

Chapter 8

Self-Determination: The Fight for a Correct Line

Towards the end of 1927, Nasanov returned to the Soviet Union after a sojourn in the United States as the representative of the Young Communist International. I had known him briefly in the States before my departure for Russia. Nasanov was one of a group of YCI workers who had been sent on missions to several countries. He had considerable experience with respect to the national and colonial question and was considered an expert on these matters.

Nasanov's observations had convinced him that U.S. Blacks were essentially an oppressed nation whose struggle for equality would ultimately take an autonomous direction and that the content of the Black liberation movement was the completion of the agrarian and democratic revolution in the South – a struggle which was left unresolved by the Civil War and betrayal of Reconstruction. Therefore, it was the duty of the Party to channel the movement in a revolutionary direction by raising and supporting the slogan of the right of self-determination for Afro-Americans in the Black Belt, the area of their greatest concentration.

Upon his return, Nasanov sought me out and it was he, I believe, who first informed me that I had been elected to the National Committee of the YCL back in the States. In the months ahead, we were to become close friends. Through him, I met a number of YCI people, mostly Soviet comrades who held the same position as Nasanov did on the national question. They seemed to be pushing to have the matter reviewed at the forthcoming Sixth Congress of the Comintern. And as it later became clear to me, they were anxious to recruit at least one Black to support their position.

As I have indicated before, the position was not entirely new to me. I was present at the meeting of the YCL District Committee in Chicago in 1924 when Bob Mazut (then YCI rep to the U.S.), at the behest of Zinoviev, had raised the question of self-determination. At that time, he had been shouted down by the white comrades. (See Chapter Four.)

Sen Katayama had told us Black KUTVA students that Lenin had regarded U.S. Blacks as an oppressed nation and referred us to his draft resolution on the national and colonial question which was adopted by the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920.¹ Otto and other Black students had also told me that they got a similar

impression from their meeting with Stalin at the Kremlin shortly after their arrival in the Soviet Union.

All of this seemed tentative to me. No one had elaborated the position fully and Nasanov was the first person I met who attempted to argue it definitively. But all of these arguments, and especially Nasanov's prodding, set me to thinking and confronted me with the need to apply concretely my newly-acquired Marxist-Leninist knowledge on the national-colonial question to the condition of Blacks in the United States.

To me, the idea of a Black nation within U.S. boundaries deemed far-fetched and not consonant with American reality. I saw the solution through the incorporation of Blacks into U.S. society on the basis of complete equality, and only socialism could bring this to pass. There was no doubt in my mind that the path to freedom for us Blacks led directly to socialism, uncluttered by any interim stage of self-determination or Black political power. The unity of Black and white workers against the common enemy, U.S. capitalism, was the motor leading toward the dual goal of Black freedom and socialism.

I felt that it was difficult enough to build this unity, without adding to it the gratuitous assumption of a non-existent Black nation, with its implication of a separate state on U.S. soil. To do so, I felt, was to create new and unnecessary roadblocks to the already difficult path to Black and white unity.

Socialism, I reasoned, was not in contradiction to the movement for Black cultural identity, expressed in the cultural renaissance of the twenties and in Garvey's emphasis on race pride and history (which I regarded as one of the positive aspects of that movement). Socialism for U.S. Blacks did not imply loss of cultural identity any more than it did for the Jews of the Soviet Union, among whom I had witnessed the proliferation of the positive features of Jewish culture – theater, literature and language.

The Jews were not considered a nation because they were not concentrated in any definite territory; they were regarded as a national minority and Birobidzhan was set aside as a Jewish autonomous province. Such a bolstering of self-respect, dignity and self-assertion on the part of a formerly oppressed minority people was a necessary stage in the development of a universal culture which would amalgamate the best features of all national groups. This was definitely the policy of the Soviet Union with regard to formerly oppressed nationalities and ethnic groups.

Like the Jews, I reasoned, the position of U.S. Blacks was that

of an oppressed race, though at the time I am sure I would have been hard-pressed to define precisely what was meant by that phrase. The main factor in the oppression of Jews under the Czar had been the religious factor; the main factor with U.S. Blacks was race. Blacks lacked some of the essential attributes of a nation which had been defined by Stalin in his classic work, *Marxism and the National Question*.²

Most assuredly, one could argue that among Blacks there existed elements of a special culture and also a common language (English). But this did not add up to a nation, I reasoned. Missing was the all-important aspect of a national territory. Even if one agreed that the Black Belt, where Blacks were largely concentrated, rightfully belonged to them, they were in no geographic position to assert their right of self-determination.

I could see many analogies between the national problem in the old Czarist Empire and the problem of U.S. Blacks, but the analogy floundered on this question of territory. For the subject nations of the old Czarist Empire were situated either on the border of the oppressing Great Russian nation or were completely outside it. But American Blacks were set down in the very midst of the oppressing white nation, the strongest capitalist power on earth. Faced with this, it was no wonder that most nationalist movements up until then had taken the road of a separate state outside the United States. How then could one convince U.S. Blacks that the right of self-determination was a realistic program?

Nasanov and his young friends answered my arguments over the course of a series of discussions and were quick to pick out the flaws in my position. They contended that I was guilty of an ahistoric approach with respect to the elements of nationhood. Certainly, some of the attributes of a nation were weakly developed in the case of U.S. Blacks. But that was the case with most oppressed peoples precisely because the imperialist policy of national oppression is directed towards artificially and forcibly retaining the economic and cultural backwardness of the colonial peoples as a condition for their super-exploitation. My mistake had been to ignore Lenin's dictum that in the epoch of imperialism it was essential to differentiate between the oppressor and the oppressed nations.

They further contended that I had presented the matter as though self-determination were solely a question for Blacks. I had therefore separated the Black rebellion from the struggle for socialism in the United States. In fact, it was a constituent part of the lat-

ter struggle or, more precisely, a special phase of the struggle of the American working class for socialism.

