

Internationalizing African Opinion: Race, Writing and Resistance

Imagine what it meant to us to go to Hyde Park to speak to a race of people who were considered our masters, and tell them right out what we felt about their empire and about them ... and yet, as George Padmore would say ... 'Where else but in Britain would you get Lord Bridgeman's son heading the League against Imperialism, or the daughter of Lord and Lady Cunard – Nancy – associating with people like George Padmore??'

Ras Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism from Within* (1973)

No race has been so noble in forgiving, but now the hour has struck for our complete emancipation.

Amy Ashwood Garvey, speaking at a Trafalgar Square rally in 1935

Walking down a London street in May 1935, the young student Francis Nkrumah was feeling dispirited and pondering returning home rather than continuing his onward journey to study in the United States when he 'heard an excited newspaper boy shouting something unintelligible'.¹ As the boy grabbed a bundle of the latest editions, Nkrumah caught sight of the headline on a placard: 'MUSSOLINI INVADES ETHIOPIA'. He would note famously in his autobiography that this shocking piece of news was all that he needed to overcome his malaise: 'At that moment, it was almost as if the whole of London had declared war on me personally. For the next few minutes I could do nothing but glare at each impassive face wondering if those people could possibly realise the wickedness of colonialism ... My nationalism surged to the fore.'²

Since Nkrumah was, of course, from the Gold Coast, present-day Ghana, what was being evoked here was something far more expansive and powerful than a nationalism of birthplace. He was not alone; there were others in London and beyond, black thinkers and campaigners from across Africa and the Caribbean, who would be galvanized by incidents in Ethiopia. In London they included figures who would, in many cases, become household names across the decolonizing world: C. L. R. James, Eric Williams, Jomo Kenyatta, I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, T. Ras Makonnen, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Chris Braithwaite and George Padmore. In many cases, notably Padmore's, they were socialists and communists disillusioned by the Comintern's vacillations on the question of imperialism during that period, seeking a way to align anti-capitalism to a serious engagement with questions of race, colonialism and culture. The result was what Brent Edwards has described as a 'striking shift from the institutions of international communism to a non-aligned effort at "international African" work'.³ London at this historical juncture has been described by

Minkah Makalani, in a resonant phrase, as providing ‘a unique incubator for radical black internationalist discourse’.⁴ In his excellent account of C. L. R. James’s years in 1930s Britain, Christian Høgsbjerg observes that a critical mass of campaigning figures from the African and Caribbean colonies in London led to ‘black, radical, anti-colonialist activists ... developing their own alternative counterculture of resistance in the imperial metropolis alongside more directly political campaigning in Pan-Africanist organizations’.⁵ Crucial to this counterculture was a vibrant black press, a ‘valuable source for understanding the roles played by Blacks in Britain’ during the 1930s and 1940s.⁶ As a ‘wave of black publications rolled off the presses in the late 1930s’ and ‘harangued’ the British government on a wide range of issues, from Ethiopia itself to the serious Jamaican riots of 1938, they also whetted and sharpened the cutting edge of British criticism of empire.⁷

Two events were vitally catalysing for that counterculture: the labour rebellions that shook the British West Indies from the 1930s onwards and ‘forced themselves into the consciousness of the people and rulers of the British Empire’, and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (later Ethiopia) which was met by fierce resistance from the Ethiopians.⁸ Very different in their manifestations, and yet possessed of shared features, between them these struggles helped give a high international profile to anticolonial resistance in both African and Caribbean contexts. After the invasion of Ethiopia, black campaigners held anti-war rallies which were attended by people of various ethnicities, including a ‘substantial crowd of English people’.⁹ At one, Amy Ashwood Garvey, a dynamic force in the London scene, though lamentably ill-represented in its archives, spoke forcefully to European colonizers: ‘You have talked of “the White man’s burden” ... But now we are carrying yours and standing between you and fascism.’¹⁰ While excellent work has been done on the contributions of black radicals in London and other European capitals, and on the development of transnational and diasporic networks, by Makalani, Matera, Edwards and Pennybacker among others, further attention needs to be paid to the extent to which this radical – and radicalizing – black counterculture in London drew on actually occurring resistances, learning vital lessons from insurgencies on colonial ground and interpreting them to a metropolitan audience. In doing so, black radicals, positioning themselves as both colonial and British in their London base, developed important tenets of anticolonialism, which in turn shaped the approach of their metropolitan allies. They also sought to create institutions and formal networks which would facilitate anticolonial thought and work in the heart of empire. The theory and practice of self-emancipation now emerged as a necessary corollary to an uncompromising rejection of paternalism, while questions of ‘blackness’, indeed of race itself, became much more salient.



