This is a peer-reviewed, accepted author manuscript of the following chapter: Murphy, David. / No more slaves! Lamine Senghor, black internationalism and the league against imperialism. The League Against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives. editor / Michele Louro ; Carolien Stolte. Leiden : University of Leiden, 2020. (© Leiden University Press)
https://www.lup.nl/product/the-league-against-imperialism/

No More Slaves! Lamine Senghor, Black Internationalism and the League against Imperialism

David Murphy

On the evening of 11 February 1927, on the second day of the inaugural meeting of the League against Imperialism, the tall, gaunt, figure of Lamine Senghor strode to the podium to deliver the penultimate speech of the session.[1] Senghor was a decorated veteran of the First World War, who had risen to prominence in the mid-1920s as a leading figure in the emerging communist-inspired anti-colonial movement in France. In his speech, he denounced imperialism as a modern form of slavery and called on the workers of the world to unite and overthrow the entire capitalist-imperialist system. By all accounts, his rousing speech was received rapturously by the delegates gathered at the Château d'Egmont, some of whom rushed to the podium to embrace the Senegalese militant who would continue to be feted over the remainder of the Congress. In many photographs from the event, Senghor is clearly the centre of attention: other delegates drape their arms around his shoulders, broad grins etched on their faces. It does not seem an exaggeration to claim that he was one of the stars of the show: a posed photograph of Senghor in profile, fist clenched standing at a lectern was reproduced in the conference proceedings and was used to

[1] For more in-depth analysis of Senghor's anti-colonial activism, see my articles: '"Defending the Negro Race": Lamine Senghor and Black Internationalism in Interwar France', *French Cultural Studies*, 24.2 (2013), 61-73; and 'Tirailleur, facteur, anticolonialiste: la courte vie militante de Lamine Senghor (1924-1927)', *Cahiers d'histoire*, 126 (2015), 55-72.

illustrate various articles about the Congress over the months to come.[2] The novelty and the exoticism of his status as a black African, for a largely European audience, also surely played a part in this rapturous response.

Senghor had been invited to participate in the inaugural meeting of the League against Imperialism in his capacity as President of the Committee for the Defence of the Negro Race (Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre, CDRN).[3] The CDRN, launched by Senghor in March 1926, was a broad church in which he sought to bring together both moderate and radical members of the black community in France while also reaching out to subjects in the colonies, primarily through the circulation of the movement's newspaper (sent overseas in small packets with sympathetic sailors). The CDRN was working, like many of the other delegations in Brussels, within a 'complex political landscape' that operated between the local (as expatriate communities in Europe), the national (representing their countries of origin), and the international (operating as representatives within a transnational political network, as Klaas Stutje demonstrates so clearly in his chapter on Mohammad Hatta and Indonesian nationalism).

---

[2] See, in particular, Roger N. Baldwin, 'The Capital of the Men without a Country', *The Survey*, 1 August 1927, 460-8.

[3] According to a report from the Ministry for the Colonies' surveillance unit, the CAI, it was in fact the far more moderate figure of Georges Satineau who had initially been invited to attend the Brussels Congress but he turned down the invitation (perhaps fearing that this was a hidden Communist initiative), thereby opening the door for Lamine Senghor (and Narcisse Danäé) to attend. Note by Agent Désiré, 27 February 1927, Archives Nationales d'Outre-mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence (henceforth ANOM), 3 Slotfom 24.

Prior to the creation of the CDRN, Senghor had been a prominent member of the far more radical Intercolonial Union (l'Union Intercoloniale, UIC).[4] Although nominally an independent group run by and for representatives of the colonised peoples (Nguyen ai Quoc, the future Ho Chi Minh, was one of its most active members in its early stages), the UIC was in fact controlled by the Colonial Studies Committee of the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français, PCF).[5] The UIC had been launched by the PCF within months of the latter's creation after the historic split between French Socialists and Communists at the Congress of Tours in late 1920. The UIC was designed to demonstrate the PCF's commitment to the Communist International's anti-colonial agenda. In reality, though, the PCF's support for the UIC and the anti-colonial cause was inconsistent, to say the least.

Senghor's decision to leave the UIC, a shift from a communist-inspired to a black movement, appeared to assert the primacy of race over class: as with so much of Senghor's career as a militant, though, appearances could be deceptive, with genuine and potentially contradictory motives hidden in a tangled web of ideological leanings, personal connections, gut feelings, and underhand political tactics, typical of both the anti-colonial movement (in its far-left and nationalist guises) and the colonial state's security forces that sought to undermine them. There were very real tensions between Senghor and the PCF but there are ample reasons to

[4] In the mid-to-late 1920s, the UIC began to split into separate national, regional and ethnic movements for independence. See Dónal Hassett's chapter in this volume on the creation of the Etoile Nord-Africaine, also in March 1926, with tacit support from the PCF.

[5] For a detailed account of black involvement in the UIC, see Philippe Dewitte, *Les Mouvements nègres en France 1919-39* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985), 95-122. For a more general account of the UIC's activities, see Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 187-99.

believe that any break with his communist allies was largely strategic: not least amongst these is the fact that Senghor announced the creation of his new movement in an article, 'The Negroes have Awoken', in the UIC's own newspaper, *Le Paria* [The Pariah], in April 1926. It is difficult to imagine that the UIC and their PCF handlers would have permitted this declaration of black independence within one of their own publications for anything other than strategic reasons: French communism in the mid-1920s was not renowned for its tolerance of dissenting internal voices.[6] We must thus treat with caution the notion that the 'racial' turn in Senghor's thinking is evidence of his complete disillusionment with communism: on the contrary, the publication of such an article in the columns of *Le Paria* makes it clear that in many respects the break with his former communist allies was at best partial. Indeed, the most productive way of viewing Senghor's entire career as a militant is that of a balancing act in which he veered between radicalism and reformism, communism and black internationalism. He consistently kept both his friends and his enemies guessing about his true motives and allegiances, as he sought to carve out a political discourse in which both race and class might carry equal weight.[7]

After the CDRN's creation in early 1926, Senghor had criss-crossed France in a successful recruitment drive seeking to draw members of black collectives, often constructed on an ethnic or regional basis, into a single movement. Visiting the port towns of Marseilles,

[6] 'The Negroes have Awoken' was later revised slightly and published as 'The Word "Negro"' in the first issue of the CDRN's newspaper, *La Voix des Nègres*, in January 1927. The latter article has received by far the greater critical attention, but, in fact, the two pieces are almost identical, the latter essentially a minor reworking of the former.

[7] We must also remain conscious of the possibility of Senghor's personal duplicity, as the archives reveal that he probably served for a short period as an informer for the CAI. For a further discussion of these issues, which are beyond the scope of this chapter, see my article, 'Tirailleur, facteur, anticolonialiste'.