My argument added up to a defense of the current position of the U.S. Party, albeit I had embellished the position somewhat against Nasanov's criticisms. Up to this point, the Black students had not challenged the Party's line on Afro-American work. We reasoned that the Party's default in the work among Blacks was not the result of an incorrect line, but came from a failure to carry out in practice its declared line. We believed that this failure was due to an underestimation of the importance of work among Blacks, which came from an underestimation of the revolutionary potential of the struggle of the Black masses for equality. All this resulted from the persistence of remnants of white racist ideology within the ranks of the Party, including some of its leadership.

Nasanov and some of his friends agreed with us that the American CP did underestimate the revolutionary potential of the Black struggle for equality. But, they maintained, this underestimation came from a fundamentally incorrect social-democratic line, rather than from white chauvinism. They said that I had stood the whole matter on its head: I had presented the incorrect policies as the result of subjective white chauvinist attitudes; whereas, they pointed out that the white chauvinist attitudes persisted precisely because the Party's line was fundamentally incorrect in that it denied the national character of the question.

"Our American comrades seem to think that only the direct struggle for socialism is revolutionary," they told me, "and that the national movement detracts from that struggle and is therefore reactionary." This, they pointed out, was an American version of the "pure proletarian revolution" concept; they referred me to Lenin's polemic against Radek on the question of self-determination.

The Bolsheviks also criticized my formulation of the matter as primarily a race question. To call the matter a race question, they said, was to fall into the bourgeois liberal trap of regarding the fight for equality as primarily a fight against racial prejudices of whites. This slurred over the economic and social roots of the question and obscured the question of the agrarian democratic revolution in the South, which was pivotal to the struggle for Black equality throughout the country. They pointed out that it was wrong to counterpose the struggle for equality to the struggle for self-determination. For in fact, in the South, self-determination for Blacks (political power in their own hands) was the guarantee of equality.

HISTORY OF THE QUESTION IN THE COMINTERN

In these discussions with my young friends, which extended over the course of several months, I became keenly aware of the gaps in my understanding of Marxist-Leninist theory on the national-colonial question. I was to find, as Nasanov and others had indicated, that the idea of Blacks as an oppressed nation was not new in the Comintern. Though Stalin was undoubtedly the person pushing the position at the time, it had not originated with him, but with Lenin himself.

It first appeared in Lenin's "Draft Theses on the National-Colonial Question" which he submitted to the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920. The draft, which was later adopted, called upon the communist parties to "render direct aid to the revolutionary movements among the dependent and underprivileged nations (for example, Ireland, the American Negroes, etc.) and in the colonies."³

Some have argued that Lenin's reference to U.S. Blacks as a subject nation was merely a tentative deduction. When he submitted his draft, he asked the delegates for opinions and suggestions on fifteen points, one of which was "Negroes in America."⁴

It was recorded, however, that the Colonial Commission of the congress, which Lenin himself headed and in which Sen Katayama was a leading member, held lengthy discussions on the question of U.S. Blacks.⁵

John Reed, the American author, was a delegate and participated in the discussion, apparently in opposition to Lenin's formulations. In fact, he made two speeches, one in the commission and one to the congress, contending that the problem of U.S. Blacks was that of "both a strong race movement and a strong proletarian workers' movement which is rapidly developing in class consciousness."⁶ Equating all national movements among Blacks to Garvey's Back to Africa separatism, he contended that "a movement which struggles for a separate national existence has no success among the Negroes, like the 'Back to Africa' movement, for example" and that Blacks "consider themselves above all Americans, they feel at home in the United States. This makes the tasks of communists very much easier."⁷

But despite Reed's objections, the reference to American Blacks as an oppressed nation remained in the resolution as finally adopted. For Lenin's thesis was not something spun out of thin air, but was the result of a serious study of the question. This is clear from his work "New Data on the Laws Governing the Development

of Capitalism in Agriculture,” which spoke about the United States.

In this work, published in 1915 (and based on the U.S. Census of 1910), Lenin viewed the question of Blacks in the South as one of an uncompleted agrarian and bourgeois democratic revolution. He drew attention to the remarkable similarity between the economic positions of the South’s Black tenants and the emancipated serfs in the agrarian centers of Russia, pointing out that both groups were not tenants in the European civilized sense, but “....semi-slaves, share-croppers...”⁸

Emphasizing the absence of elementary democratic rights, among Blacks, he alluded to the South as “the most stagnant area, where the masses are subjected to the greatest degradation and oppression... a kind of prison where (these ‘emancipated’ Negroes) are hemmed in, isolated, and deprived of fresh air.”⁹ These kinds of conditions, the lot of the vast majority of U.S. Blacks, undoubtedly led Lenin to conclude that their movement for “emancipation” would take a national revolutionary direction.

Conclusive proof of Lenin’s thinking at the time with respect to U.S. Blacks can be found in an uncompleted work written in 1917, though not available until 1935. The work, “Statistics and Sociology,” was begun in the early part of 1917, but was interrupted by the February Revolution and never resumed.¹⁰

In the section of the manuscript referring to U.S. Blacks, he drew a clear distinction between their positions and that of the foreign-born immigrants, that is between the white foreign-born assimilables and the Black unassimilables.

In the United States, the Negroes (and also the Mulattos and Indians) account for only 11.1 per cent. They should be classed as an oppressed nation, for the equality won in the Civil War of 1861-1865 and guaranteed by the Constitution of the republic was in many respects increasingly curtailed in the chief Negro areas (the South) in connection with the transition from the progressive, pre-monopoly capitalism of 1860-1870 to the reactionary, monopoly capitalism (imperialism) of the new era.”¹¹

Whereas with the white foreign-born immigrants, Lenin observed that the speed of development of capitalism in America has produced a situation in which vast national differences are speedily and fundamentally, as nowhere else in the world, smoothed out to form a single ‘American nation’.”¹²

All of this shows that the idea that U.S. Blacks comprise an oppressed nation was neither a temporary nor tentative formulation on

Lenin's part.

