Peace and the Colonial Question’, 144.

colonialism. Padmore therefore directed his rage not exclusively at fascists and conservatives, but also at the Popular Front governments in Spain and France, and their supporters in Britain.⁵⁵

The Conference on Peace and Empire began on the evening of Friday 15 July. Nehru opened the conference by stating that fascism was ‘an intensified form of the same system which is imperialism’, and that therefore in combating fascism ‘you inevitably combat imperialism’. He rejected distinguishing between the two.⁵⁶ Owen contextualizes Nehru’s visit to Britain by analyzing the attempts of British advocates of the Popular Front to win Nehru’s support for this cause. The support of Nehru, a famous anticolonial leader, was ‘an invaluable prize’ in rebutting anticolonialist criticisms of the Popular Front.⁵⁷ The conference’s dividing lines became apparent at the outset, during a debate about the correct interpretation of ‘collective security’. Nehru stated that his ‘idea of collective security ... is not to retain a *status quo* which is based on injustice’, but rather the ‘essential corollary is the removal of imperialism and fascism.’⁵⁸ The ILP in their report of the conference attempted to conscript Nehru to their position, correctly noting that ‘Nehru denounced Imperialism as an evil as great as Fascism, demanded full independence for subject peoples, and said that, whilst India would welcome a system of real collective security [‘as it would operate in a world order of freedom’], that did not mean the

⁵⁵ Padmore, ‘Why Moors Help Franco’, 5.

⁵⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, ‘Peace and Empire’, in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: Volume 9* (New Delhi, 1976), 62.

⁵⁷ Nicholas Owen, ‘The Cripps Mission of 1942: A reinterpretation’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 30 (2002), 64.

⁵⁸ Nehru, ‘Peace and Empire’, 65.

collective security of the present League of Nations.’⁵⁹ This debate would continue during the discussion of the general resolution the following day. The ILP’s Reginald Reynolds argued that while the Indian National Congress’s February 1938 session in Haripura had advocated collective security, it had done so in a different sense to the conference resolution. Ben Bradley retorted that the resolution ‘correctly interpreted’ the Congress position.⁶⁰

Nehru himself was equivocal on the matter, and his opening statement about the relationship between colonialism and fascism and how to combat them did not place him comfortably in either the CPGB-India League camp or the ILP-IASB camp. He stated in his concluding speech that there was nothing with which he disagreed in the general resolution adopted at the Conference on Peace and Empire, but acknowledged that this resolution was an incomplete rendering of the Indian National Congress position adopted at the Haripura session. He concluded that the cause of unity was more important than the different emphases he would have placed on the resolution had he drafted it himself.⁶¹ Nehru’s position within this debate is difficult to pin down, but his later role in the failure of the Cripps Mission and subsequent

⁵⁹ ‘I.L.P. or Communist Policy for Colonial Workers?’, *New Leader*, 22 July 1938, 5.

⁶⁰ ‘Peace and Empire Conference’, *Colonial Information Bulletin*, 1 August 1938, 4.

⁶¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, ‘The Congress and Collective Security’, in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: Volume 9*, 69-71.

involvement in the Quit India Movement illustrate that he was not quite as preoccupied with antifascism as were the CPGB.⁶²

Nehru was followed on the Friday evening by Stafford Cripps. Cripps had been the most prominent politician in the Socialist League, a left-wing faction of the Labour Party, until the party forced the League to dissolve in 1937, and remained the leading figure on the party's left in 1938.⁶³ The two inter-war Labour minority governments had done little to break from established British colonial policy, but Cripps and his comrades in the Socialist League were more deeply committed to anticolonialism than were the wider party, and Cripps even wrote the foreword to Padmore's *Africa and World Peace* (1937).⁶⁴ However, like the conference's Communist organizers, Cripps's anticolonialism became increasingly compromised by his antifascism. The ILP report contrasted Nehru's call for 'real collective security' with Cripps's caution that 'there were parts of the British Empire which were not fit for independence and which should be put under international control.' The ILP presumed that Cripps intended this to be under the League of Nations.⁶⁵ The intelligence services, unsurprisingly unalert to the subtleties of left-wing frictions, remarked that Cripps '[m]ade a revolutionary speech and was considerably heckled by

⁶² In 1942, Cripps, representing the British government, offered Dominion status to India at the conclusion of the Second World War in exchange for Indian support of the British war effort. This was rejected, prompting the Quit India Movement, which demanded the immediate end of British rule in India.