C. L. R. James giving a speech at a rally for Ethiopia in London

This chapter considers the International African Service Bureau (IASB) and its journal, *International African Opinion*, as metropolitan institutional sites which facilitated the development of an anticolonial counterculture which, while drawing on Marxism, also sought to identify resources for resistance which were embedded in black colonial experiences. While insisting on the specificity of both black oppression and black resistance, this counterculture did not lay claim to incommensurable cultural difference; the task at hand was to reconstitute the grounds of the universal. Gary Wilder's suggestion that 'we now need to be less concerned with unmasking universalism as covert European particularisms than with challenging the assumption that the universal is European property' is relevant here.¹¹ The radicals of the IASB were doing both, calling European and American claims to universalism to account while re-centring Africa and the West Indies in a new cartography of liberation. Similarly, the diversity of lived experiences of race and global race hierarchies could not simply be reduced to epiphenomenal expressions of economic truths. As interpreters of Ethiopian and Caribbean resistance, the most important contribution of black radicals in London may have been to make questions of labour and capitalism central to black anticolonial thought, and, conversely, to make race and culture more fundamental to metropolitan discussions of labour and anti-capitalism. Rather than just 'translating'

communist categories into ‘the idiom of Pan-Africanism’, the task at hand was one of creating a new language that did not repudiate other vocabularies of critique, but sought to bring them in more strenuous engagement with each other.¹² Out of this, would emerge a revitalized collaborative anticolonialism. The collective work of the IASB pointed towards Africa and the West Indies as ‘co-producers’ of modernity, black intellectuals not just being influenced by European thought, but producing knowledge of the world.¹³

African Emancipation and Black Metropolitan Organizing

All this revolutionary history can come as a surprise only to those who, whatever International they belong to, whether Second, Third, or Fourth, have not yet ejected from their systems the pertinacious lies of Anglo-Saxon capitalism. It is not strange that the Negroes revolted. It would have been strange if they had not.

C. L. R. James, writing as J. R. Johnson

The whole history of British colonial rule has taught that native leaders and masses, be they Africans, Indians or West Indians, are only respected if they agitate for their rights and meet their rulers with courage and dignity. Cringing will get Africans nowhere. Let us stop it.

International African Opinion, 1939

On 5 December 1934 a shot rang out in a remote part of Ethiopia known as Wal Wal, where a border dispute was underway between the Italian military, which had occupied Somaliland, and Ethiopian soldiers. A heavy fusillade of fire in two directions followed. At the end of several hours, during which three Italian aeroplanes strafed Ethiopian lines, there were 107 dead on the Ethiopian side and thirty on the Italian. Overpowered, the Ethiopians withdrew, but the incident was the beginning of what came to be known as the ‘Abyssinia crisis’, an event that would shake up the tenuous peace then prevailing in Europe and cause a flurry of frantic diplomatic activity. Benito Mussolini, Italy’s Fascist leader, would use the episode to clear the way for a full-scale invasion of Ethiopia, then the only country on the continent of Africa not under some form of European colonial rule or, in the case of Liberia, United States protection. Emperor Haile Selassie (Ras Tafari), crowned only a few years earlier, in 1930, would take the fateful but hugely important decision not to follow the path of appeasement urged by Britain, but to lay his case before the League of Nations, stating categorically that, as the maps showed, Wal Wal lay well inside sovereign Ethiopian territory.¹⁴ In doing so, he was boldly staking Ethiopia’s claim to equality of status with sovereign European nations and, equally significantly, challenging the league to show that its vaunted universal principles – collective security, peace and order – would be applied beyond Europe. His attempt to hold them to their stated universal commitments would fail signally, and that failure, which enabled Italy to invade his kingdom unchallenged, would reverberate across an outraged West Indies and Africa: ‘Apart from the Kingdom of the Lord there is not on this earth any nation that is superior to any other’, he pronounced firmly.¹⁵ The failure was read, correctly, as a signal that Europe refused to recognize the independent status of a sovereign black African nation – and in doing so, was reifying the status of all of Africa as subjugated, not included in ‘universal’ rights.¹⁶ Africans were once again marked as something less than wholly free, which was to be less than fully human. If that status had never been acceptable

to the enslaved and the colonized, it was now beyond the realm of possibility, to be challenged unequivocally and by black people across continents.