Despite the thesis of the Second Congress, Reed's views – reflecting as they did the position of the young American Party – were to persist in the U.S. without serious challenge through the Fifth Congress of the Comintern. The Third Congress of 1921 recorded no discussion with respect to the character of the problem.

The Fourth Congress in 1922 also did not seriously discuss the point. This meeting, however, marked the first appearance of Black delegates to the Comintern. They were Otto Huiswood as regular Party delegate, and the poet Claude McKay as a special fraternal delegate. It was also the first congress to set up a Negro Commission, and extended discussions took place on the thesis brought in by the commission which characterized the position of U.S. Blacks as an aspect of the colonial question. It stressed the special role of American Blacks in support of the liberation struggles of Africa, Central and South America and the Caribbean.

The thesis of the Fourth Congress did add a new, international dimension to the question, but it did not challenge the Party's basic anti-self-determination position. This position was stressed in a speech by Huiswood (Billings) which called the Afro-American question "another phase of the racial and colonial question," an essentially economic problem which was "intensified by the friction which exists between the white and black races."¹³

The discussion of the character of the question came up in the Fifth Congress in 1924, this time in connection with the Draft Program of the Communist International. For the first time since the Second Congress, the discussion centered directly on the character of the question as an oppressed nation and the appropriateness of the slogan of the right of self-determination

August Thalheimer (the German head of the Commission on the Draft Program) reported that "the slogan of the right of self-determination cannot solve all national questions." Such is the case in the United States, "where there is an extraordinarily mixed population" and where the "race question" is also involved. Therefore, he pointed out, "the Program Commission was of the opinion that the slogan of right of self-determination must be supplemented by another slogan: 'Equal Rights for all Nationalities and Races'."¹⁴

Representing the U.S. at the Fifth Congress, John Pepper supported this anti-self-determination position. According to him, the United States was a country in which the different nationalities could not be separated. Self-determination was not appropriate;

Blacks in the U.S. did not want it. "They do not want to set up a separate state inside the U.S.A.," and they wish to remain inside the U.S., not leave it for Africa. To the demand of "social equality," he held that "we should change these words to the following: full equality in every respect."¹⁵

Lovett Fort-Whiteman, the sole Black delegate, apparently supported Pepper's position and gave his standard speech (which I was to hear a number of times in the States). He stressed the racial aspect of the problem and called for a special communist approach to Blacks.

There appeared to be no opposition to the draft program, but, after all, it was only the first version. The program in its final form was to be discussed and adopted at the Sixth Congress. Apparently Zinoviev and others in the CI leadership were not satisfied with the formulation that had rejected self-determination for U.S. Blacks. Zinoviev had instructed Bob Mazut to investigate the question while on his assignment to the U.S., immediately following the congress.

Such was the situation following the Fifth Congress. The question can be raised as to why the U.S. Party's position was not seriously challenged during this whole period and why the proponents in the Comintern of the self-determination thesis failed to press for their position.

Their reluctance in this regard, I presume, was because they did not want to push their position against the unanimous opposition of the American Party, including its Black members. After all, the Comintern was a voluntary union of communist parties which operated under democratic-centralism. It was not the policy of the Comintern leadership to arbitrarily force positions on member parties.

1928: A REEXAMINATION OF THE QUESTION

How are we to account then for the renewed interest in the Afro-American question among certain influential leaders of the Comintern on the eve of the Sixth Congress? Why the drive to reopen the question? The answer lies in the changed world situation: the sharpened crisis of the world capitalist system, consequent on the breakdown of partial capitalist stabilization; the beginning of a deepening economic depression in Europe; and the continued upsurge of the colonial revolutions in China, India and Indonesia.

These harbingers of the new period were pointed out by Stalin at the Fifteenth Congress of the CPSU in early December 1927, in which he referred to the "collapsing stabilization" of capitalism.¹⁶

It was to be a period of revolutionary struggle. In order to lead these struggles, an attack on right opportunism was required in the practice and work of the communist parties. It was a period in which the national and colonial question was to acquire a new urgency. The CI paid special attention to the fight against those views which liquidated or downplayed the importance of the question. In this context, the Comintern felt that the establishment of a revolutionary line on the Afro-American question was key if the CPUSA was to lead the joint struggle of the Black and white working masses in the coming period.

The low status of the CP's Negro work itself was another factor pressing for a radical policy review. There had been no progress in this work, despite the prodding of the Comintern. As already mentioned, the highly touted American Negro Labor Congress had failed to even get off the ground.

In a speech at the Sixth Congress, James Ford counted nineteen communications from the Comintern to the U.S. Party on Negro work, none of which had been put into effect or brought before the Party. He further observed that "we have no more than 50 Negroes in our Party, out of the 12 million Negroes in America."¹⁷

All of these factors strengthened the determination of the Comintern to make the Sixth Congress the arena for a drastic re-evaluation of work and policy in this area.

In the winter of 1928, preparations were already afoot for the Sixth Congress which was to convene the following summer. The Anglo-American Secretariat of the CI set up a special sub-committee on the Negro question which would prepare a draft resolution for the official Negro Commission of the Congress.

As I recall, the subcommittee consisted of Nasanov and five students: four Blacks (including my brother Otto and myself) and one white student, Clarence Hathaway, from the Lenin School. In addition, there were some ex-officio members: Profintern rep Bill Dunne and Comintern rep Bob Minor. They seldom attended our sessions. James Ford, who was then assigned to the Profintern, also attended some sessions.

