
AFRICAN PROFILES

Messali Hadj

FRANZ ANSPRENGER

THE LATEST COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE in Africa, which began after Stalin's death, is well known to employ a strategy involving a pincer-movement. The two attacking "columns" are marching at present in formations that are still strictly separate, although they no doubt intend to join forces some day. The first (and at present most forceful) line of attack consists of generous offers of bilateral development aid; in this, Moscow and its East European satellites as well as Peking (notwithstanding different ideological nuances) co-operate with African governments of all colours, even with those which, by the greatest stretch of imagination, can hardly be labelled "national democratic".

The second line of attack is the training of young African cadres at the universities, trade union colleges, etc., of the Eastern bloc. Publications of converted African students¹ go to show the patient and careful but unswerving way in which the "befriended guests" are being enlisted in the service of Marxist-Leninist teaching which alone can bring happiness. The constant care for Africans studying in the West by the communist parties or front organisations in the respective countries comes into the same category; what is more, at the moment Moscow evidently considers the time ripe for beginning to build up communist cells inside Africa itself, not yet formally called political parties.²

A German expert, Fritz Schatten, has judged the chances of success for the communist cadre-offensive as quite good: "Ideally, then, the person trained in the East returns to his homeland as so-to-speak a missionary for a world-wide movement carrying a historical mission—he becomes, voluntarily or not, a communist functionary."³ In actual fact, communist party organisations that could be taken seriously have still to be created throughout the African continent, including those states (such as Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, Sudan, South Africa) in which formally such parties have already existed for many years. They are all more or less illegal, it is true; but this alone does not sufficiently explain why they have remained so in-

significant: after all (leaving South Africa aside), the great national liberation movements succeeded in asserting themselves victoriously against the colonial power everywhere, and had been subject to equally hard administrative pressure for more or less extended periods.

At the same time, a revolutionary situation does exist in Africa. In the opinion of many African politicians a revolution is necessary not for the attainment of political independence but for the achievement of economic independence, an aim which is put forward everywhere, that is, to overcome the state of economic backwardness and to integrate the masses of the people into the modern world. *Les Damnés de la Terre* is the title of the last book by the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon of the West Indies, who died in 1961 at the age of 37, who fought on the side of the Algerian F.L.N. and who was perhaps the most passionate theoretical exponent of this anti-colonial revolution.⁴ Despite this Fanon was no communist; his book—though not explicitly—is implicitly nothing but a rejection of communism. Obviously, despite its efforts, communism is not readily able to capture the revolutionary forces in Africa, to canalise them for its own purposes. Why?

This question cannot be answered in a short essay. But one cause among several is to be found in the disadvantageous heritage of past communist policies: the wooing of Africa initiated since the death of Stalin is, after all, not the first offensive in this direction. A number of politically conscious Africans of the older generation have their experiences with communism already behind them, and it is not without interest to glance briefly at the personality of some of these Africans. None of them could put up with communism for long. That their story is not irrelevant, but typical, is demonstrated by the mere fact that no effective communist parties are in operation anywhere in Africa.

THE TWENTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD former French soldier Messali Hadj, who after demobilisation worked in a Paris industrial concern, was elected chairman of the organisation *Etoile Nord-Africaine* in 1926, just as the Communist International was preparing a new offensive in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. This took the form of founding the "League against Imperialism", a "front" organisation, disguised by the participation of prominent non-communists, the management of which was at first largely in the hands of the German Communist Party, with Willi Münzenberg pulling the strings.

This appeal to the widest possible masses and to as many groups as possible amongst the people under colonial rule was in full accord with the well-known theses which Lenin drafted for the second Comintern congress of 1920, stating that "we as communists must and will support the popular freedom movements in the colonies only if these movements are truly revolutionary, if their representatives do not obstruct us in educating in the revolutionary spirit the peasantry and the broad masses of the exploited and in organising them".

But in fact the Comintern concerned itself even after 1920 only very marginally with the colonial question, so that the Indian delegate, M. N. Roy, at the third congress

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in 1921 bitterly criticised the opportunism of the Soviet government and the lack of interest in the commission on the Eastern question set up by the congress shown by the European and American delegates. The demand of the fourth congress of 1922, that "every communist party in the countries possessing colonies must take over the task of organising systematic moral and material assistance for the proletarian and revolutionary movement in the colonies . . . European communist workers in the colonies must try to organise the indigenous proletariat and win their confidence", also remained essentially a dead letter: what proved to be a stronger force was the dislike, say, felt by the French workers, however communist-minded they may have been, for Algerian *bougnoules* and similar sub-proletarians. But now the new league was to provide a new beginning, and it is easy to understand that a man like the young Messali should enthusiastically rally to its banner, since his membership of the French Communist Party during the past few years had given him no practical opportunity to mobilise his Algerian compatriots.