Bordeaux, Le Havre and the major colonial military base at Fréjus (where trainee African officers were a primary target of his propaganda), he had, by late 1926, recruited, it was estimated by the agents of the Ministry for the Colonies' surveillance unit (the CAI[8]) close to 900 members (in a black population numbered at less than 20,000).[9] By early 1927, however, the broad coalition that had come together within the CDRN was already beginning to fragment. Even as the first issue of its newspaper, *La Voix des Nègres* [The Voice of the Negroes] proudly and insistently proclaimed the unity of 'les nègres', the CDRN was in fact in the middle of a long and protracted schism that would a few months later lead to the break-up of the organisation with Senghor and his fellow radicals deserting en masse to create the League for the Defence of the Negro Race (*Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre*, LDRN). The split in the organisation was the result of complex personal, political and cultural issues but appears primarily to have divided the CDRN on ideological lines with the more assimilationist members remaining within a rump CDRN and the more radical, communist-leaning members departing for the LDRN. As a result, Senghor arrived in Brussels at the head of a seemingly united black movement that was, in fact, rapidly fragmenting. The demise of the CDRN did have one positive effect though: in the absence of the need to exercise the type of rhetorical restraint that had just about held the body together for a year, Senghor now found once again the radical voice that had brought him to

---

[8] The full title of the Service de Contrôle et d'Assistance aux Indigènes (generally known as the CAI) indicated its twin mission to police (*contrôle*) and to assist (*assistance*) the 'indigenous' populations from the colonies resident in France; however, the primary, unspoken mission of the CAI was to carry out surveillance on colonial subjects.

[9] The CAI consistently cast doubt on the CDRN membership numbers cited by Senghor and other members of the executive and it appears evident that there was a problem in ensuring that signed-up members actually paid their membership dues. A monthly CAI report for October 1926 accepts, however, that a figure of 900 members is probably only 'slightly inflated'. CAI monthly report, October 1926, 8. ANOM, 3 Slotfom 144.

prominence as a key member of the Intercolonial Union and this is what made his speech in Brussels so powerful.

In many ways, the League against Imperialism, a body which, in its initial phase, sought to realise the Comintern's 1924 call for alliances between communists and nationalists, was the perfect home for Lamine Senghor, as he moved between reformist and radical, communist and black internationalist groupings. This chapter will thus examine Senghor's contribution to the Congress as a case study of the complex ways in which issues of race, class and anti-colonialism were intertwined in this period. It will also explore the importance of the Brussels Congress as an event at which personal as well as political ties could be forged. In order to better comprehend Lamine Senghor's political position at the time of the Congress, it is important to understand the context in which he emerged as an activist and the evolution that he underwent over the short period during which he became central to French anti-colonial politics. The analysis of his speech in this chapter will thus focus on certain key motifs that reveal the central ideas that motivated Senghor, as well as the ways in which these were shaped by various powerful forces and significant events that occurred during his brief career as an activist between 1924 and 1927. Essentially, Senghor's experiences act as a telling case study of the opportunities and dangers of intercolonial co-operation for black groups in the interwar period.

Senghor at the Brussels Congress

Lamine Senghor travelled to Brussels in February 1927, accompanied by the young Guadeloupean radical, Narcisse Danaë, as part of a two-man CDRN delegation. Also present in Brussels were the Martiniquan lawyer and communist, Max Bloncourt, who, the CAI reported, had invited himself along as the representative of the Intercolonial Union. He was accompanied

by fellow UIC member, Camille Saint-Jacques, a Haitian engineer with whom Senghor endured a rather fractious relationship, the Haitian consistently expressing doubt about the CDRN leader's left-wing credentials. During his own time in the UIC, Senghor had worked closely with both Bloncourt and Saint-Jacques, regularly sharing a platform with them during the PCF's campaign against the Rif war in Morocco in 1925 (which will be discussed further below).[10]

Liberated from the moderation that had marked most of his public contributions to the CDRN, Senghor delivered a fiery speech that delighted his audience. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he found space in his speech to denounce (without actually naming him) his sworn enemy, Blaise Diagne, French parliamentary deputy for Senegal. In January 1918, Diagne had accepted an invitation from French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, desperate for the extra troops that might finally bring the war to a successful conclusion while limiting the loss of further French lives, to lead a recruitment tour in French West Africa. Given the title of *High Commissioner for the Republic*, Diagne was greeted in the colonies with the pomp and ceremony normally reserved for white dignitaries from the imperial centre, which initially enhanced his reputation amongst France's many black subjects and its few black citizens. For Senghor and other black militants, however, Diagne was simply doing the dirty work of his colonial masters. In his speech, he declared: "You saw, during the war, that as many negroes as possible were recruited, and led off to be slaughtered. So many were recruited that the French governors had refused to recruit any more as they feared the people would rise up in revolt. But, as recruitment had to continue at any

[10] Other black and African delegates in Brussels included the South African, J.T. Gumede and the African American, R.B. Moore.

cost, a *special negro* was found and garlanded with honours […]. This celebrated negro recruited 80,000 men, to add to the 500,000 already fighting in France."[11]

Blaise Diagne, this 'special negro' occupied a special place in Lamine Senghor's cast of colonial villains, regularly evoked in his writing and speeches. The origins of this animosity go back to November 1924, when Senghor, then completely unknown outside of black and anti-colonial activist circles, appeared as a witness for the defence in a libel trial, featuring Diagne as the chief litigant.

In October 1924, the black newspaper, *Les Continents*, had published an article 'The good disciple', in which Diagne was accused by the Caribbean novelist René Maran of having received 'a certain commission for each soldier recruited' to take part in the war.[12] The Parisian media was predictably thrilled at the whiff of scandal that clung to the case but, more significantly, for a few days at least, the trial placed the politics of France's black colonial populations at the forefront of public debate, and in particular the issue of the participation of colonial troops in the First World War.[13] Lamine Senghor's testimony projected the African

[11] Lamine Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays et autres écrits* anticolonialistes, edited by David Murphy (Paris: L'Harmattan, 'Autrement Mêmes', 2012), 61; emphasis in original. All translations from the French are mine. The figure of 500,000 black African soldiers fighting in France is a significant inflation of the now historically accepted figure of approximately 130,000 men who saw active service. In the interwar period, there was no historical consensus on these figures, and they were consistently inflated by black nationalists and communists.

[12] Ibid. 109-10.