⁶³ For the Socialist League, see Corthorn, *In the Shadow*; Jupp, *Radical Left*; Ben Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge, 1977).

⁶⁴ Padmore, *Africa and World Peace*, ix-xi.

⁶⁵ 'I.L.P. or Communist Policy for Colonial Workers?', 5.

the audience.’⁶⁶ It did not occur to them that Cripps was being heckled by members of the ILP and IASB for being insufficiently revolutionary. The executive committee of the IASB subsequently attacked Cripps in a statement published in *International African Opinion*. Like the ILP, the IASB criticized Cripps’s plans for ‘trusteeship’ for Africa: ‘It is clear that Sir Stafford Cripps has the typical vice of many European socialists, even revolutionaries. He conceives Africans as essentially passive recipients of freedom given to them by Europeans.’⁶⁷ Here, the IASB were also implicitly criticizing Cripps’s allies in the CPGB, as well as making a claim for the revolutionary agency of African peoples.

However, the IASB in this statement did not go on to reject the aid of European workers and socialists, but rather appealed to the interdependence of the European and colonial revolutions. Drawing on James’s research into the Haitian Revolution, the statement invoked the memory of the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue (later Haiti) who helped make the French Revolution, while simultaneously arguing that the European working-class movement could provide a ‘counter-balance’ in preventing a ‘native bureaucracy’ developing in newly-independent countries. Technical aid from Europe would be welcomed, but governance would not.⁶⁸ For the IASB, the problem with Cripps and the CPGB was not that they were European

⁶⁶ 15 and 16 July 1938, TNA, KV 2/668 (Richard Stafford Cripps).

⁶⁷ Executive Committee of the IASB, ‘Sir Stafford Cripps and “Trusteeship”’, *International African Opinion*, September 1938, 3.

⁶⁸ Executive Committee of the IASB, ‘Sir Stafford Cripps and “Trusteeship”’, 3. For James’s famous history of the Haitian Revolution, see C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London, 1938).

socialists, but that they had got socialism wrong; the ILP, equally vociferous about Cripps's ideas of 'trusteeship', were much more natural allies.

This was not, though, the nadir of the IASB's relationship with Cripps. Writing at the end of the Second World War, Padmore used Cripps's mission to India to demonstrate that he had undergone 'a sea-change in political outlook'. The mission was contrasted with 'a time when Sir Stafford Cripps was outspoken in his condemnation of imperialist rule and posed as an aggressive supporter of self-determination for India and other Colonial countries', for which Padmore cited his speech to the Conference on Peace and Empire as evidence.⁶⁹ Cripps's reformist anticolonialism of the 1930s, when contrasted with his later proposal that Dominion status for India after the Second World War be contingent upon support for the British war effort, seemed in hindsight only a minor offence.

Anglophone pan-Africanists were joined at the conference by a francophone comrade, Emile Faure, a Senegalese pan-Africanist who was president of the Ligue de défense de la race nègre (LDRN) (League for the Defence of the Negro Race) and secretary of the pan-colonial Rassemblement coloniale (Colonial Assembly) in France. Faure and the LDRN had previously been aligned with the Comintern, but, like Padmore, had broken from the movement. Faure was sympathetic to Padmore's brand of pan-Africanism and by 1940 had become a member of the

⁶⁹ George Padmore with Dorothy Pizer, *How Russia Transformed Her Colonial Empire: A Challenge to the Imperialist Powers* (London, 1946), 149-50.

IASB's executive committee.⁷⁰ Lelia Seleau and Dorothy Pizer, the latter a British Jewish Marxist associated with the IASB and Padmore's partner, acted as Faure's interpreters during his visit to London.⁷¹ Despite being outnumbered, the ILP-IASB coalition managed to get two nominees, including Reynolds, on to the standing orders committee. This committee in turn succeeded in allowing Faure to be admitted as a fraternal delegate.⁷²

Faure addressed the conference on the second day. A report of his speech, written by Seleau, was published in *International African Opinion*. Faure accused the French Popular Front government of exacerbating colonial oppression. He cited the reestablishment of forced labour in West Africa, as well as the imprisonment of journalists in Indochina and his comrade in the Rassemblement coloniale, Messali Hadj. He continued that '[p]arties supposed to be on the Left have been willing agents of this vicious repression', and warned colonial peoples against 'the specious "anti-Fascist" slogans adopted by these bodies in an attempt to cloak their own Imperialist-Fascist designs.' Comparisons between fascism and colonialism as racialized systems