Our subcommittee met and broke the subject down into topics; each of us accepted one as his assignment to research and report on to the committee as a whole. The high point in the discussion was the report of my brother Otto on Garvey's Back to Africa movement. In his report, he concluded that the nationalism expressed in that movement had no objective base in the economic, social and

political conditions of U.S. Blacks. It was, he asserted, a foreign importation artificially grafted onto the freedom movement of U.S. Blacks by the West Indian nationalist, Garvey.

U.S. Blacks, Otto concluded, were not an oppressed nation but an oppressed racial minority. The long-range goal of the movement was not the right of self-determination but complete economic, social and political equality to be won through a revolutionary alliance of Blacks and class-conscious white labor in a joint struggle for socialism against the common enemy, U.S. capitalism.

Up to that point, I was still not certain as regarded the applicability of the right of self-determination to the problems of Blacks in the U.S., but my misgivings about the slogan had been shaken somewhat by the series of discussions I had had with my Russian friends. Otto, in his report, had merely restated the CP's current position. But somehow, against the background of our discussion of the Garvey movement, the inadequacy of that position stood out like a sore thumb. Otto, however, had done more than simply restate the position; he brought out into the open what had been implicit in the Party's position all along. That is, that any type of nationalism among Blacks was reactionary.

This view, it occurred to me, was the logical outcome of any position which saw only the "pure proletarian" class struggle as the sole revolutionary struggle against capitalism. The Party had traditionally considered the Afro-American question as that of a persecuted racial minority. They centered their activity almost exclusively on Blacks as workers and treated the question as basically a simple trade union matter, underrating other aspects of the struggle. The struggle for equal rights was seen as a diversion that would obscure or overshadow the struggle for socialism.

But how could one wage a fight against white chauvinism from that position? I thought at the time that viewing everything in light of the trade union question would lead to a denial of the revolutionary potential of the struggle of the whole people for equality. Otto's rejection of nationalism as an indigenous trend brought these points out sharply in my mind.

In the discussion, I pointed out that Otto's position was not merely a rejection of Garveyism but also a denial of nationalism as a legitimate trend in the Black freedom movement. I felt that it amounted to throwing out the baby with the bathwater. With my insight sharpened by previous discussions, I argued further that the nationalism reflected in the Garvey movement was not a foreign transplant, nor did it

spring full-blown from the brow of Jove. On the contrary, it was an indigenous product, arising from the soil of Black super-exploitation and oppression in the United States. It expressed the yearnings of millions of Blacks for a nation of their own.

As I pursued this logic, a totally new thought occurred to me, and for me it was the clincher. The Garvey movement is dead, I reasoned, but not Black nationalism. Nationalism, which Garvey diverted under the slogan of Back to Africa, was an authentic trend, likely to flare up again in periods of crisis and stress. Such a movement might again fall under the leadership of utopian visionaries who would seek to divert it from the struggle against the main enemy, U.S. imperialism, and on to a reactionary separatist path. The only way such a diversion of the struggle could be forestalled was by presenting a revolutionary alternative to Blacks.

To the slogan of “Back to Africa,” I argued, we must counterpose the slogan of “right of self-determination here in the Deep South.” Our slogan for the U.S. Black rebellion therefore must be the “right of self-determination in the South, with full equality throughout the country,” to be won through revolutionary alliance with politically conscious white workers against the common enemy – U.S. imperialism.

Nasanov was seated across the table from me during this discussion and, elated at my presentation, he demonstratively rose to shake my hand. I was the first American communist (with perhaps the exception of Briggs) to support the thesis that U.S. Blacks constituted an oppressed nation.

The next day, Nasanov and I submitted a resolution to the subcommittee incorporating our views. We couldn’t get a majority but we had Hathaway’s support, as I remember. It was agreed that the resolution be submitted to the Anglo-American Secretariat as the views of those who subscribed to it, and those who disagreed with it would present their own views.

The only really persistent opposition in the subcommittee, as I remember, came from Otto; the other students were somewhat ambivalent on the question. I attributed much of this to Sik’s influence, since he had already begun to develop his position which held that the question of U.S. Blacks was a “race” question and that Blacks should not demand self-determination, but simply full social and political equality. His theories were later used by the Lovestoneites and others who opposed the self-determination position.

Once my hesitations were overcome, the whole theory fell logi-

cally into place. Here is the full analysis as I came to understand it. The thesis that called for the right of self-determination is supported by a serious economic-historical analysis of U.S. Blacks.

The evolution of American Blacks as an oppressed nation was begun in slavery. In the final analysis, however, it was the result of the unfinished bourgeois democratic revolution of the Civil War and the betrayal of Reconstruction through the Hayes-Tilden (Gentlemen's) Agreement of 1877.

This betrayal was followed by withdrawal of federal troops and the unleashing of counter-revolutionary terror, including the massacre of thousands of Blacks and the overthrow of the Reconstruction governments which had been based on an alliance of Blacks, poor whites and carpetbaggers. The result was that the Black freedmen, deserted by their former Republican allies, were left without land. Their newly-won rights were destroyed with the abrogation of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and they were thrust back upon the plantations of their former masters in a position but little removed from chattel bondage.

The revolution had stopped short of a solution to the crucial land question; there was neither confiscation of the big plantations of the former slaveholding class, nor distribution of the land among the Negro freedmen and poor whites. It was around this issue of land for the freedmen that the revolutionary democratic wave of Radical Reconstruction beat in vain and finally broke.

The advent of imperialism, the epoch of trusts and monopolies at the turn of the century, froze the Blacks in their post-Reconstruction position: landless, semi-slaves in the South. It blocked the road to fusion of Blacks and whites into one nation on the basis of equality and put the final seal on the special oppression of Blacks. The path towards equality and freedom via assimilation was foreclosed by these events, and the struggle for Black equality thenceforth was ultimately bound to take a national revolutionary direction.