[13] For a comprehensive account of this landmark trial, see (2003). Alice L. Conklin, 'Who Speaks for Africa? The René Maran-Blaise Diagne Trial in 1920s Paris', in Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (eds), *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 302-37. For an in-depth account of African participation in the war, see Marc Michel, *Les Africains et la grande guerre: l'appel à l'Afrique (1914-1918)* (Paris: Karthala, 2003).

colonial infrantryman, the *tirailleur sénégalais*, as a man radicalised by his experiences who would now devote himself to the denunciation of colonial injustice. Shortly after the trial, Senghor would write a general account of it for *Le Paria*: "Instead of attempting to prove precisely how much the great slave trader [Diagne] received for each Senegalese he recruited, they should have brought before him a whole procession of those blinded and mutilated in the war. […] All of these victims would have spat in his face the infamy of the mission that he had undertaken."[14]

Senghor's views on the suffering endured by colonial soldiers were given authority by his own status as a 'mutilé de guerre' [war wounded], which was typically the self-description he used on the official public documents produced by the movements to which he belonged. In April 1917, his battalion of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* had been gassed near Verdun, and Senghor had suffered terrible injuries, losing one of his lungs, from which he never fully recovered.

In the period since the Diagne trial, he had grown increasingly gaunt and frail, periodically suffering breathing problems, coughing up blood, his body wracked by the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him late in 1927. Senghor could speak with first-person conviction about the suffering caused by the war and the duplicity of the French authorities in their dealings with those colonial soldiers who had fought to save France. A constant refrain in his speeches and writings, one to which he returned again in Brussels, was the iniquity and double standards involved in the treatment of colonial veterans of the First World War, and, in particular, the pensions paid to them: "You have all seen that, during the war, as many Negroes as possible were recruited and led off to be slaughtered. […] The Negro youth are now more clear-sighted. We know and are deeply aware that, when we are needed, to lay down our lives or

[14] Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, 33-4.

to do hard labour, then we are French; but when it's a question of giving us rights, we are no longer French, we are Negroes."[15] Senghor's position as a 'mutilé de guerre' opened up a space within 1920s France in which otherwise radical ideas could be given a hearing. Could a man who had loyally served France, sacrificing his health, really be dismissed as an enemy of the state?

The question of why this once loyal colonial soldier had become a leading anti-colonial militant in the first place is difficult to answer with certainty but it is clear that the Diagne libel trial was a turning point in Senghor's career. The young militant was persuaded by the UIC to stand as a witness for the defence and he suddenly found himself face to face with the man who had promised so much to the African soldiers who had fought in the First World War. Indeed, for Olivier Sagna, Senghor's testimony during the trial reveals that 'more than the UIC militant, it is the war-wounded veteran whose wounds have been reopened who speaks'.[16]

Beyond his own personal circumstances, Senghor happened on to the political scene at a potentially fruitful moment of strategic alliances for the anti-colonial movement. The UIC sent one of its newest recruits to speak in defence of a bourgeois, reformist newspaper at the Diagne-*Les Continents* trial largely because, as was mentioned above, in 1924, the Comintern had called on communists to seek alliances with all anti-colonial nationalist movements. The trial was thus perceived as an opportunity to create a united anti-colonial front between (bourgeois) reformers and (communist) radicals. This united front would only last a few years but it is in this context that we must situate Lamine Senghor's activism.

---

[15] Ibid. 63.

[16] Olivier Sagna, *Des pionniers méconnus de l'indépendance: Africains, Antillais et luttes anticolonialistes dans la France de l'entre-deux-guerres (1919-1939)*, PhD thesis, Paris 7 (1986), 311.

No more slaves!

At the heart of Senghor's Brussels speech was an impassioned denunciation of European imperialism in Africa. Early on, he responded angrily to the preceding intervention by an Egyptian delegate who had claimed that his homeland had escaped colonial rule, declaring that the 'English' presence in Egypt could only be understood as a form of colonisation: 'What is colonisation? It is the violation of the right of a people to organise itself as it sees fit'.[17] Senghor here sought to forge a unity between those suffering from each of the many distinct forms of Western domination of 'colonised' lands. He also tested a vocabulary for defining colonialism that he would most likely have been developing at the time for his anti-colonial fable, *La Violation d'un pays* [The Rape/Violation of a Land] (1927), which would be published just a few months later.

In the remainder of the speech, he went on to deploy virtually all of the attack lines available in the playbook of the radical anti-colonial left in the mid-1920s. As we saw above, he attacked the injustice in the treatment of those colonial soldiers who had fought for France in the First World War. He denounced the cruel treatment of the colonised, citing examples from colonial reports of extreme physical punishments meted out to Africans. Inverting the trope of African savagery, he identified French imperialism as the true source of barbarism: 'Who could fail to shudder at the thought that today, in the twentieth century, the French are still committing

[17] Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, 58. To support his argument, Senghor claimed that the Egyptian members of the CDRN would back his position but it seems unlikely that the CDRN would have had many, if any, Egyptian members. In the monthly note for February 1927, the CAI agent adopts a rather irked tone in commenting on this passage from the speech, stating that these Egyptian members were a pure invention on Senghor's part. CAI monthly note, February 1927, 49. ANOM, 3 Slotfom 145.

such horrific acts, worthy of the ferocity of the middle ages?'.[18] Imperialism cannot hope to bring civilisation to the colonies for it is an inherently unjust system of domination and French claims of a civilizing mission are, in fact, deeply insincere: '[The French] say "Oh no, we must not teach the negroes" because, if they are educated, they will be civilized and we will no longer be able to do what we wish with them'.[19] The use of forced labour was perhaps the clearest evidence of the coloniser's true feelings regarding the worth of the colonised: "You are forced to work ten hours a day under the burning sun of Africa and all you earn is two francs! Women and children work the same hours as men and, despite all that, we are told that slavery has been abolished, that the negroes are free, that all men are equal."[20]

Forced labour was a lynchpin in his argument that European imperialism was merely a renewed form of slavery: "Slavery. We are told it has been abolished. We might accept that the retail sale of individuals has been outlawed […]. But we can see that the imperialists reserve the very democratic right to sell an entire negro people to another imperial power. It is not true, slavery has not been abolished. On the contrary, it has been modernised."[21]

The trope of twentieth-century colonialism as a modern form of slavery sought to undermine the civilizing rhetoric of the European powers and, in the black world, to promote a transcolonial unity between Africans and members of the diaspora. The advent of communism now meant that the international brotherhood of the black world was complemented by the inter-

[18] Senghor *La Violation d'un pays*, 60.

[19] Ibid. p.59.

[20] Ibid., 60.