European historians of the Abyssinia crisis have tended to discuss it as a preliminary act of appeasement on the road to fascism which was not ‘an episode in the relations between European and African peoples’, but rather ‘a catalyst of the disintegration of international law and order in Europe, leading to a European and so to a World War’.¹⁷ In contrast, for many colonial subjects in Africa and the West Indies, as well as black intellectuals resident in London, the incursions upon and invasion of the only sovereign and fully independent African nation by a European power was *precisely* about African people and their relation to Europeans. The Ethiopian resistance represented a radical yet realizable possibility: defeating imperialism and seizing back the continent of Africa. James recalled that the attack on Ethiopia prompted him and others to organize a campaign and demand action against Italy, and even to consider forming a military organization to fight the Italians. An important cognitive shift had taken place with the invasion and Ethiopian resistance to it: a sense that ‘the African revolution’, as James termed it, was underway, and that it was important for black intellectuals to identify themselves ‘with those bands, hundreds and thousands of them, who are still fighting, and for years are going to carry on the fight against Imperialistic domination of any kind’.¹⁸ The result of this recognition among black radicals resident in Britain was the formation of the International African Friends of Abyssinia, which was soon renamed the International African Friends of Ethiopia. This significant black presence and flurry of activity in the service of ‘colonial emancipation in general and African emancipation in particular’ meant, James opined, that, ‘As far as political organisations in England were concerned the black intellectuals had not only arrived but were significant arrivals.’¹⁹ It also brought black people from various parts of the globe into alliance, as Makonnen recalls:

It’s very important to put the response of the black world to the Ethiopian War into perspective, especially since it is easy to get the impression that pan-Africanism was just some type of petty protest activity – a few blacks occasionally meeting in conference and sending resolutions here and there. But the real dimensions can only be gathered by estimating the kind of vast support that Ethiopia enjoyed amongst blacks everywhere ... It brought home to many black people the reality of colonialism, and exposed its true nature ... It was clear that imperialism was a force to be reckoned with, because here it was attacking the black man’s last citadel.²⁰

In ‘Abyssinia and the Imperialists’, a 1936 piece written for *The Keys*, the journal of the League of Coloured People (LCP), James acerbically hailed the invasion as a salutary pedagogical occasion, for ‘Africans and people of African descent, especially those who have been poisoned by British imperialist education, needed a lesson’.²¹ Abyssinia posed a special challenge for all five imperial powers who desired it, since the people ‘are splendid fighters’, making it less easy for those powers to ‘steal it as easily as they had stolen the rest of Africa’.²² The lesson to be learned from this morass was applicable across colonial contexts: ‘The only thing to save Abyssinia is the efforts of the Abyssinians themselves and action by the great masses of Negroes and sympathetic whites and Indians all over the world, by demonstrations, public meetings, resolutions, financial assistance to Abyssinia, strikes against the export of all materials to Italy, refusal to unload Italian ships etc.’²³ It is this

recognition that makes the conflict, ‘though unfortunate for Abyssinia ... of immense benefit to the race as a whole’.²⁴ What the Abyssinia crisis had indeed done was to provide a concrete focus for black anticolonialism both in Britain and beyond, opening up a horizon of imaginative possibility – one that James would use, along with the ongoing labour unrest in the West Indies, as an inspiration for the work he had already begun on *The Black Jacobins*, his great historical ode to black self-emancipation.²⁵ The invasion of Ethiopia, seen as the ‘final Caucasian victory’, came to stand in for European colonialism tout court – not least, of course, due to Britain and France’s reluctance to rein in Italy and the far-from-suppressed admiration accorded by Britain’s ruling elites to the likes of Mussolini.²⁶ There was also material support in the form of arms and war materials.

That the language of nationhood permeates what was a necessarily transnational endeavour is significant. In his important account of the black presence in London during this period, Marc Matera notes that black radicals shunned narrow racial and national chauvinism as ‘dangerous illusions’.²⁷ While he is correct to suggest that many studies of resistance to colonialism have reduced diverse political imaginaries and struggles to ‘a Wilsonian rhetoric of self-determination’, and that ‘the nationalist plot occludes whole realms of political imagination and struggle’, the fact also remains that a substantial amount of effort was put into demanding that principles of self-determination, articulated by both Wilson and Lenin in very different ways, be genuinely universalized.²⁸ As the case of Ethiopia suggests, national belonging and transnational affiliations, nationalism and internationalism, were seen to have a symbiotic relationship; it was certainly not quite the case that ‘the majority of these black intellectuals and organizations rejected nationalism as a divisive and obsolete paradigm for political community’.²⁹ In most cases, individuals from the Caribbean and Africa had no independent nations of their own to reject as ‘obsolete’, which is why tremendous importance was placed on Ethiopia and Haiti as the world’s only two independent black nation-states (Liberia had a more ambiguous status). In a sense, the national had to be clawed out of the colonial before a postcolonial – or a postnational – future could be anticipated and imagined. We should be cautious about reading back into a very different political moment that sense of jaded obsolescence which is an affective disposition of our own theoretical present. For these black intellectuals, it was also not just a question of offering solidarity to Ethiopian nationalists; the sovereign statehood of this one country was felt to be vitally organic, its violation symbolic of the violence and injury inflicted upon Africans as a whole. In Cedric Robinson’s words, ‘Ethiopia’ became a point of reference, ‘a term signifying historicity and racial dignity in ways the term ‘Negro’ could not match’.³⁰ One nationalist newspaper in Sierra Leone went so far as to suggest that ‘peoples of the African group will admit that the dictator has done a distinct service’ in bringing them together into a united front with differences swept away by ‘the magic touch of kinship’.³¹ It certainly turned James into a fierce advocate of anticolonial alliances, enjoining ‘sufferers from imperialism all over the world, all anxious to help the Ethiopian people’, to ‘organise yourselves independently’.³² His metaphor was simple: prisoners broke their own chains – ‘Who is the fool that expects our gaolers to break them?’³³ We know that, as a member of the politically moderate LCP in 1933, James was already inclined to advocate a ‘spirit of nationalism’ to liberate the West