Under conditions of imperialist and racist oppression, Blacks in the South were to acquire all the attributes of a subject nation. They are a people set apart by a common ethnic origin, economically interrelated in various classes, united by a common historical experience, reflected in a special culture and psychological makeup. The territory of this subject nation is the Black Belt, an area encompassing the Deep South, which, despite massive out-migrations, still contained (and does to this day) the country's largest concentration

of Blacks.

Thus, imperialist oppression created the conditions for the eventual rise of a national liberation movement with its base in the South. The content of this movement would be the completion of the agrarian democratic revolution in the South; that is, the right of self-determination as the guarantee of complete equality throughout the country.

This new analysis defined the status of Blacks in the north as an unassimilable national minority who cannot escape oppression by fleeing the South. The shadow of the plantation falls upon them throughout the country, as the semi-slave relations in the Black Belt continually reproduce Black inequality and servitude in all walks of life.

There are certain singular features of the submerged Afro-American nation which differentiate it from other oppressed nations and which have made the road towards national consciousness and identity difficult and arduous. Afro-Americans are not only "a nation within a nation," but a captive nation, suffering a colonial-type oppression while trapped within the geographic bounds of one of the world's most powerful imperialist countries.

Blacks were forced into the stream of U.S. history in a peculiar manner, as chattel slaves, and are victims of an excruciatingly destructive system of oppression and persecution, due not only to the economic and social survivals of slavery, but also to its ideological heritage, racism.

The Afro-American nation is also unique in that it is a new nation evolved from a people forcibly transplanted from their original African homeland. A people comprised of various tribal and linguistic groups, they are a product not of their native African soil, but of the conditions of their transplantation.

The overwhelming, stifling factor of race, the doctrine of inherent Black inferiority perpetuated by ruling class ideologues, has sunk deep into the thinking of Americans. It has become endemic, permeating the entire structure of U.S. life. Given this, Blacks could only remain permanently unabsorbed in the new world's "melting pot."

The race factor has also left its stigma on the consciousness of the Black nation, creating a powerful mystification about Black Americans which has served to obscure their objective status as an oppressed nation. It has twisted the direction of the Afro-American liberation movement and scarred it while still in its embryonic state.

Although the objective base for equality and freedom via direct integration was foreclosed by the defeat of Reconstruction and the

advent of the U.S. as an imperialist power, bourgeois assimilationist illusions were continued into the new era. They were nurtured and kept alive by the nascent Black middle class and the liberal detachment of the white bourgeoisie.

Conditions, however, were maturing for the rise of a mass nationalist movement. This movement was to burst with explosive force upon the political scene in the period following World War I, with the rise of the Garvey movement. The potentially revolutionary movement of Black toilers was diverted into utopian reactionary channels of a peaceful return to Africa.

The period of bourgeois democratic revolutions in the United States ended with the defeat of democratic Reconstruction. The issue of Black freedom was carried over into the epoch of imperialism. Its full solution postponed to the next stage of human progress, socialism. The question has remained and become the most vulnerable area on the domestic front of U.S. capitalism, its “Achilles heel” – a major focus of the contradictions in U.S. society.

Blacks, therefore, in the struggle for national liberation and the entire working class in its struggle for socialism are natural allies. The forging of this alliance is enhanced by the presence of a growing Black industrial working class with direct and historical connections with white labor.

This new line established that the Black freedom struggle is a revolutionary movement in its own right, directed against the very foundations of U.S. imperialism, with its own dynamic pace and momentum, resulting from the unfinished democratic and land revolutions in the South. It places the Black liberation movement and the class struggle of U.S. workers in their proper relationship as two aspects of the fight against the common enemy – U S capitalism. It elevates the Black movement to a position of equality in that battle.

The new theory destroys forever the white racist theory traditional among class-conscious white workers which had relegated the struggle of Blacks to a subsidiary position in the revolutionary movement. Race is defined as a device of national oppression, a smokescreen thrown up by the class enemy, to hide the underlying economic and social conditions involved in Black oppression and to maintain the division of the working class.

The new theory was to sensitize the Party to the revolutionary significance of the Black liberation struggle. During the crisis of the thirties, a significant segment of radicalized white workers would come to see the Blacks as revolutionary allies.

The struggle for this position had now begun; there remained its adoption by the Comintern and its final acceptance by the U.S. Party. Our draft resolution, which summed up these points, was turned over to Petrovsky (Bennett), Chairman of the Anglo-American Secretariat. He seemed quite pleased with it, expressed his agreement and suggested some minor changes. He agreed to submit it to the Negro Commission at the forthcoming Sixth Congress.

I continued to work with Nasanov on preparations for the congress. By that time, we had become quite a team. Our next project was the South African question, a question which also fell under the jurisdiction of the Anglo-American Secretariat.

We were assigned to work with James La Guma, a South African Colored comrade who had come to Moscow to attend the Tenth Anniversary celebrations and stayed on to discuss with the ECCI and the Anglo-American Secretariat the problems of the South African Party. Specifically, we were to draft a new resolution on the question, restating and elaborating the Comintern line of an independent Native South African Republic. (The word "Native" was in common usage at the time of the Sixth Congress, though today it is considered derogatory and has been replaced with Black republic or Azania.)

SOUTH AFRICA

This line, formulated the year before with the cooperation of La Guma during his first visit to the Soviet Union in the spring of 1927, had been rejected by the leadership of the South African Party.

La Guma, as I recall, was a young brown-skinned man of Malagasy and French parentage. In South Africa, this placed him in the Colored category, a rung above the Natives on the racial ladder established by the white supremacist rulers. Colored persons were defined as those of mixed blood, including descendants of Javanese slaves, mixed in varying degrees with European whites.