[21] Ibid., 60-1. The reference to 'the very democratic right to sell an entire negro people to another imperial power' alludes to fears at the time that France might sell its Caribbean colonies to the US in order to pay off part of its war debts.

racial unity of all workers. Senghor thus concluded by proclaiming in Leninist terms that imperialism is a product of capitalism which imposes its domination on the colonised 'over there' and the workers 'over here' (as Sartre would later write in *Colonialism and Neo-colonialism*): 'Those who suffer from colonial oppression must take each other by the hand and walk shoulder to shoulder with those who suffer from the misdeeds of metropolitan imperialism; they must bear the same weapons and destroy the universal evil of global imperialism. Comrades, we must destroy [imperialism] and replace it with the union of free peoples. No more slaves!'[22]

Senghor's speech was in effect a distillation of the key ideas he had developed since the Diagne trial. During the 18 months he spent on the executive of the Intercolonial Union, it was the PCF's campaign against the Rif War in Morocco that appears to have most shaped not only Senghor's political thinking but also his confidence and his skill as an orator. It would be misleading to make claims for Senghor as a groundbreaking political theorist, for he did not seek to explore the links between capitalism and empire at length in his writing. He was, rather, a brilliant communicator of ideas, driven by moral outrage at the injustices of capitalist imperialism. A passionate public speaker, he was able to energise audiences, large and small, and distill complex political ideas into a series of resonant images.

The Rif campaign of 1924-25 was the arena in which Lamine Senghor would hone his skills as an orator, as well as the crucible in which the Comintern's call for an alliance of communism and nationalism was put to the test in France.[23] This short-lived but fascinating

[22] Ibid.. 63.

[23] This was also the period when he began his political education. In 1925, the PCF opened a 'Colonial School' for its growing band of colonised activists in the UIC, designed to improve their knowledge of Marxist ideology. Very few activists attended the classes and the 'school' closed after a few months but, while its doors were open, Lamine

experiment—in which UIC members, Lamine Senghor in particular, played a central role—saw French Communism finally attempt to prove its internationalist, anti-colonial credentials to an increasingly impatient Comintern, which regularly berated the PCF for failing to tackle French imperialism.[24] Scholars have justifiably claimed that the PCF hierarchy was not fully committed to the Rif campaign, which it largely perceived as a form of gesture politics that might appease the Comintern.[25] However, there were important individuals within the campaign—not least Jacques Doriot, head of the PCF's Colonial Commission, which oversaw the UIC, and Paul Vaillant-Couturier, editor of the PCF newspaper *L'Humanité*—who were fully committed to the anti-colonial cause. Also, the message that the struggle of the colonised was also the struggle of the proletariat appealed to significant numbers within the Communist movement: for instance, two rallies at the Luna Park in the Paris suburbs in May and November 1925 attracted crowds of over 15,000, while 60,000 attended a huge anti-war rally in the Parisian suburb of Clichy at which Senghor appeared.[26]

Senghor was one of the most assiduous students and his writing for *Le Paria* bears the imprint of this ideological training. For the content of the classes, see the series of CAI reports, ANOM, 3 Slotfom 63.

[24] Many historians of French communism have signalled 'the imperial patriotism which coloured the colonial policies of the French Communist Party'. J.D. Hargreaves, 'The Comintern and anti-colonialism: new research opportunities', *African Affairs*, 92 (1993), 255-61. Dewitte and Sagna are also very critical of the PCF.

[25] See David H. Slavin, 'The French Left and the Rif War, 1924-25: Racism and the Limits of Internationalism'. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26.1 (1991), 5-32.

[26] At least two rallies against the war were held at Luna Park in 1925, one on 20 May and a larger event on 26 November. The CAI acknowledged that both had audiences in the 'thousands': for the later event, *L'Humanité* claimed an audience of 20,000. Senghor definitely spoke at the May rally and it is likely he spoke in November also. For the May rally, see ANOM, 15 Slotfom 282/110. For the November rally, see CAI monthly note, November 1925, 3-4, 3 Slotfom 144. Senghor did not speak at the Clichy rally but he appeared before the crowd arm in arm

Senghor threw himself into the campaign wholeheartedly and appeared at countless rallies alongside other prominent UIC members, such as the Antillean Max Bloncourt and the Algerian Hadj Ali. He also shared a platform with French communists: in addition to Doriot (who led the campaign), prominent PCF speakers at these rallies included Vaillant-Couturier and the novelist, Henri Barbusse, who would later deliver the opening address at the Brussels Congress. Vaillant-Couturier and Barbusse were war veterans who had gravitated towards Communism via the virulently anti-war French veterans' organisation the *Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants* (ARAC). It is possible that Senghor may have encountered these prominent PCF members through ARAC but at the very least it seems clear that their shared experience as war veterans created a bond between them. This first-hand experience of the war was also what drove their anti-militarism.[27]

Barbusse's story provides a compelling illustration of the complex ways in which pacifism combined with calls for a global revolution within the Communist movement in the aftermath of the war.[28] Already in the years before 1914, Barbusse was a respected poet and novelist, and a confirmed pacifist. However, when the war broke out, he rushed to enlist, for he

---

with an unnamed 'Arab' in a choreographed display of inter-racial, communist-inspired unity. See article by Senghor in *L'Humanité* on 13 August 1925.

[27] Gregory Mann has studied the ways in which a shared experience of the battlefield had the potential to bring French and African veterans together. The possibility that ARAC played a role in forging bonds between left-wing French and African militants is a topic that requires further exploration. Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

[28] For a compelling account of Barbusse's political and intellectual trajectory from the First World War until his death in 1935, see Frank Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War: Studies in the Rise of Communism and Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 19-78.

argued that in order to defeat imperialist militarism, incarnated by the Central Powers, it was necessary to take up arms against it. The devastating violence that he witnessed in the first two years of the war soon led him to change his mind, for now he had experienced first-hand that modern, technological warfare was hell on earth. The only positive he drew from his experiences was the profound humanity and camaraderie of the troops, which he fictionalised in his most famous novel, *Le Feu* (Under Fire). In this bond between soldiers, which crossed lines of class, identity and colour, lay hope for a peaceful future. In order to bring about that future, however, there would have to be a global revolution that would destroy the forces of capitalism and imperialism. In a left-wing twist on his thinking from the start of the First World War, there was a need for one final struggle that would finally bring an end to war forever. It was this same thinking that appears to have driven Lamine Senghor's anti-colonialism. In this utopian vision, the coming global revolution would destroy the European empires and create a universal brotherhood of man that would bring the capitalist war machine to its knees. This revolutionary war to bring peace might scare off some moderates but the fact that these calls for peace and universal brotherhood were delivered, within the LAI, by passionate war veterans, such as Barbusse and Senghor, had the potential to win these moderates over to their cause.