Indies from its colonial condition, making the case for ‘a West Indian consciousness, and a pride in the matters that pertain to [West Indians]’.³⁴ With the invasion of Ethiopia, there emerged a clear sense that anticolonialism could therefore be necessarily at once nation-oriented (stressing independence from colonial rule) and determinedly transnational in organizational form: it would deploy the language of nation-states put in instrumental place by empire while defiantly exceeding its territorial and conceptual limits.

This insight made it both possible and necessary to demonstrate how there were or had been viable communities and collective entities which had pre-existed colonial states, and whose resources could yet be deployed in the forging of altogether different post-imperial polities. Part of the impetus here was to lay claim to an understanding of freedom and rights which sought simultaneously to expose the colonizer’s version of the universal as in fact parochial, partial and self-serving, and to show that these were concepts with African roots of their own, hardly unique to Europe or the West. Already in 1934, when he had begun to study Africa in greater depth, James had spoken of the Bushongo of Kasai as an African people with ‘a civilisation which showed what Africa would have been able to achieve had it remained free from foreign interference. In fact, their moral code might have served as an example to the rest of the world’.³⁵ Makonnen recalls: ‘George and I spent a good deal of time in the British Museum digging out some of the ancient history of Ethiopia.’³⁶ Such research made it possible for them to ‘discourse at Hyde Park’ and to ‘attempt to educate English public opinion’ on the political possibilities deriving from anticolonial insurgency. It is important to resist the temptation to read this engagement with Ethiopia, even in James’s case, as evidence of a pre-Marxist culturalism which would eventually be replaced by a properly economic analysis. The combined inspiration of the Ethiopian situation and labour uprisings (the protests over the former frequently fronted by the leaders of the latter in the West Indies) spelled the emergence of a black anticolonialism that managed to take seriously culture and economy, race and class, putting them in necessary and dialogic engagement. This was also the period, as Davarian L. Baldwin notes, when the term ‘New Negro’ returned to discourse in the United States and beyond, referring both to ‘the assertiveness and defiance of the first generation of free black people’ and to ‘the more pronounced convergence of politically leftist and black radical internationalism’.³⁷ As the question of capitalism and its deep implication in the structures of empire became vitally central, questions of race, nation and culture would not, could not, be subordinated to the status of superstructure. If ‘Marx and Engels did not see any revolutionary potential in non-Western peoples or their civilisations’, as Anthony Bogues argues, what was taking place in Ethiopia, Africa and across the Caribbean would require that contention to be revisited.³⁸

‘We repudiate this imperialist benevolence ...’: The *International African Opinion*³⁹

Of course we had people like C. L. R. James and Cedric Dover in the 1930s, but such few writers as there were had to enter a field that was predominantly white – white journals, white publishers, and nearly always white men writing about black. All right. But what this meant in even such a radical circle as the Left Book Club series was that

your work had to be read by a white man to see if it had any merit.

Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism from Within*

You'd better join our group while you're here. We're a sort of brains trust behind the various colonial organizations in this country.