⁷⁰ 'International African Service Bureau Manifesto', 29 January 1940, TNA, MEPO 38/91. For more information on Faure and the LDRN see Rabah Aissaoui, 'Algerian nationalists in the French political arena and beyond: the Étoile nord-africaine and the Parti de peuple algérien in interwar France', *Journal of North African Studies*, 15 (2010), 1-12; Jennifer Anne Boittin, 'Black in France: The language and politics of race in the late Third Republic', *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 27 (2009), 23-46; Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators': Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-1939* (New York, 2008), ch. 3; Joseph Fronczak, 'Local people's global politics: A transnational history of the Hands Off Ethiopia Movement of 1935', *Diplomatic History*, 39 (2015), 245-74; J. Ayo Langley, 'Pan-Africanism in Paris, 1924-36', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 7 (1969), 69-94.

⁷¹ 2 August 1938, TNA, KV 2/3833 (Dorothy Pizer).

⁷² Reynolds, *My Life and Crimes*, 119.

of dominance and exploitation were rhetorically powerful, and Faure joined the IASB and ILP in making these comparisons in opposition to the Popular Front. Faure, like the IASB, contended that colonial peoples should not expect Europe to ‘give’ them freedom. However, with a different emphasis to the IASB, he argued that the ‘only possible means’ of defeating colonialism was ‘in the struggle for independence in the colonies themselves’, implicitly rejecting the idea that union with the European proletariat was strategically necessary.⁷³ The ILP report of the conference praised Faure’s speech for giving ‘details of the oppressive measures of the Popular Front Government and accus[ing] the Communists of being the worst enemies of colonial peoples’. The report highlighted the speech’s consonance with their own position.⁷⁴ In contrast, Reginald Bridgeman, the former secretary of the Communist-aligned League Against Imperialism, responded by arguing that ‘the Popular Front had saved France, and therefore saved England.’⁷⁵

The report published in the *Colonial Information Bulletin* omitted a summary of Faure’s speech. However, it approvingly detailed the response of Julius Jacobs, a Communist representative of the London Trades Council. Jacobs said that Faure ‘had apparently omitted to notice that there was a class struggle in France, that the Popular Front had improved the conditions of the masses and that the type of attack made upon it that afternoon could only bring

⁷³ Lelia Seleau, ‘The French Colonies under the Popular Front’, *International African Opinion*, August 1938, 5.

⁷⁴ ‘I.L.P. or Communist Policy for Colonial Workers?’, 5.

⁷⁵ Reginald Reynolds, ‘Under which King Bezonian?’, *Controversy*, September 1938, 236.

grist to the mill of the supporters of Fascism in France and elsewhere.⁷⁶ This prompted Reynolds to launch a blistering attack on Jacobs and the Colonial Information Bureau in the pages of the ILP's discussion journal, *Controversy*. Reynolds began by criticizing the Comintern for closing down the League Against Imperialism the previous year, when Moscow decided that 'perhaps after all French Imperialism was rather a Good Thing'. He also condemned the Colonial Information Bureau for omitting Faure's speech from its report, despite the speech being 'the sensation of the conference.'⁷⁷ Reynolds devoted the rest of his article to defending Faure and attacking the French Popular Front. He countered Bridgeman's argument that the Popular Front had 'saved' France by claiming that French democracy merely 'gave certain limited rights to 40,000,000 people in France, including the right to exploit, oppress, persecute, massacre and do exactly as they pleased with some 60,000,000 outside France.'⁷⁸ He further censured Jacobs for suggesting that 'the colonial under-dog ought to be very happy just as he is because the chap sitting on top of him can afford an extra lump of sugar in his coffee', and told him that if Faure had failed to notice the class struggle in France, it was because 'the Communists and their allies had so successfully liquidated [it] in the interests of French imperialism'.⁷⁹

The conference's general resolution was discussed during the final session, held on Saturday afternoon. It was introduced by Leonard Barnes, an anticolonial writer and supporter of

⁷⁶ 'Peace and Empire Conference', 5.

⁷⁷ Reynolds, 'Under which King Bezonian?', 236.

⁷⁸ Reynolds, 'Under which King Bezonian?', 237.