In defence of the 'negro race'

Although Senghor's speech contained many elements designed to illustrate the unity of the entire colonised world in the face of European imperialism, he made it clear from the start that he was speaking on behalf of 'the negro race' who shared a distinctive historical experience: "What is the Committee for the Defence of the Negro Race? It is a universal organisation of the negro youth who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the liberation of the entire race. You are aware

that the negro race has been humiliated more than any other race on the planet; the world's imperialists hold the right to life or death over them. However, we are taking on the struggle to seize our right to equality from those races that claim to be superior to us."[29]

Senghor claimed that imperialism was a universal ill but that the 'negro race' had endured very specific forms of oppression that bound them together. As was seen in the quote cited above regarding the recruitment of African soldiers during the war, Senghor sought to argue that a new consciousness of their shared plight would create a radicalism amongst young black people: 'You have all seen that, during the war, as many Negroes as possible were recruited and led off to be slaughtered. […] The Negro youth are now more clear-sighted'.[30]

In the final stages of the Congress, the LAI placed Senghor at the head of the working party asked to draft the 'Resolution on the Negro Question' and the finished document bore all the hallmarks of his fiery rhetoric. The situation of blacks in Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas were brought together within a history of oppression dating back five centuries: 'For more than five centuries, the negro people of the world have been made victims and been cruelly oppressed'.[31] If the 'nègres' of the world unite amongst themselves and then join forces with other colonised groups, they would finally bring such oppression to an end.[32]

The radicalism of Senghor's fusion of racial solidarity with a wider call for a transcolonial front against empire stands in stark contrast to the apparent reformist assimilationism of the pre-split CDRN. Throughout 1926, Senghor and other CDRN figures deployed the reformist language of the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* and parts of the French

[29] Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, 57-8.

[30] Ibid., 63.

[31] Ibid., 63-4.

[32] See Disha Karnad Jani's contribution to this volume for further analysis of the 'Negro' resolution.

Socialist party. In early CDRN documentation, there was no mention of capitalist imperialism; instead, the group diplomatically positioned itself within the lineage of France's great humanitarians and philanthropists.

In retrospect, though, the most evident sign of the radicalism veiled by the CDRN's surface moderation was its critical reflection on the language of race, its exploration of the modes of self-definition available to black people.[33] The CAI records indicate that there had been much internal discussion within the CDRN about whether to use the term 'noir' [black] or 'nègre' [negro] in their title, and Lamine Senghor played a decisive role in pushing the committee towards the latter term.[34] In 'The Negroes have Awoken', he articulates a racial identity that is based not on shared racial characteristics but on a shared sense of oppression: "One of the great questions of our age is that of the awakening of the Negro. […] To be a Negro is to be exploited until one's last drop of blood has been spilt or to be transformed into a soldier defending the interests of capitalism against those who would dare try to stop its advance."[35]

---

[33] Christopher, L. Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads: Essays on Francophone African Literature and Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003).

[34] There was far from unanimity within the CDRN, however, regarding the use of the term 'nègre'. At the first general assembly of the CDRN (from which Senghor was absent) on 4 July 1926, a Malagasy member (later tentatively identified by the CAI as Samuel Stéfany) asks that 'nègre' be replaced by 'noir' in the group's title, a motion approved by the meeting. From then on, the CAI refers to the group in its files as Comité de Défense de la race noire but the CDRN executive itself appears largely to have ignored the decision taken on 4 July. Certainly, Lamine Senghor consistently used the term 'nègre' in his writings and speeches. See CAI monthly note, July 1926. ANOM, 3 Slotfom 144.

[35] Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, 41. Once again, Senghor identifies military service for Africans as part of a continuum linked to other forms of colonial exploitation.

The references to 'one's last drop of blood' and 'a soldier defending the interests of capitalism' clearly echoed Senghor's comments elsewhere equating exploitation in the colonies with the sacrifice of so many African lives during the First World War. However, the call for 'the awakening of the negro' was inspired by another context entirely: the racial radicalism of Marcus Garvey.

I have written at length elsewhere (building on the work of Miller and Edwards) about the ways in which Senghor and the CDRN enacted a transnational process of translation of Garvey's ideas, using the term 'Nègre' as a proud badge of self-identification, just as Garvey had proclaimed himself a 'Negro' (always with a capital 'N').[36] In an era when the term 'noir' was widely gaining prominence as a more dignified replacement for 'nègre', seen as derogatory and demeaning, Senghor and the CDRN deliberately chose 'Nègre' as the term that encompasses all black people: "It is our honour and our glory to call ourselves Negroes with a capital N. It is our Negro race that we wish to guide along the path towards its total liberation from the yoke of slavery. We want to impose the respect due to our race, as well as its equality with all of the other races of the earth; which is our right and our duty."[37]

According to Senghor, the 'nègre' is an individual who has been downtrodden and oppressed through slavery, colonialism, segregation: the terms 'noir' and 'homme de couleur' [coloured man] were, to him, merely escape routes for educated blacks seeking to carve out a place for themselves in a dominant white society. The first step towards liberation is to embrace one's identity as a 'nègre': for that allows one to perceive the true nature of Western oppression

---

[36] See, for example, Senghor's articles for *La Voix des Nègres*: 'Ce qu'est notre comité de défense de la race nègre'; 'Le mot "nègre"; and 'Nègres, en garde!' in Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, 46-52.

[37] Ibid., 43.

of the black world.[38] A decade later, the Negritude school of writers—in particular, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire—would tie the celebration of difference into what was, initially at least, a reformist politics of empire. But for Lamine Senghor, one's identity as a 'nègre', forged in the suffering of colonial exploitation or in the carnage of the battlefields of the First World War, could lead only to a radical anti-colonial politics.

Reactions to the Congress

Unsurprisingly, the CDRN was delighted at the impact made by its President through his participation in the Congress. Its newspaper, *La Voix des Nègres* [The Voice of the Negroes] devoted much of its second issue to coverage of the event, including a full reprint of Senghor's speech, which was described as 'masterly',[39] as well as the full text of the 'Resolutions on the negro question'. The CDRN's enthusiasm was shared by black and civil rights activists on both sides of the Atlantic: the speech was immediately translated into English and reproduced in various journals in the United States.[40] W.E.B. DuBois's *The Crisis* reported Senghor's words approvingly in its July 1927 edition, the author having discovered a translation of the speech in

[38] Garvey is never named directly as an inspiration in CDRN/LDRN writings but his influence is nonetheless clearly visible in various ways. The Jamaican's anti-communist stance clearly played a part in the lack of direct acknowledgement by Senghor, and it is striking that the Resolution on the Negro Question produced by the Brussels Congress criticises Garvey's racial vision.

[39] Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, 56.