Peter Abrahams, *A Wreath for Udomo*

The first serious organizational attempt to create a global black coalition of resistance out of the Ethiopia campaign was made in Britain. The International African Friends of Ethiopia (IAFE), the brainchild of James and Ashwood Garvey, was the first prominent incarnation of these efforts; after the eventual defeat of the Ethiopians, it would transform itself in 1937 into the International African Service Bureau (IASB), a task which could be described in the terms Stafford Cripps used for Padmore's work: a 'bare and courageous exposure of the great myth of the civilizing mission of western democracies in Africa'.⁴⁰ Disseminating anticolonial writing and critical analyses specifically by black campaigners and intellectuals was central to the work of the IASB, Abrahams's thinly fictionalized 'brains trust'. (That they were overwhelmingly male was a fact that went unremarked by them at the time, though, as Matera notes, the organizational labours of women, not least of Amy Ashwood Garvey, were, in fact, fundamental.) Well connected within both black and pan-African circles, Ashwood Garvey ran a restaurant and club, the Florence Mills Social Parlour, which famously afforded a congenial space for many black activists and intellectuals to meet. According to Ras Makonnen's memoir, the explicit aim of the IASB was to direct anticolonial activity in Britain under black leadership and consciousness: 'we were not going to have any European leadership' and the 'idea therefore was to emphasize service to people of African descent in as many ways as possible'.⁴¹ The IASB's paper, *International African Opinion (IAO)*, would note acerbically that 'European organisations tend to ignore the African struggle and to use the colonial movement merely as a decoration to their own for ceremonial occasions'.⁴² As its general secretary, I. T. A. (Isaac) Wallace-Johnson, remarked, the Ethiopia episode and the failure of Britain and other League of Nations members to curb Italy demonstrated one thing: 'that the world is still dominated by the philosophy of might over right. It has also opened the eyes of Africans the world over, that they have no rights which the powerfully armed nations are bound to respect'.⁴³ In its own literature, the IASB described one of its primary purposes as helping to 'enlighten British public opinion about conditions in the Colonies, Protectorates and Mandated territories in Africa, the West Indies and other parts of the Empire'.⁴⁴ It would also campaign for democratic rights and freedoms in the colonies and against such things as child labour, forced labour and the colour bar. A prolific flurry of publishing activity by members of the bureau followed, including such works as *How Britain Rules Africa* and *Africa and World Peace*, both by Padmore, followed by James's *A History of Negro Revolt*, Eric Williams's *The Negro in the Caribbean* and *Capitalism and Slavery* and Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*.⁴⁵ The one work from this period which has been given any sustained attention in postcolonial literary scholarship is James's justly celebrated *Black Jacobins*, although Williams's and Kenyatta's works have been central to African studies over the years. Equally important are the collective efforts embodied by the *IAO* and related publications, emerging as they did out of a campaigning

milieu of debate, discussion and organizational work.

It is not only possible but right to think about many of the Asian and black intellectuals and campaigners resident in London in the 1930s as distinctively British figures, addressing British audiences and laying claim to British political and ethical terrain; they brought with them, of course, colonial histories and experiences, and sought to integrate these into their analyses of both the British and the global present. My point here is somewhat different from the way in which the likes of James and Padmore, for instance, are routinely figured as 'Black Englishmen', steeped – as they undoubtedly were – in English (but also European) literary and political traditions. Cedric Robinson has suggested that many such figures felt that 'a part of their mission was to correct the errant motherland', and that even the most anti-imperialist among them found it difficult to shake off a Whiggish belief in the eventual triumph of English 'fair play and deep moral regulation'.⁴⁶ James's later, rather tongue-in-cheek, remark about his journey from Trinidad is, of course, widely cited: 'The British intellectual was going to Britain.'⁴⁷ Noting that even Trotsky considered James's 'cast of mind all too typically English', Howe suggests that James's 'central thrust remained that of the extreme, indeed shameful, chasm between the British values he genuinely cherished and their betrayal in the colonies'.⁴⁸ Schwarz notes of Padmore that he 'mastered the culture of the colonisers, having learned to inhabit Englishness at perfect pitch', and that for him, as for James, 'mastering the codes of England provided a way out from colonial Trinidad'.⁴⁹ None of this is untrue, but it is necessary to push beyond variants of Shakespeare's 'Caliban' as a generic symbol for these figures, with the attendant implication that their 'cursing' criticism and analyses were fundamentally made possible by their mastery of the colonizer's language. Something more interesting was going on during this moment of discernment, in which black campaigners and intellectuals found themselves undertaking a different kind of journey to Caliban's. For those who had travelled from the West Indies and parts of Africa, what came into focus was their own sense of self, individual and collective. As Ethiopia was bombarded, while Britain and the League of Nations stood by, urgent questions presented themselves. Who were 'we', the black sojourners in Britain who had arrived there from across the Caribbean and Africa? Was it even possible for that diversity of backgrounds and histories to coalesce into a collective identity, deeply felt as a shared experience in the attack on a sovereign African nation few of them actually came from but to which a shared affective allegiance united them? How could this collective African and black self, shaped by the colonial encounter but not reducible to it, be given voice – and, given the importance of self-representation to the act of self-emancipation, by whom? The black self in a historical frame became the object of study for these black intellectuals. Indeed, James appears to have said as much: 'I began to gain in England a conception of black people which I didn't possess when I left the Caribbean.'⁵⁰

To 'close ranks' in creating black organizations like the IASB was, then, a necessary step in this process of self-study and self-understanding, which entailed crafting a voice that did not simply echo European intellectual insights, and then making it heard. If one of the most important reasons for doing so was to repudiate white leadership and European tutelage in order to act from a place of confident self-knowledge, equally vital was a sense that there