La Guma, however, identified completely with the Natives and their movement. He had been general secretary of the ICU (Industrial and Commercial Union, the federation of Native trade unions) and also secretary of the Capetown branch of the ANC. Later, after his expulsion from the ICU by the red-baiting clique of Clements Kadalie (a Native social democrat), La Guma became secretary of the non-European trade union federation in Capetown.

La Guma was the first South African communist I had ever met. I was delighted and impressed with him and was to find, in the

course of our brief collaboration, striking parallels between the struggles of U.S. Blacks for equality and those of the Native South Africans. In both countries, the white leadership of their respective parties underestimated the revolutionary potential of the Black movement.

La Guma had made his first trip to Moscow the year before. He and Josiah Gumede, president of the ANC, had come as delegates to the inaugural conference of the League Against Imperialism which had convened in Brussels, Belgium, in February 1927. Gumede attended as a delegate from the ANC, while La Guma was a delegate from the South African Communist Party. It was La Guma's first international gathering, and he had the opportunity to meet with leaders from colonial and semi-colonial countries and discuss the South African question with them. Madame Sun Yat-sen and Pandit Nehru were among those present. The conference adopted the resolutions of the South African delegates on the right of self-determination through the complete overthrow of imperialism. The general resolutions of the congress proclaimed: "Africa for the Africans, and their full freedom and equality with other races and the right to govern Africa."¹⁸

After Brussels, La Guma went on a speaking tour to Germany, after which he came to Moscow. Although the Brussels conference had called for the right of self-determination, it left unanswered many specific questions that are raised by that slogan. Were the Natives in South Africa a nation? What was to be done with the whites?

La Guma was to find the answer to these questions in Moscow, where he consulted with ECCI leaders, including Bukharin, who was then president of the Comintern. He participated with ECCI leaders in the formulation of a resolution on the South African question, calling for the return of the land to the natives and for "an independent native South African republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' republic with full, equal rights for all races."¹⁹

La Guma returned to South Africa with the resolution in June 1927; Gumede also arrived home in the same month. But the resolution was received hostilely by Bunting and was rejected by the South African Party leadership at its annual conference in December 1927.

Bunting was a British lawyer who had come to South Africa some years before. An early South African socialist and a founder of the Communist Party, he was the son of a British peer. As Bunting later commented, he nearly used up the small fortune he had

inherited in the support of Party work and publications.

Bunting and his followers insisted that the South African revolution, unlike those in the colonies, was a direct struggle for socialism without any intermediary stages. To the Comintern slogan of a "Native South African Republic," Bunting counterposed the slogan of a "Workers' and Peasants' Republic." This concept of "pure proletarian revolution" was an echo of what we had found in the U.S. Party with respect to Blacks. But here, the error stood out grotesquely given the reality of the South African situation with its overwhelming Native majority.

It was against this background that La Guma and Gumede left to go to Moscow to attend the Tenth Anniversary celebrations, and the Congress of the Friends of the Soviet Union. La Guma apparently was not in Moscow on that occasion; he was probably out on a tour of the provinces. Both he and Gumede travelled widely during their visit to the Soviet Union.

Our purpose at this time was to develop and clarify the line laid down in the resolution formulated the previous year. Our draft, with few changes, was adopted by the Sixth Congress of the Comintern and the ECCI.

As already noted, Bunting had put forward the slogan of a South African "Workers' and Peasants' Government." Bunting's formulation denied the colonial character of South Africa. He failed, therefore, to see the inherent revolutionary nature of the Natives' struggle for emancipation.

As opposed to this, our resolution began with a definition of South Africa as "a British dominion of the colonial type" whose colonial features included:

1. The country was exploited by British imperialism, with the participation of the South African white bourgeoisie (British and Boer), with British capital occupying the principal economic position.
2. The overwhelming majority of the population were Natives and Colored (five million Natives and Colored, with one and a half million whites, according to the 1921 Census).
3. Natives, who held only one-eighth of the land, were almost completely landless, the great bulk of their land having been expropriated by the white minority.
4. The "great difference in wages and material conditions of the white and black proletariat," and the widespread corruption of the white workers by the racist propaganda and ideology of the imperialists.²⁰

These features, we held, determined the character of the South African revolution which, in its first stage, would be a struggle of Natives and non-European peoples for independence and land. As the previous resolution had done, our draft (in the form adopted by the Sixth Congress and the ECCI) held that as a result of these conditions, in order to lead and influence that movement, communists – black and white – must put forth and fight for the general political slogan of “an independent Native South African Republic as a stage towards a workers’ and peasants’ republic, with full, equal rights for all races, black, coloured and white.”

“South Africa is a black country,” the resolution went on to say, with a mainly black peasant population, whose land had been expropriated by the white colonizers. Therefore, the agrarian question lies at the foundation of the revolution. The black peasantry, in alliance with and under the leadership of the working class, is the main driving force. Thus, along with the slogan of a “Native Republic,” the Party must place the slogan “return of the land to the Natives.”

This latter formulation does not appear in the resolution as finally adopted. Instead, it includes the following two formulations:

1. Whites must accept the “correct principle that South Africa belongs to the native population.”

2. “The basic question in the agrarian situation in South Africa is the land hunger of the blacks and... their interest is of prior importance in the solution of the agrarian question.”²¹

With the new resolution completed, La Guma returned to South Africa. In the year since the first resolution, the opposition to the line had intensified and had already come to a head at the December Party Congress – even before La Guma’s return.

Bunting put forward his position in a fourteen page document in the early part of 1928. He equated the nationalism of the Boer minority to the nationalism of the Natives and justified his opposition to nationalism on the basis that all national movements were subject to capitalist corruption, and, in the case of South Africa, a national movement among Natives “would probably only accelerate the fusion, in opposition to it, of the Dutch and British imperialists.”²² Since it would thus only consolidate the forces against it, it was not to be supported.