⁷⁹ Reynolds, 'Under which King Bezonian?', 238.

the Popular Front.⁸⁰ The resolution went further than the Communist statement ‘Peace and the Colonial Question’ by declaring that ‘the national freedom and independence of all colonial countries and subject peoples are indispensable to world peace.’ It did, though, throw its weight behind the Popular Front and collective security, calling for the ‘united action of all progressive and peaceful forces’ and couching the importance of national independence within the language of the ‘strengthening of the democratic and progressive movements everywhere’ and ‘halt[ing] Fascist aggression’.⁸¹

The ILP tabled a series of amendments to delete the references to collective security, to include an explicit statement of support for the struggles of colonial peoples against imperialism, and to ‘correct the emphasis of the resolution’ so that independence was demanded as a ‘death-blow to Imperialism rather than as a means of securing assistance for European “democracy.”’⁸² This set of amendments was defeated by 141 votes to twenty-three.⁸³ After this defeat, the ILP were prepared to vote for the second half of the general resolution, which called for colonial independence and contained few references to the Popular Front or collective security, but a suggestion that the resolution should be voted on paragraph-by-paragraph was refused.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ ‘Peace and Empire Conference’, 3.

⁸¹ ‘Peace and Empire Conference’, 3-4.

⁸² ‘I.L.P. or Communist Policy for Colonial Workers?’, 5.

⁸³ ‘Amendments to Resolution’, Papers of Reginald Bridgeman, DBN/27/3.

⁸⁴ ‘I.L.P. or Communist Policy for Colonial Workers?’, 5.

Reynolds and C.A. Smith therefore spoke for the ILP against the resolution, while CPGB members Bradley and Robin Page Arnot spoke for the resolution.⁸⁵

The IASB were represented by T. Ras Makonnen and Chris Jones. Makonnen attempted in his speech to alert delegates to the contradictions of the general resolution. He asked: ‘How can you have peace with empire? What you really want is peace of mind to continue to loot your empire. In fact we want war not peace, because only war will settle the contradictions latent in this empire, and show how false its pretensions are.’ He later claimed that this speech led to ‘many people walk[ing] out in disgust’.⁸⁶ To Makonnen, not a self-identified Marxist but nonetheless influenced by Lenin, colonialism was the driving force of European conflict, and reforming colonialism under the League of Nations would therefore fail to bring peace. Jones’s intervention came when Reynolds was heckled during his speech. Reynolds later recalled that Communist delegates realized the inappropriateness of heckling Faure, a black man speaking about colonialism, but were conversely unrestrained when Reynolds himself spoke. When Reynolds was met with shouts of ‘lies’ and ‘liar’, Jones, ‘like an avenging black angel’, shouted ‘It’s the truth. It’s the truth that yuh can’t stand!’ Reynolds claimed that the Communists, again confronted by a black opponent of the Popular Front, relapsed into temporary silence.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ ‘Peace and Empire Conference’, 4-5.

⁸⁶ T. Ras Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism from Within*, (London, 1973), 157.

⁸⁷ Reynolds, *My Life and Crimes*, 120.

For all this protest, the general resolution was passed, by an ‘overwhelming majority’ according to the Colonial Information Bureau, whereas the ILP claimed it was by a ratio of three-to-one and that this level of support for their position was ‘significant’.⁸⁸ At a meeting of the ILP’s national administrative council two weeks later, Fenner Brockway stated that the ILP was ‘well represented’ at the conference and that their case ‘received adequate expression’, suggesting they were, at least, genuinely content with their showing.⁸⁹ Similarly, Reynolds remembered that ‘we were out-numbered by the well-drilled Communist contingents; but there was still a marginal floating vote and I have never seen a Communist-staged conference so closely challenged.’⁹⁰ It is a testament to the strength of the ILP-IASB’s arguments and organization that they could cause such a stir at a Communist-controlled conference.

The *New Leader* report further stated that a ‘feature of the conference was the support given to the I.L.P. point of view by most of the delegates from the colonial workers’ organisations’, most notably the IASB but also delegates from Ceylon and the Arab delegation from Palestine. It declared that, despite losing the main vote, knowing that it had the support of colonial workers’ organizations was ‘sufficient’.⁹¹ The language of colonial ‘support’ for the ILP position implied, incorrectly, and intentionally or otherwise, a hierarchical relationship between resisters to the politics of the Popular Front. However, this premium placed on the opinions of

⁸⁸ ‘Peace and Empire Conference’, 5; ‘I.L.P. or Communist Policy for Colonial Workers?’, 5.