were resources to be drawn on which were not simply reducible to Prospero's gift. These were, to some extent, provided by coming to grips with a history of ideas and achievements out of Africa – James confessed, for instance, that he had been completely 'unaware that Africa had artistic structures and traditions of its own' – but it was the resistance in Ethiopia and the insurgencies in the Caribbean which most inspired the insight that the language of black rebellion needed to be understood and espoused.⁵¹ If the Caribbean had been a foundational agent of capitalist modernity through plantation slavery – an argument James, among others, would make – it was also the case that the descendants of those rebellious chattels were once again leading the way in challenging the depredations of capitalism and empire.⁵² Now, as then, it was the metropole that had something to learn from the periphery, and the black radicals of the IASB sought to play a key role in this process. And so, while the organization was assertively black in composition and primary membership – and self-consciously more radical than existing black organizations like the LCP, which James had been involved with for a time – numerous sympathetic white Britons were listed as 'patrons' on its letterhead. They included Nancy Cunard; Sylvia Pankhurst, MP and future colonial secretary Arthur Creech Jones; the publisher Victor Gollancz; the Rev. Reginald Sorensen; the writer Ethel Mannin; the MPs Ellen Wilkinson, Noel Baker and D. N. Pritt (among others); and the radical journalist F. A. Ridley. James would edit the organization's journal, *International African Opinion*, which laid out the IASB's aims and guiding principles with admirable clarity: 'Educate – Co-operate – Emancipate: Neutral in nothing affecting the African Peoples'.⁵³ It would provide speakers to go to 'Labour Party branches, Co-operative Guilds, League of Nations Union branches, peace societies and religious organisations'.⁵⁴

In his illuminating assessment of black internationalism in this period, Minkah Makalani has noted that the IASB's output was copious: 'One of the more striking aspects of the bureau's intellectual work was its sheer volume. In a span of just four years, a core group of roughly seven members produced nine books, a novel, a play, a score of pamphlets, and three journals and a news bulletin.'⁵⁵ Authorship ensured a hard-won authority; James himself noted that speakers from the bureau often spoke at public meetings where there were more whites than blacks, and that 'the fact that we had published books gave us some sort of status'.⁵⁶ The *International African Opinion*, which billed itself as 'a journal of action', explicitly aimed not only at consolidating the oppositional energies unleashed by the invasion of Ethiopia but, as its pointed title indicates, at foregrounding a black non-metropolitan understanding of global events. Its masthead featuring a black woman holding up a torch with a world map in the background, the journal offered 'the most wide-ranging and cogently argued articulation of the anti-imperialist position in the late 1930s'.⁵⁷ The fact that its run did not outlast the newsprint shortage in the months leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War should not lead us to overlook the importance of the terrain claimed by the journal. The collective efforts of the IASB executive and other *IAO* contributors gave clear and consolidated expression to the critical and analytical currents that had emerged from black resistance over the preceding years. Although the importance of the journal has been recognized in scholarship on black internationalism, a more detailed engagement is needed with its contents, and in particular its uncompromising delineation of a cogent, detailed

anticolonialism.⁵⁸ For the first time, a number of vital points looking ahead to the era of decolonization were made within the pages of a single journal, and expanded on by other writings associated with it. These included the recognition of the extent of black and other anticolonial resistance, and the concomitant centrality of self-emancipation; the repudiation of notions of tutelage and trusteeship; the importance of solidarity across racial and national lines; and finally, perhaps most controversially, a radical challenge to the presumed opposition between fascism and ‘democratic’ imperialism that was central to colonial myth-making which will be considered in greater detail in [Chapter 9](#).

The address of the *IAO* was determinedly global and cross-racial, even as it sought to build on a pan-African consciousness of shared racial oppression: ‘[We do not] believe that African emancipation is to be achieved in isolation from the rest of the world. But the freedom of the African or any other people can be won only by those people themselves.’⁵⁹ Any engagement between white and black workers would have to be dialogical, ‘accomplished only by mutual confidence and respect on a basis of complete equality, learnt in discussion, struggle and danger, honestly shared and reciprocal assistance generously given’.⁶⁰ While it stresses the necessarily racialized nature of this ‘awakened black political consciousness’, the journal is clear in its rejection of ‘racial chauvinism’ from any quarter: ‘We repudiate the idea of substituting a black racial arrogance for a white’.⁶¹ Although African emancipation could not be arrived at in isolation from that of the rest of humanity, organizational efforts would have to be constitutively ‘AFRICAN’.⁶² In a pointed reversal of familiar metropolitan gestures of inclusion, ‘while jealously guarding our independence’, the journal’s editors noted that the contributions of white friends would appear in the journal. (Their financial assistance was repeatedly acknowledged and thanked.)