[40] For details on the reception of the speech, see Brent Hayes Edwards, 'The Shadow of Shadows'. *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 11.1 (2003), 11-49.

the 15 May edition of *The Living Age*.[41] The author states that Senghor 'vigorously challenges the superiority of Caucasians and says that their present colonization of Africa is nothing more or less than the usurpation of the right of a nation to direct its own destinies'.[42] In a fascinating article published just a few months after the Congress, Roger Baldwin, the director of the American Civil Liberties Union, who was present in Brussels and, like Senghor, elected to the executive of the LAI's international committee, cited the Senegalese as one of the most eminent of the 'men without a homeland', those political exiles who had made Paris their home. Little more than two years after his first public appearance, this young man from Senegal had managed to carve out a position as a radical spokesman for black people not only in France but also internationally.

If the Brussels Congress inspired hope and enthusiasm amongst anti-colonial radicals, it provoked a very worried response from the colonial authorities. Every month, the CAI prepared a roundup (*note mensuelle*), drawing together the main points from the irregular bulletins provided by its network of informers. Typically a document of 30-40 pages, it was distributed to the French Minister for the Colonies and all of the Governor-Generals in the French empire. The *note mensuelle* for February 1927, however, ran to over 80 pages, illustrating the degree of concern generated by the inaugural meeting of the League. In the preface to the long section on the Brussels Congress, the report declared ominously: "We announced in the previous report the decision to hold this Congress, whose importance should not be underestimated. It appears

[41] 'A Black Man's Protest', *The Living Age,* 332:4306 (15 May 1927), pp.866-68; 'The Browsing Reader', *The Crisis* (July 1927), 160.

[42] 'The Browsing Reader', 160.

necessary to explain the origins of this meeting, which has led to the creation of an organisation whose existence will no doubt lead to some regrettable consequences."[43]

The French colonial establishment and various right-wing forces had a habit of transforming even the mildest call for reform into a radical call for the overthrow of Empire. In this context, the League against Imperialism appeared particularly menacing, as it briefly united nationalists and communists from across Europe and the colonised world. Gustave Gautherot, an obsessive anti-communist journalist and scholar, wrote in *Le Bolchévisme aux colonies et l'impérialisme rouge* that the LAI was 'the most formidable bolchevist anti-colonial organisation' and Lamine Senghor was presented as one its most important members.[44] The emergence of Lamine Senghor as a key figure in Brussels had not gone unnoticed by the CAI. In the lengthy resume of the event within the February 1927 report—including a summary of all the major speeches—the CAI agent comments that 'Senghor's speech had a visible influence on the audience who applauded it vigorously'.[45]

More generally, the February 1927 report is deeply revealing of the official mind of the interwar French colonial apparatus and what it genuinely feared as a potential threat to the future of the empire. The report was dismissive regarding 'Bolshevik' attempts to stir up a Marxist critique of empire within the colonies. What the French did fear, however, was a potential union between international communism and nationalist anti-colonial movements: indeed, communist support for nationalist movements, it stated, had already produced (unspecified) 'tangible

[43] Monthly CAI report, February 1927, 34. ANOM, 3 Slotfom 145.

[44] Gustave Gautherot, *Le Bolchévisme aux colonies et l'impérialisme rouge* (Paris: Alexis Redier, 1930). Though Gautherot's text was published three years after Senghor's death, he seems unaware of this fact.

[45] Monthly CAI report, February 1927, 50. ANOM, 3 Slotfom 145.

results'.[46] A group solely made up of colonised peoples was not seen as a danger; it was the alliance with more centrist and socialist groups in metropolitan centres that might create difficulties for colonial governments. The report accused the Bolsheviks of playing the pacifist, humanitarian card in order to lure European socialists such as Georg Lebedour and George Lansbury into the orbit of the League.[47] The success of the LAI was attributed to a general international revulsion towards foreign intervention in places such as Morocco, Syria and China. (The report also posited that the LAI played cleverly on German anger at the loss of its colonies: Germans, it stated, were only too glad to see other colonial powers criticised.) The main French organisations backing the LAI included Communist-affiliated groups—the veterans' movement, ARAC; the trade union, CGTU; and Senghor's CDRN—who constituted the usual 'undesirables',[48] but it had also attracted the Ligue des droits de l'homme and the Ligue internationale des femmes pour la paix: 'these are the ones that are being deceived'.[49]

The February report was also deeply conscious of the significance of the Brussels Congress on both a symbolic and a human level. The event allowed militants from around the world to share ideas and strategies, to gain strength from the sense of belonging to a global movement. It also allowed them to develop personal friendships, forging the type of close personal connections that can grease the wheels of more high level, strategic alliances. As was mentioned at the start of this chapter, photographs of the event indicate a degree of personal warmth from many other delegates towards Senghor. In one particular photo, a Chinese nationalist delegate has his arm draped around Senghor's shoulder, acting as a personal

[46] Ibid., 34.

[47] Ibid., 35-6.

[48] Ibid., 40.

[49] Ibid.

illustration of the type of anti-colonial solidarity that Anna Belogurova posits, in her contribution to this volume, as central to Chinese nationalist thought in the wake of Sun Yat Sen. As Dónal Hassett's chapter demonstrates, Senghor also appears to have developed close ties to the Algerian delegation from the Etoile Nord-Africaine, based on bonds of religion and a shared colonial oppressor. The Congress can thus be seen as a site where the political and the personal coalesced, a venue in which one's own often lonely struggle against the might of empire could find support from like-minded souls. Indeed, the CAI report notes ruefully that the Congress had been an inspirational event for many of those present: one delegate described it as 'the dawn of the great day' that they had been waiting for.[50]

A month later in the March 1927 report, the CAI mulled over with some irritation the Belgian government's decision to allow the Congress to take place in the first place: the Belgians' alleged claim that they had nothing to fear from the LAI, as there was no communism in their colonies, was met with incredulity.[51] Seeking to burnish their own liberal credentials, the Belgians had created a forum that might undermine the entire European imperial project. Fortunately for the colonial powers, the unity that had been on display in Brussels was already starting to look temporary. As the CAI sifted through the various links that had been made at the Brussels Congress, they noted with quiet satisfaction a growing Socialist distrust of the League as a Communist initiative. The threat/promise of global anti-colonial revolution was already receding due to deep splits within the anti-colonial movement.

Afterlives: the 'martyrdom' of Lamine Senghor

---

[50] Ibid., 73.

[51] Monthly CAI report, March 1927, 42-5. ANOM, 3 Slotfom 145.