WE FIND MESSALI among the speakers at the "Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism", organised by the league in Brussels in February, 1927. His brief address, made in the name of the *Etoile Nord-Africaine*, ended with the words: "Our fight for independence will be hard . . . French imperialism wants to set brother murderously against brother amongst us. I hope that the victorious struggle for freedom of the Chinese people will be the signal for the liberation of us all, and I assure the fighting Chinese people that they have the support of all oppressed peoples. Through uniting all oppressed peoples, and with the support of the world proletariat, we hope to achieve the destruction of imperialism and to create a truly human society. I greet the representatives of brother nations who are at present at this congress.

I greet with all my heart the French proletariat which has supported us and still supports us today. . . . I conclude my speech with the call: long live the socialism of the oppressed nations! Long live the Soviet Union, which is liberating the world! Long live the Chinese revolution! Long live the congress!"⁵

This text contradicts the assertion made in a biographical sketch recently circulated by political friends of Messali: "In 1925 Messali Hadj completely severed his connections with the communists, in whose organisation he was active as a very young man."⁶ No, in 1927 the chairman of the *Etoile Nord-Africaine* at least still believed that it was possible to advance in close fellowship with the Comintern. But not for very long. When the first wave of police persecution against the *Etoile Nord-Africaine* began in 1929, Messali evidently did not receive the hoped-for support from the communists. In May, 1933, he had the party programme revised in order to safeguard his organisation "from threatening infiltration and underground activities".⁷ It is now that the *Etoile Nord-Africaine* for the first time expressly demands "complete independence" for Algeria, whereas the communists three years later wrote in the founding manifesto of the P.C.A. (Parti Communiste Algérien): "If we try to shake off the chains of serfdom and oppression which keep us shackled to imperialist France, we do so in order to create firm brotherly bonds, which will bind our people of their own free will with the great brother-nation of France into a community with common interests."⁸ In other words, a communist France would not think of giving up Algeria!

Meanwhile, at the Moslem Congress in Geneva in September, 1935, Messali had entered into relations with the Pan-Islamic movement and its leader, Cheikib Arslan: the gulf between him and the communists became even wider. The communist author Egrétaud criticised Messali's demeanour at that time as "wavering" and "confused".

In 1934 the *Etoile Nord-Africaine* participated in the

FRANKIE, YOU'RE A GENIUS! In one unguarded moment the department's journal, *S.A. Digest*, let out what must amount to one of the great understatements of recent times when it quoted a public relations consultant as saying that "presenting South Africa's case to the rest of the world is recognised in international public relations circles as the trickiest single public relations problem"! With so much dirty linen to hide, who can wonder. But, never despair: "Waring washes whitest of all," or, presenting the new anti-Soapy formula, "We didn't get White by accident."

BUT I AM WORRIED by one or two small doubts. Who reads these advertisements? And who believes them? Apart from those dubious allies, the League of Empire Loyalists and a few Tory backwoodsmen, we have few

friends in Britain and the impact of the proportionate representation is negligible. All of which just goes to show that even mountains of Old Spice won't remove the stench of good old polecat. And even if the Old Specious is laid on with a heavy hand, our own bunglers can be relied upon to drop some resounding clangers and undo all the good work. Who will ever forget the performances of Messrs. Vorster, Sauer and Abraham in the C.B.S. TV film "Sabotage in South Africa"? The latter, in particular, was splendid: when asked if Africans were allowed to protest against the provisions of the Transkeian constitution, he blurted out, "Of course they are, they're protesting about them all the time!"

ONE WONDERS WHAT impact is made by the long procession of retired warriors, tycoons and editors of minor

provincial European newspapers, all of whom dutifully issue strangely similar-sounding statements just prior to departure. How seriously, for instance, can one take the opinions of Monty, who equates Dr. Verwoerd and Mao Tse Tung together as "great guys"?

I AWAIT WITH bated breath the handling of the Bantu Laws Amendment Bill by the Propaganda Department. It is difficult to see just how this Bill can ever be given the proverbial sugar-coating, even by the most ingenious of public relations men—and how it will be believed by even the most ingenuous of readers. The Leader of the Opposition says it will lead to a revolutionary situation. He might consider sending a copy of the Bill to Mr. Kruschew, inscribed "To Russia with Love". It is Bondage of the worst kind. A. B. OLIPHANT

mass Paris demonstrations against the attempted fascist *coup d'état* of February. In 1935 and 1936 Messali offered to join the popular front that was then being created. But even after the election victory of the popular front, the communists had no intention of giving him honest support; on the contrary: together with middle-class moderate Algerian organisations, the P.C.A. at a "Congrès Algérien" in June, 1936, proposed complete assimilation with France. And when, in August of the same year, Messali held his first mass meeting in his homeland of 20,000 people in the stadium of Algiers, drastic measures of suppression became only a matter of time. On 25 January, 1937, the *Etoile Nord-Africaine* was declared illegal by the communist-supported Popular-Front Government of Léon Blum.

THE SAME CONFLICT reappeared after the Second World War in far more bloody circumstances. Messali's organisation (which now went under the name "Parti du Peuple Algérien") was made responsible for the riots that broke out during the victory celebrations on May 8, 1945, at Sétif. The communists were participants in the De Gaulle government which ruthlessly suppressed the rising (officially 15,000 dead; according to Algerians 45,000 dead). Consistent with this was the comment by Léon Feix in the communist party organ, *L'Humanité*, of May 12, 1945: "It is highly illuminating that the criminal tools of bloated colonialism should be the M.T.L.D. and P.P.A., for instance Messali and the impudent jackals in his pay, who did not utter a word and did nothing when France was under Nazi domination and who now demand independence. What needs to be done is to punish without mercy the originators of these difficulties."