Bunting not only underrated nationalism, he played on the whites’ fear of it and raised the specter of blacks being given free reign, with a resulting campaign to drive the whites into the sea. He was echoing the specter that was haunting whites who remembered

the song of the Xhosas:

*To chase the white men from the earth
And drive them to the sea.
The sea that cast them up at first
For Ama Xhosas curse and bane
Howls for the progeny she nursed
To swallow them again.*²³

According to Bunting, the elimination of whites seemed to be implied in the slogan of a “Native Republic.” He regarded the phrase “safeguards for minorities” as having little meaning, since whites would assume that the existing injustices would be reversed; that, in effect, blacks would do to them what they had been handing out for so long.

While Bunting had held that all nationalism was reactionary, La Guma distinguished between the revolutionary nationalism of the Natives and the “nationalism” of the Boers (which in reality was simply a quarrel between sections of the ruling class). He argued that the communists must not hold back on the revolutionary demands of the Natives in order to pacify the white workers who are still “saturated with an imperialist ideology” and conscious of the privileges they enjoy at the Natives’ expense.²⁴

Bunting held that the road to socialism would be traveled under white leadership; to La Guma, the securing of black rights was the first step to be taken. As the Simonses described it, “First establish African majority rule, he argued, and unity, leading to socialism, would follow.” La Guma called on communists to “build up a mass party based upon the non-European masses,” put forward the slogan of a Native Republic and thus destroy the traditional subservience to whites among Africans.²⁵ This argument continued up through the Sixth Congress.

MY STAY IN THE CAUCASUS

In the middle of April 1928, I left Moscow for a stay in the Caucasus. The winter had been one of those long, cold, dark Moscow winters. Snow was still on the ground in April. Over the whole season, I had been plagued by recurrent seizures of grippe. Between the demands of school and the preparations for the Sixth Congress, it had been a winter of intense activity. Undoubtedly, this had contributed to my inability to shake off the illness. By the spring, I was pretty run down.

The school doctor detected a slight anemia and recommended a month in a rest home. So, I was shipped off to Kislovodsk, a famous health resort in the northern Caucasus. I traveled south and east, across the Ukrainian steppe, where spring had already come to Rostov-on-Don, the administrative center for the northern Caucasus region. Then on to Mineralny Vody (Mineral Water), the gateway to the Caucasus and a major railroad junction. I changed there for Kislovodsk, a short distance further towards the mountains.

Stepping off the train in Kislovodsk in early morning, I felt better at my first breath of fresh mountain air. The city was located in the foothills on the northern range of the Caucasus. Its mineral springs were famed for their medicinal properties, especially for coronary patients. Formerly a famous watering-place for the wealthy, it was now enjoyed by all the Soviet people. Kislovodsk was the source of the famous Narzan water which cost forty or fifty kopeks a bottle in Moscow. Here it bubbled from the ground in numerous springs, and you could drink all you wanted.

Checking in at the sanitarium, I was assigned to a room shared by three others – two workers and a Party functionary from Tbilisi named Kolya Tsereteli. Kolya was a tall, handsome, swarthy young man. He cut quite a figure in his long Georgian *robochka*, soft leather boots, high astrakhan cap and ornamental belt, complete with *kinjal* (dagger). He immediately took me in charge and became my constant companion during my stay there.

After I had been examined by a doctor who prescribed daily baths, Kolya took me around on a sightseeing tour. The sun was coming up over the parks, cypress trees and places for open air concerts.

After several weeks, I felt much better and was soon chafing at the bit, bored with the regimen and eager to return to Moscow. At this point Kolya suggested that we might try to arrange my accompanying him to his home in Tbilisi (hot springs) and stay for a week before returning to Moscow. I was delighted and had no difficulty in getting both my release from the sanitarium and permission from the school to make the trip.

Tbilisi – the Florence of the Caucasus – was a beautiful modern city, stretching for miles along both sides of the Kura River. It had spacious avenues lined by stately cypress trees; handsome buildings and apartments; a magnificent cathedral, its great central dome flanked by four cupolas, framed against a background of the mountains of the mighty Caucasus chain, with Mount David rising 2,500 feet above the city.

It was a mixed population of mainly Georgians, Armenians, Jews and some Turko-Tartars. Kolya explained that there actually were more Armenians than Georgians living there in the capital of Georgia! He went on to tell me that in the Caucasus, ethnic groups often overlapped their national boundaries as finally constituted. This was particularly so in the case of the Armenians, who were the victims of genocidal persecution and dispersal by Turkey. As a result, there were more Armenians in Azerbaidzhan and Georgia than in the Armenian Republic itself.

In the old days, Georgian nationalism was directed more against the Armenians than against the Russians. The Armenians had a larger merchant class. They dominated commerce and were an obstacle to the growth of the weak Georgian bourgeoisie who retaliated by whipping up national animosity against the Armenians. Hence, national hatred was often directed against rival national groups rather than against the dominant Czarist power, and the Czarist government exploited these animosities fully.

The area was known for bloody battles between the various ethnic groups. But all that ended with the revolution, Kolya said, and with the establishment of the Trans-Caucasian Federation, based on national equality and voluntary consent.

Within the federation, which was composed of three republics (Georgia, Azerbaidzhan and Armenia), the Georgian republic had three minority districts: Abkhazia and Azaria as autonomous republics, and Yugo-Osetia as an autonomous region. National languages and cultures were flourishing under the new regime.

“As you will see, here in Tbilisi we have Georgian, Armenian and Russian theaters,” Kolya told me.

Kolya hailed an *izvozhik* and we rode to his apartment, located on one of the broad tree-lined avenues of the city. Arriving there, we were happily greeted by his family. His wife, an attractive young schoolteacher, received me warmly and told me that Kolya had written her about me. They had two beautiful children, a boy of about three and a girl about five. They seemed fascinated with my appearance and couldn't take their eyes off me. I was undoubtedly the first Black man they had ever seen.