Universal Blackness, Global Anticolonialism

The first editorial of the *IAO* deserves special attention as a collective statement of aims which brought together several of these points. It is important for its definition of shared ‘black political consciousness’ as deriving from ‘a common bond of oppression’ and ‘scattered’ struggles which need to be brought together.⁶³ Conversely, it repudiated black middle-class petitioning or ‘seeking crumbs from the tables of their imperialist masters’ as a dead end: ‘No freedom will ever be given by any other people or any other organisation, and the black people must therefore shoulder their own burden.’⁶⁴ This was also to reject in the most strenuous terms the ‘constant subordination’ that is a widely accepted tenet of imperial propaganda among whites, ‘that Africans can do nothing except under tutelage, this desire even on the part of our so-called friends, that everything should be done *for* the blacks and nothing *by* the blacks’.⁶⁵ While announcing its retrenchment into an organization based on ethnic kinship and cultural affiliation – ‘membership of it is limited to Africans and to persons of African descent’ – the IASB and the journal ‘take no isolated view of our task’.⁶⁶ The ‘common destiny of all the oppressed of whatever nationality or race’ would guide the mission. The *IAO* would seek to learn, assist and facilitate with due intellectual modesty:

We know our limitations. We know that we cannot liberate the millions of Africans and people of African descent from their servitude and oppression. That task no one can do but the black people themselves. But we can help to stimulate the growing consciousness of the blacks, to give them benefit of our daily contact with the European movement, to learn from the black masses the lessons of the profound experiences that they accumulate in their daily toil, to point out certain pitfalls that may be avoided, to co-ordinate information and organisation, to do an incessant propaganda in every quarter of Britain, exposing evils, pressing for such remedies as are possible, and mobilising whatever assistance there is to be found in Europe for the cause of African emancipation.⁶⁷

Noting that it was a centenary year for the 1838 People's Charter in Britain, the editorial suggested that colonial black people would take forward the demands of the Chartists as an intermediate stage towards full independence.

Over its run, the *IAO* both identified aspects of colonial rule and showed, in counterpoint, how these were repeatedly contested and challenged. Padmore skewered the pretensions of the newly opened Empire Exhibition in Glasgow, which 'was informing their Imperial Majesties what a glorious contribution to the peace and prosperity of the people of the Empire this Exhibition represents', even as 'the working masses of the West Indian island of Jamaica were being shot and bayoneted for demanding betterment of their miserable working conditions'.⁶⁸ An essay on Ethiopia in this same first edition inverted the terms of civilizational discourse produced by the 'noble teachers of barbarous savages' to criticize 'the jungle-law, which is imperialist diplomacy, though wild animals at least do not justify their killings by references to Christ and international morality'.⁶⁹ Resistance by Ethiopians and then on the part of West Indians was putting paid to such hypocrisy, however, creating 'disorder not only in the streets but in the calculations of the British Colonial officials, these men born to govern'.⁷⁰ The 'judicious management of the black intelligentsia, giving them jobs, O.B.E's and even knighthoods', would no longer suffice to control the 'explosions in island after island'.⁷¹ All too often, imperial mythologizing was successful in masking resistance, a 'self-boasting' which, 'like all advertising which is insistent and continuous', had succeeded.⁷² As the conquest of Ethiopia receded in British public awareness, the West Indian labour rebellions provided a focus of organization and agitation for black radicals in London, with many public meetings in Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park, working 'to build public support for the strikes in Trinidad and Barbados'.⁷³ Reframing what was being dismissed as disorderly 'hooliganism' in anticolonial terms, the *IAO* noted that Royal Commissions such as that sent to the island in 1938 were predictable and familiar responses from colonial authorities, ways of killing time so that reforms could be staved off. This gradualist reformism had to be repudiated for good.

The journal's direct attack on imperial mythologies immediately found its target. Shortly after the first issue of *International African Opinion* went into circulation, its editors received an irate letter from an Englishman who had read it and wanted to share a few 'home truths'. Dipped in spiteful ink, the trolling epistle offered its own version of the 'Caliban' theory of resistance, whereby 'sub-logical' black men first learned the arts of freedom from white rulers:

In the first place, but for the beneficent rule of this country and its administrators (at whom you lose no occasion to sneer) you would not have such a paper. Far from being able to write such articles, you would be unable to even read them. In short, it is only from the rulers whom you so hate that you have received the education that has enabled you

to bite the hand that feeds you.⁷⁴

The letter found its way into print despite the author's stated supposition that the editors would not 'dare publish' it, but was accompanied by a remarkably full editorial response that deserves some attention. Inverting the premises of their critic's civilizational claims, the editors noted sharply: 'As far as we know, it is to the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Jews, and the Greeks that Europe owes the foundations of its culture. The Arabs contributed heavily during the Middle Ages. But we have not noticed any special feeling of gratitude among the modern Europeans to either Arab or Jew, for instance.'⁷⁵ It is not just that all cultures owe something to their predecessors and to other cultures, the editors informed their bristling interlocutor; quite specifically, 'a very elementary knowledge of history would teach him that far from blacks owing anything to Britain, Western civilisation owes a debt to blacks which can never be repaid'.⁷⁶ Some of the greatest business houses and family fortunes in Britain were built on the slave trade and on the West Indian sugar plantations. As to the familiar claim that the journal itself would not exist were it not for British education, far from Africans needing to be grateful to Europe for teaching a small number to read and write in European languages, many more Europeans owed their entire 'standard of living and education' to the 'labour of generations of Africans'. In response to the claim that Britain was liberal enough to allow them to 'so vilify the Government', the editors noted that such freedom of speech as was available to them was a result of 'the devoted struggles of the British working-class movement through the centuries' and not the liberal beneficence of the Empire's ruling classes.⁷⁷