In June 1927, Lamine Senghor published *La Violation d'un pays*, a short, illustrated, polemical work, an anticolonial fable of sorts, in which he developed many of the ideas and tropes that had been at the heart of his Brussels speech. The volume also marked a clear desire to take the anticolonial struggle into the cultural sphere, a strategy that would become far more pronounced just a few years later when the young colonised intellectuals at the heart of the Negritude movement would assert the primacy of the cultural in anti-colonial debate. In the wake of Negritude's cultural and later political successes, the achievements and significance of 1920s black radicalism were almost entirely airbrushed from the historical record. Black Paris in the interwar period would now follow a teleological development from jazz to Josephine Baker to Negritude, and I would argue that the early death of Lamine Senghor clearly played a key part in this process. Shortly after the publication of *La Violation d'un pays*, Senghor's health faltered: he retreated to the south of France in the hope that its drier, warmer air would give him some respite, but on 25 November 1927 he succumbed to the illness, almost exactly three years to the day after his appearance at the Diagne-*Les Continents* trial. Almost 100 years later, the black community in France has arguably yet to see a more effective and charismatic political leader.

In the aftermath of his death, it suddenly seemed, at least in the context of black French activism, as if this influential figure had never existed. This was most likely due in large measure to the tensions that had threatened to destroy the LDRN in the second half of 1927. As Senghor's poor health obliged him to remain in the south of France, the other members of the executive committee became increasingly concerned about the LDRN's finances and organisation. Senghor was accused of embezzling funds, and his continued absence from Paris was interpreted as proof

of his guilt.[52] On 25 November 1927, the very day that Senghor died in the southern French town of Fréjus, in the home of a Senegalese shopkeeper, accompanied solely by two PCF members, the printer of *La Violation d'un pays* arrived at the LDRN offices demanding payment, which further incensed the committee. They would only learn of their President's death when his obituary appeared in the pages of *L'Humanité* a week later.[53] In the circumstances, they decided to draw a discrete veil over their suspicions regarding Senghor's alleged embezzlement of LDRN funds. The whole sorry story of the final few months of the LDRN President's life is symptomatic of the fragility of the black movements of the interwar period. Association with larger bodies such as the PCF and the LAI was alluring, for it offered a degree of visibility as well as organisational and financial stability: there remained persistent fears, however, that the 'black cause' would be lost from view in a more general anti-colonial movement.

For its part, the League against Imperialism viewed Lamine Senghor's untimely death as a useful propaganda opportunity. Shortly after his return from the Brussels Congress, on 18 March 1927, Senghor had been arrested after an altercation with a police officer in the southern French town of Le Muy, near his family's home in Roquebrune sur Argens, and he was imprisoned in

---

[52] It is impossible to know for certain if Lamine Senghor did steal from LDRN funds. What is clear from the archive is that the LDRN's finances were chaotically organised with Senghor often using his own personal funds from his military pension in order to pay expenses and then being reimbursed by the treasurer. In addition, a hidden PCF subsidy was paid directly to Senghor, which only became apparent to the rest of the executive during the Senegalese's final illness. Dewitte, *Les Mouvements nègres*, 166.

[53] Senghor's obituary was published in *L'Humanité* on 2 December 1927. See Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, pp.144-45. The LDRN would not get round to publishing an obituary for its late President until May 1928 due to ongoing financial difficulties which delayed the publication of its newspaper, *La Race Nègre*. Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, 145-9.

the nearby town of Draguignan. Senghor's growing celebrity, clearly enhanced by his speech in Brussels, meant that his incarceration quickly led to national and international demands that he be released. In particular, an account of Senghor's arrest and a call for his release was published in *L'Humanité* the very next day on 19 March.[54] The only problem was that, by the time his imprisonment became a matter of international concern, Senghor had, in fact, already been released and he appears only to have spent a single night in prison. Senghor's comrades in the anti-colonial movement believed that his arrest was clearly linked to his speech in Brussels and perceived his release as a victory. The CAI's March 1927 report is irked by this reading of events: Senghor had not been arrested at their behest and, from their inquiries, the incident had arisen as a result of the Senegalese's angry response to a random police request to identify himself (reading between the lines, it does not take a huge leap of the imagination to read the incident as an over-zealous and potentially racist police officer carrying out identity checks on a visible minority). The CAI's internal correspondence on the matter reveals that, in the 1920s, the French colonial approach to anti-colonial militancy in mainland France was primarily one of containment and disruption rather than a concerted policy of harassment and repression, although as Dónal Hassett demonstrates elsewhere in this volume, when a group such as the Etoile Nord-Africaine was seen to have become too successful in terms of reach and recruitment, the repressive power of the state was quickly deployed: the movement was dissolved and its leaders imprisoned. (In the colonies, the state had no such qualms about using brute force and arbitrary colonial laws.)

In an illustration of how even perceived repression might play to liberal audiences and be used by radicals as a way of winning over moderates, the facts of Senghor's brief imprisonment

[54] See CAI monthly surveillance report for March 1927, 16-8 and 38-41. ANOM, 3 Slotfom 145.

did not get in the way of the League's desire to turn Lamine Senghor into a martyr whose death had been caused, it claimed, by vile French imperialists. Willi Münzenberg is surely the source of the myth wilfully spread by the League that Senghor had died in prison after months of incarceration, arrested as 'punishment' for his part in the Brussels Congress. Writing in the first issue of the LAI's journal, *The Anti-Imperialist Review*, in 1928, Münzenberg stated that: "Some Governments became nervous and irrational as a result of the Congress. In France, the African Lamine Senghore [*sic*], the brave representative of his suffering race, who was elected a Member of the Executive Committee of the League Against Imperialism, and whose speech at the Congress was a passionate and mordant denunciation of French imperialism, fell a victim to the rancour of the authorities. He was arrested and cast into prison, where he died a few months later of tuberculosis."[55]

Elsewhere in the same issue of the journal, an unsigned report on the development of the League repeats this myth: 'The terrible denunciation of French imperialism by the Negro Lamine Senghor cost the latter both his freedom as well as his life, for he died in prison of tuberculosis at the end of last year'.[56] Given Munzenberg's close connections with communists across Europe, it is inconceivable that he was unaware of the true circumstances of Senghor's death: indeed, Senghor's obituary in *L'Humanité* clearly stated that he had passed away in a friend's home in the southern town of Fréjus and not while languishing in a prison cell.

Apparently working from the adage that 'when the legend becomes fact, print the legend', Munzenberg and the League continued to disseminate this false version of Senghor's

[55] Willi Münzenberg, 'From Demonstration to Organization', *The Anti-Imperialist Review*, 1.1 (1928), 4-10.