⁸⁹ Meeting of National Administrative Council, 30 and 31 July and 1 August 1938, British Library of Political and Economic Science, ILP/3/26.

⁹⁰ Reynolds, *My Life and Crimes*, 119.

⁹¹ ‘I.L.P. or Communist Policy for Colonial Workers?’, 5.

colonial, and particularly African and Caribbean, peoples is significant, and something of a novelty in the history of British anticolonialism. The ILP's satisfaction at their alignment with colonial activists even in losing the general vote should not be dismissed as a case of sour grapes.

Of course, as the ILP report tacitly acknowledged, their position did not have a monopoly on colonial opinion. Peter Blackman of the Negro Welfare Association, an organization for black workers founded by the Barbadian activist Arnold Ward in 1931 as an affiliate to the British section of the League Against Imperialism, supported the general resolution.⁹² Krishna Menon also supported the resolution, concluding the discussion with 'a strong appeal that the resolution should be passed with enthusiasm'.⁹³ Makonnen viewed the NWA as one of the CPGB's 'little front movements' and recounted that the IASB 'objected strongly to the idea of their representing Africans'. He also recalled that his own speech seemed 'a bit extreme ... to many of our Indian friends' (perhaps Menon and the India League), as they had merely wanted 'a broader front to stimulate more interest'.⁹⁴

The CPGB was eager to contest the amount of colonial support received by the ILP. The *Daily Worker* reported that '[v]arious attempts by a tiny minority of delegates representing organisations without any real basis deliberately to disrupt the proceedings were recognised as of

⁹² For the NWA, see Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism*, ch. 7.

⁹³ 'Peace and Empire Conference', 5.

⁹⁴ Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism from Within*, 157.

no importance'.⁹⁵ The general secretary, Harry Pollitt, reporting to the party's congress in September 1938, condemned 'Trotskyists' for their 'well-organised attempt to wreck the Peace and Empire Conference'. Given the apparent absence of Trotskyists from the conference (even the IASB's James seems not to have been in attendance), it appears that Pollitt was baselessly referring to the ILP and IASB as Trotskyists, who were often derided as 'fascists' by Communists due to their opposition to the Popular Front. However, Pollitt did not explicitly mention the IASB, instead portraying the conference's tensions as being between 'disruptionist', and presumably white, Trotskyist forces on the one hand, and the mainstream of a conference 'presided over by Nehru' on the other.⁹⁶ This was a misleading statement, ignoring that black and colonial activists were an important part of this 'disruption', and adds credence to Owen's argument that Nehru's support was an important asset for the CPGB in deflecting anticolonial criticism of the Popular Front.

Aftermath and legacies

A second event, the Peace and Empire Congress, was held in the McLellan Galleries on Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow on Saturday 24 and Sunday 25 September 1938. There were 634 delegates representing similar organizations to those present at the London conference, and Menon moved a near identical resolution, which was passed. The chairman would have been the LNU leader, Robert Cecil, were he not unable to attend, illustrating the extent of the previously

⁹⁵ 'British Youth to Visit India', *Daily Worker*, 18 July 1938, 8.

⁹⁶ Communist Party of Great Britain, *For Peace and Plenty! Report of the Fifteenth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain* (London, 1938), 69-70.

unimaginable alliances that the CPGB was willing to make in the interests of the Popular Front.⁹⁷ As expected, the Glasgow congress effectively served as a replay of the London event. This time the IASB was represented by Padmore, whose speech, according to *International African Opinion*, ‘exposed the logical fallacy in the belief expressed by most of the conference that peace and empire could be reconciled.’⁹⁸ Tom Taylor and James Carmichael spoke for the forty-strong ILP delegation, and the *New Leader* noted that the impression made by their speeches ‘was deepened by the presentation of the case for the colonial workers contributed by George Padmore’. Taylor, Carmichael and Padmore argued that during the impending war, colonial peoples should be encouraged to revolt against imperialism. Glasgow was one of the ILP’s strongholds, and following the conclusion of the congress on 25 September, Padmore ‘addressed a vast meeting in Glasgow and forcibly stated the attitude of the I.L.P. and of colonial workers’ organisations on the war question’, and ‘received enthusiastic backing’ for his speech.⁹⁹ The previous month, the IASB and ILP had collaborated on an anticolonialist ‘counter-exhibition’ to the Empire Exhibition held in Glasgow’s Bellahouston Park. Carmichael and Ethel Mannin formally opened the exhibition, and messages of support were received from Brockway, Nehru and James Maxton.¹⁰⁰ The IASB’s report of the counter-exhibition opined that the fact that a

⁹⁷ ‘Peace and Empire’, *Colonial Information Bulletin*, 30 September 1938, 6-7.