On being told by Kolya to “shake hands with the black uncle,” the boy hesitantly extended his little hand.

I took it and gently shook it. When he withdrew it, he looked at his hand to see whether some of the black had come off and seemed rather surprised that it hadn't.

“No, it won’t come off,” I said, and we all laughed. I had experienced this reaction from Russian children in Moscow, and it never failed to amuse me.

The Tseretelis lived in a clean and neatly-furnished three-room apartment on the second floor of the building, with a balcony over the sidewalk. As if reading my thoughts, Kolya said, “Don’t worry, we all usually sleep in one room; the other is for my brother who stays here with us. He is out of town, so you can stay in his room.”

Kolya was anxious to check in at the Party office where he worked, so we left our baggage and walked to his office a short distance away. I was interested in the people we passed. They looked better dressed than the Russians back in Moscow, their costumes were gayer. Perhaps it was due to the milder climate.

Kolya served as the deputy secretary of the Agitprop Department of the Tbilisi Committee of the Communist Party. He introduced me to his fellow workers in the department; they all seemed glad to see him and remarked how well he looked after his rest. They were speaking Georgian; Kolya asked them to speak in Russian in deference to me. They all seemed to be multilingual. Kolya, I knew, besides his native Georgian, spoke Russian, Armenian and some French. The comrades insisted on calling a conference. Like most Party officials, they were well-informed on both domestic and international questions and were an educated audience.

They asked me my impressions of their country, and they also had questions about the situation in the United States, about the conditions of Blacks. Kolya told them that I was a student at the Lenin School in Moscow and that formerly I had been at KUTVA. They knew about KUTVA as they too had sent students there. They were interested in the work I had done in preparation for the forthcoming Sixth Congress, and they were familiar with Stalin’s report to the Fifteenth Party Congress from that December, where he described the international situation. They asked me questions about the international situation and the war danger and we exchanged opinions.

Kolya explained that I was only going to be in town for a couple of days. It was Friday then, and I was scheduled to leave on Sunday. As I remember, we took a car from the pool and two or three people from the office accompanied us on a sightseeing tour along the banks of the river.

We returned to Kolya’s home where his wife had a delicious big meal waiting for us: *shashlik*, fruits and pastries. We sat up until

late that night telling stories.

The next day we saw a number of places of interest, bathed in the famous hot sulfur springs, went up to the summit of Mount David and saw the old church on the mountain, which dated back centuries, and the mausoleum of famous Georgian poets and patriots. All in all we spent a very enjoyable weekend together.

On Sunday, Kolya and his wife took me to the station and put me on the train for Moscow. Three days later I was back home. I saw Kolya once again when he was on a visit to Moscow and I took him out to dinner.

Notes:

1. (p. 219.) Lenin, "Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions," *Collected Works*, vol. 31, pp. 144-51.
2. (p. 220.) "...a historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." Stalin, "Marxism and the National Question," *Works*, vol. 2, p. 307.
3. (p. 223.) Lenin, "Draft Theses," p. 148.
4. (p. 223.) *Ibid.*, p. 144.
5. (p. 223.) Sen Katayama, the veteran Japanese communist, was a special friend of the Black students in Moscow. He was born to a Japanese peasant family, was educated in the U.S. and became one of the founders of the Japanese Social Democratic Party in 1901. A member of the ECCI, he had spent several years in exile in the U.S. and was considered somewhat of an expert on the Afro-American question. Katayama was most interested in our studies and our views on the situation in the U.S., particularly as it concerned Blacks. "Old Man" Katayama knew all about white folks, and we Black students regarded him as one of us. We often came to him with our problems and he always had a receptive ear. It was Katayama who told us of Lenin's earlier writings about U.S. Blacks and Lenin's views on the Black Belt. He died in Moscow in 1933 at the age of 74.
6. (p. 223.) *Der Zweite Kongress der Kommunist. International: Protokoll der Verhandlungen vom 19. Juli in Petrograd und vom 23. Juli bis 7. August, 1920 in Moskau* (Hamburg, 1921), p. 156.
7. (p. 223.) *Ibid.*
8. (p. 224.) Lenin, "New Data on the Laws Governing the development of Capitalism in Agriculture. Part One: Capitalism and Agriculture in the United States of America," *Collected Works*, vol. 22, p. 25.

9. (p. 224.) *Ibid.*, p. 27.
10. (p. 224.) Lenin, "Statistics and Sociology," *Collected Works*, vol. 23, p. 271-77.
11. (p. 225.) *Ibid.*
12. (p. 225.) *Ibid.*, p. 276.
13. (p. 225.) Speech of Huiswood (Billings), *Inprecorr*, July 25, 1924, pp. 514-15.
14. (p. 226.) Speech of Thalheimer, *Inprecorr*, July 25, 1924, pp. 514-15.
15. (p. 226.) *Protokoll: Fünfter Kongress der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Band II (Verlag Carl Hoym Nachf), p. 699.
16. (p. 227.) Stalin, "The Fifteenth Congress of the C.P.S.U. (B.). December 2-19, 1927, Political Report of the Central Committee, December 3," *Works*, vol. 10, p. 297.
17. (p. 228.) Speech of James Ford, *Inprecorr*, August 3, 1928, p. 772.
18. (p. 236.) Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 390.
19. (p. 236.) "The South African Question (Resolution of the E.C.C.I.)," *The Communist International*, December 15, 1928, p. 54.
20. (p. 238.) *Ibid.*, p. 52.
21. (p. 238.) *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 56.
22. (p. 239.) Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 395.
23. (p. 239.) Edward Roux, *Time Longer than Rope: A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), p. 13.
24. (p. 240.) Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 398.
25. (p. 240.) *Ibid.*, p. 398.