[56] 'Report on the Development of the League Against Imperialism', *The Anti-Imperialist Review*, 1.1 (1928), 83-93: 88.

death. A flyer in French and German from the Service de la Presse et d'Information for the LAI's second congress in 1929 once again presents Senghor as a martyr (and even manages the same misspelling of his surname): "The front constituted by the League against Imperialism is solid. Thousands of its militants have made great sacrifices, some, such as the unforgettable Senghore [*sic*] […], have paid with their lives for their fidelity and devotion to the anti-imperialist struggle."[57]

Munzenberg's propaganda has certainly had some long-lasting effects and the myth was spread so assiduously that the legend has become fact even for some highly respected contemporary scholars who had the misfortune of becoming interested in Lamine Senghor via the League against Imperialism and its archival and printed sources, and have taken Munzenberg's words at face value. For instance, a brief history of the League against Imperialism, published in 1996, by the UK Socialist History Society, repeated Munzenberg's claims about Senghor's martyrdom: 'Most tragic was the case of Lamine Senghor, who was imprisoned upon his return to France from the Brussels Congress and died of tuberculosis in November 1927, whilst still in detention'.[58] In assessing the significance of the League against

[57] See the archives of the League: International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, Box 2, File 100. The flyer also lists the Cuban communist, Julio Antonio Mella, who was murdered in January 1929, as another martyr.

[58] Jean Jones, *The League against Imperialism* (Preston: The Socialist History Society, Occasional Papers Series, 4, 1996). Jones explicitly cites Münzenberg's article in *The Anti-Imperialist Review* as her source. More recently, Vijay Prashad states that 'a leading light, Lamine Senghor of the Committee for the Defense of the Negro Race, died in a French prison shortly after the conference'. Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*, NY and London: The New Press, 2007), 23. Robert Young's version is slightly closer to the established facts: 'While Senghor's speech impressed the delegates, it also impressed the French authorities, and he was arrested after his return to Paris from Brussels. Later released on account of his health, he died of tuberculosis before the end of the year.' Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell. 2001), 260.

Imperialism, scholars must constantly be aware of the self-mythologizing dimension of the LAI's propaganda efforts. The League's members and its executive rightly stressed the violence and exploitation at the heart of the modern, capitalist imperialist project: and these were lines of attack that could gain support from moderate, reformist groups. By the interwar period, however, empire had become a fact of life and, although its excesses might be condemned, calls for independence had largely been relegated to the radical fringes. The colonial state apparatus could use openly repressive measures in the colonies but, in the metropolitan centre of empire, it more regularly deployed a range of tactics, from containment to disruption to co-optation.

Conclusion

Lamine Senghor's participation in the inaugural congress of the League against Imperialism provides a fascinating case study of the possibilities that were opened up by the creation of this body and, in particular, the equal space that international communism appeared to offer to the 'black question' both in the colonies and in racially segregated societies, the United States chief amongst them. The celebration of Senghor as a 'star' of the Congress and what appears to be the genuine human warmth evident in photographs from the event augured well for the future of the League, and for the position of the 'black question' within it. As is demonstrated by many of the

---

Edward T. Wilson, for his part, repeats the idea that Senghor was imprisoned due to his speech: 'Representing the French African colonies, Lamine Senghor delivered a violent denunciation of imperialism, for which he was incarcerated by the French government'. See Edward T. Wilson, 'Russia's Historic Stake in Black Africa', in David E. Albright (ed.), *Africa and International Communism* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 67-92: 80.

contributions to this volume, personal connections forged at events such as the Brussels Congress often helped to forge longstanding political alliances.[59]

The promise of a long-lasting alliance between communists, socialists and nationalists would prove illusory, however, as the Comintern flipflopped its way through the interwar period, promoting alliances between communists and nationalists that it would often promptly break within months. Throughout the interwar period, black activists from the US, the Caribbean and Africa were drawn to the communist movement as a potential ally but many eventually became disillusioned by what they perceived as the lack of attention paid to the specificity of the racism endured by black people: it is unlikely that any of the white delegates in Brussels suffered the indignity of being turned away from their hotel room due to the colour of their skin, as reportedly happened to Senghor.[60] If he had lived, Senghor may not have fared any better than the likes of George Padmore, denounced in the 1930s by the Comintern for his refusal to toe the party line, or he may, like Aimé Césaire, eventually have split definitively with the PCF over its Stalinism and its failure to engage with black issues.[61] Senghor's attempts to marry communism and black internationalism remain, nonetheless, an experiment that merits far greater historical attention.[62]

---

[59] See, for example, Carolien Stolte's chapter for a discussion of Nehru's support for Hatta and the Indonesian nationalist movement.

[60] In his contribution to this volume, Dónal Hassett cites Messali Hadj's *Mémoires* as the source for this incident.

[61] See James R. Hooker, *Black Revolutionary: George Padmore's Path from Communism to Pan-Africanism* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1967), and Aimé Césaire, *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956).

[62] In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the interface between 'black' and 'red' politics: see, for example, Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Margaret Stevens, *Red Internationalism and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919-1939* (London: Pluto, 2017).

The broad coalition of the League against Imperialism in its early incarnation, at least, may well have been the type of forum in which Senghor's black internationalism would have flourished alongside a broader set of anti-colonial alliances. Senghor had been a committed member of the Intercolonial Union and, as Michael Goebel has argued, after the Brussels Congress, 'the LAI continued to play a role akin to that fulfilled earlier by the UIC in bringing together anti-imperialists of various backgrounds, who exchanged and compared their viewapoints'.[63] Senghor had eventually abandoned the UIC, not due to its internationalism, but rather due to the lack of interest in black issues that he attributed to its PCF paymasters: and he continued to display solidarity with other anti-colonial movements when he became leader of both the CDRN and the LDRN. The simple fact of the matter was that, in the interwar period, the Communists were the anti-colonial movement's surest and wealthiest allies, and it was difficult to steer a path that avoided them entirely. Philippe Dewitte illustrates this dilemma succinctly through the case study of Lamine Senghor's deputy, Tiémoko Garan Kouyaté, who would replace the former after his death. In late 1927, Kouyaté received an invitation to an LAI meeting in Brussels but, desperate to trace a more moderate and independent line than his predecessor, he hid the letter from the executive and gave no reply;[64] just 18 months later, however, starved of cash and with the LDRN running out of steam, he accepted an invitation to attend the LAI's second congress in Frankfurt.[65] Black and African issues were given greater prominence in Frankfurt—in addition to Kouyaté, George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta and James W. Ford were also in attendance—and a decision was taken there to create an International Congress of Negro

[63] Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, 210.

[64] Dewitte, *Les Mouvements nègres*, 174.

[65] Ibid. 193.

Workers which was eventually launched in Hamburg a year later in July 1930. The contribution of such individuals to the LAI waxed and waned through the 1930s, but the League continued to be an important facilitator of black and African initiatives—for example, providing the funding for the International African Services Bureau which saw Padmore, Kouyaté and C.L.R. James collaborate on anti-colonial campaigns, particularly in opposition to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. Lamine Senghor's participation in the Brussels Congress and the foundation of the LAI were thus key early instances of the often contradictory desires for unity and autonomy that would mark the relationship between black radical groups and the LAI from its inception to its demise.