⁹⁸ ‘Activities of the Bureau’, *International African Opinion*, October 1938, 16.

⁹⁹ ‘The Colonies in Wartime’, *New Leader*, 30 September 1938, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Sarah Britton, “‘Come and see the empire by the all red route!’: Anti-imperialism and exhibitions in interwar Britain”, *History Workshop Journal*, 69 (2010), 68-89.

British party now centred anticolonialism in its political programme was ‘a great step forward in Socialist history’.¹⁰¹

The July 1938 Conference on Peace and Empire held in London, and the second event held in Glasgow, therefore provide the best illustrations — save, perhaps, for the debates over the Italo-Ethiopian War — of the tensions within British anticolonialism in the 1930s. The importance of the IASB, and particularly of Padmore, in shaping the ILP’s anticolonialism in this period should not be underestimated. The IASB developed a reputation for being the ‘colonial bureau’ of the ILP, and Padmore even edited the party’s journal, despite never joining the party. In January 1939, the ILP and IASB formed the British Centre Against Imperialism, a short-lived organization that was the spiritual predecessor to the post-war Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF).¹⁰² It was the intellectual and political alliance between black socialists and the ILP that informed the anticolonial politics of the MCF, which drew much of its leadership from inter-war ILP members such as Brockway and Bob Edwards and forthrightly supported the pan-Africanist project of Kwame Nkrumah — Ghana’s first president and Padmore’s mentee.¹⁰³ This, then, was a section of the British left that placed anticolonialism at the centre of its socialist politics, and which from the 1930s and into the post-war period comprised a coalition of black and white activists. If the CPGB’s watchword of the second half of the 1930s was ‘against fascism and war’,¹⁰⁴ then the IASB’s and ILP’s was, in effect, *against capitalism and colonialism, and through*

¹⁰¹ ‘Anti-Imperialist Exhibition in Glasgow’, *International African Opinion*, July 1938, 16.

¹⁰² ‘Important Decisions at Colonial Conference’, *New Leader*, 27 January 1939, 4.

¹⁰³ For the MCF, see Howe, *Anticolonialism*, chs 6-7.

*that against fascism and war.*¹⁰⁴ The fundamental theoretical disagreements about the relationships between these four phenomena led to a cleavage within the British socialist movement that would endure through the Second World War. While the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (between Germany and the Soviet Union) of August 1939 prompted a softening of Communist antifascism and a revival of its anticolonialism (at least in theory), the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 caused an instant reversion to the old antifascist priorities, as the CPGB became fervently hawkish patriots.

Seven years after the Conference on Peace and Empire, the Fifth Pan-African Congress was held in Manchester. Padmore, one of the primary organizers, reported on the congress for the *Chicago Defender*. The first speech reported by Padmore, however, was not made by one of the many leading radicals of Africa and its diaspora present at the congress (who included Amy Ashwood Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Kenyatta, Nkrumah, and Padmore himself), but rather by the white secretary of the ILP, John McNair. McNair told the audience that they must ‘battle for complete political independence’, and that this would be achieved not through ‘trusting the hypocrisy of the British Imperialist class’, who would never voluntarily leave Africa. Instead, the congress delegates must return to their homelands and take their independence through struggle.¹⁰⁵ The pride of place given to McNair’s speech, at first glance, seems odd, but this example of collaboration between the ILP and British-based pan-Africanists was in fact the continuation of a deep political comradeship that had developed over the previous decade, and

¹⁰⁴ Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*.

¹⁰⁵ George Padmore, ‘Colonials Demand Freedom’, *Chicago Defender*, 27 October 1945, 1.

one exemplified at the 1938 Conference on Peace and Empire. From this perspective, we can see how black activists reshaped socialist politics in Britain, and, accordingly, how the politics of anticolonialism informed the alliances and divisions of the British left during the inter-war period and beyond. A coalition of black and white socialists in Britain were committed to the project of ending colonialism from below.