The events on which light is thrown by these examples have built a wall—impenetrable to this very hour—between communism and the extreme wing of the Algerian nationalist movement (whether devoted to Messali or not). At the same time Messali and his followers never failed to apply the organisational experience of the communists to the legal, semi-legal, or wholly illegal associations they built up after 1945 in Algeria and among the Algerian emigrant workers in France. For instance, the simultaneous use of a legal and an illegal apparatus, or again the cell-structure, the *Gleichschaltung* of the trade unions, and lastly the co-ordination in the last stages of the revolutionary struggle of the military and the political and administrative organisations: all these are but the most obvious examples of the debt owed to the communists in the matter of methods by this wing of Algerian nationalism (covering the M.T.L.D. and the P.P.A., the F.L.N. and the M.N.A.); indeed, Messali's fall in 1954 from his earlier position is strikingly reminiscent of a simultaneous trend in communism: the majority of the central committee of the M.T.L.D. (Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques) which rebelled against Messali, accused him—probably not entirely unjustly—of encouraging a "personality cult"!

NEVERTHELESS, IT CANNOT BE over-emphasised that the borrowing of communist methods and also the more or less conscious adoption of some of the phraseology changes nothing in the basic immunity to communism of the

extreme wing of Algerian nationalism, and the communists themselves referred to it at a meeting of the central committee as early as October, 1948, when the secretary-general of the P.C.A. stated: "We are not closely enough bound to the masses, particularly the Moslem masses, in the workshops and offices, in the cafés and markets. In these conditions it is difficult for our cadres to know what the people are thinking, to be in tune with the people."⁹ On the other side, the F.L.N. treated the isolation of Algerian communism from the living realities of the people to devastating criticism, contained in its first party programme declaration, the platform of the Soumman Congress of August, 1956: "The communist leadership, bureaucratic, without any contact with the people, has been unable to analyse correctly the evolutionary situation. That is why it has condemned 'terrorism' and from the first months of the insurrection ordered its members from Aurès, who had come to Algiers to get instructions, not to take up arms. Its subservience to the C.P. of France has become the subservience of a yes-man with the silence which followed the granting of special powers in February, 1956, to Guy Mollet's government, which the French communists at first did not oppose. The P.C.A. has disappeared as a serious organisation, primarily because of the preponderance in its midst of Europeans; the shock to their artificial Algerian nationalist beliefs, faced with the realities of armed resistance, brought these contradictions into the open."¹⁰

It seems appropriate to close the Messali episode with this quotation from the programme of the F.L.N. However far the F.L.N. may have moved away from Messali, as regards its relation to communism it is following the route marked out by the founder of Algerian nationalism on the basis of bitter experience. No blasts of propaganda from the communist bloc, no offers of aid or perhaps even of real assistance given in support of the revolutionary war of the F.L.N. (as soon as its success began to come into sight) can wipe out the fact that French communism and its Algerian offshoot on the whole failed to integrate themselves into the process of emancipation of the Algerian people. They failed because the bonds of nationhood and religion binding the Algerians together were far stronger than the abstract theme of a "class-struggle situation", because the communists underestimated these elemental forces, and in particular never believed in the chances of a spontaneous national revolution, which, in 1954 and the years that followed, the F.L.N. knew how to embody and to lead.

- 1 See Andrew Amar, *A Student in Moscow* (London, 1961); Michel Ayih, *Ein Afrikaner in Moskau* (Cologne, 1961).
- 2 "What is evident is that the extension of the understanding of communism, the study of Marxism-Leninism or of such journals as *The African Communist* and *World Marxist Review*, and through these the developing of corresponding political organisation, whether finding its fulfilment in the immediate formation of Communist Parties or through the development of parties advancing to acceptance of the principles of Marxism-Leninism, has become a vital need for future political development in Africa." R. Palme Dutt, "Africa and Communism", in *The African Communist* (London), January, 1962, p. 46.
- 3 Fritz Schatten, *Africa—schwarz oder rot?* (Munich, 1961), p. 359.
- 4 Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris, 1961).
- 5 *Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont*, Report of the Brussels Congress (Berlin, 1927), p. 98.
- 6 *Réalités Algériennes* (Antwerp), October-November, 1959, p. 26.
- 7 *La Voix du Peuple* (organ of the Mouvement National Algérien, the group in the national movement that remained faithful to Messali), March, 1961.
- 8 Marcel Egrétaud, *Réalité de la Nation Algérienne* (Paris, 1957), p. 173.
- 9 Colette and Francis Jeanson, *L'Algérie hors la loi* (Paris, 1955), p. 110.
- 10 *El Moudjahid* (central organ of the F.L.N.), special supplement on the Congress of August 20, 1956, at Soumman-Tal, p. 16.