A Question of Rebellions

As Roderick Macdonald has noted, the 1930s represented a definitive break from 'reformist and essentially élitist' approaches where criticism of empire was concerned.⁷⁸ To no small extent, this break was a result of 'a state almost of insurrection' that prevailed in the West Indies, which Padmore, along with others, gave several accounts of in the pages of the *IAO*:

Unarmed, the crowd took to throwing stones. A warning came from the police. The Riot Act was read and shots were fired over the heads of the strikers. More stones were thrown, and the next volley, lasting for ten minutes, was directed straight at the men, women and children, who by that time numbered over a thousand. Many were wounded, and four workers were killed. One of them, an old Negro woman, was bayoneted to death. The crowd went wild, and, rescuing as many wounded as they could, they retreated into the fields, setting the canes on fire.⁷⁹

In an episode uncannily resonant of Morant Bay, on an April day in 1937 a small riot had taken place outside the Frome Estate sugar plantation office – owned by a subsidiary of the gigantic Tate & Lyle Corporation in the parish of Westmoreland, Jamaica. Workers were angry about the dilatory payment of wages. The action soon escalated into a strike 'and then a large-scale violent confrontation'.⁸⁰ For a host of reasons to do with wages (subject to arbitrary and severe cuts) and working conditions, including security of tenure, a volatile situation intensified, culminating in a showdown with armed black policemen commanded by white officers facing 'about a thousand strikers who were armed only with bits of wood, iron

pipes and stones'.⁸¹ By the end of the day, three people had been shot and one bayoneted by the police, two of them women – one old and one pregnant. Several people, including five policemen, were wounded, and nearly a hundred arrested. Subsequently thousands attended protest meetings and marches to draw attention to the situation of the working poor, and soon sporadic strikes ensued. On 22 May 1937 the capital city of Kingston was shut down, disorder spread, public property was set upon, streets were blocked and mobs occupied public utility buildings. A crowd of thousands being addressed by trade unionists Bustamante and Grant refused to disperse, and met the inevitable baton charge with a return shower of stones and bricks. As similar scenes repeated themselves over the next few days, extending to rolling strikes, looting and the firing of cane-fields, during which Bustamante was jailed, police numbers were reinforced by troop battalions, and several civilians died during violent clashes. The rebellion, described by Ken Post as a 'counter-blow against capitalism',⁸² finally calmed down when a 'New Deal' involving a large land settlement was agreed by the colonial administration under Acting Governor Woolley.⁸³ Labour militancy would continue in various forms, however, leading up to another violent confrontation in June the following year, with an emergency declared on the nineteenth of that month. As one historian notes, 'the economic foundations of slavery, especially in the general picture of land-ownership, had basically remained untouched' since Emancipation.⁸⁴

In the necessary retelling of the history of black oppression as the history of black resistance, the Caribbean also came to occupy an increasingly important place for the intellectuals of the IASB. The arc that could be drawn from the moment of Ethiopia to the conflagrations that swept the British West Indies allowed precisely for the illumination of connections between the construction of pan-African solidarity and a conceptualization of resistance as necessarily rooted in the everyday struggles of black toilers. Both events could also be situated in the longer history of black resistance, which James, among others, saw as vital to the present-day struggle. In places like Jamaica, 'Ethiopianism' (also known as 'Rastafarianism') – in which all people of African descent identified as Ethiopian – already existed as a strong and vital force. The fate of Ethiopia came thus to stand in for the fate of all black people, not least those dispersed across the Caribbean. Tellingly, James ends his short treatise, *The History of Negro Revolt*, with an account of contemporary 'Negro movements' that includes an extended engagement with the Trinidad labour uprisings, beginning with Uriah Butler's agitation among oilfield workers. Recounting how labour organizing in Trinidad shifted from Captain Cipriani to Butler when the former refused to sanction strike action against Apex Oilfields in 1935, James appears to track the radicalizing of his own political trajectory, from his making the case for West Indian self-government before coming to England in 1932 to writing histories of black self-emancipation through revolt.⁸⁵ As revolts spread across the West Indies – to Barbados, St Vincent, St Lucia, British Guiana and Jamaica – James wrote: 'Consideration of the remedies is beyond us but they will need to be far-reaching.'⁸⁶ Like others, he 'had become aware of the existence of a more vigorous Black opposition than that with which he was familiar in his own class ... he had witnessed the capacities for resistance of ordinary Black people, the transformation of peasants and workers into liberation forces.'⁸⁷

This is not the place for an extended review of the causes and consequences of the waves of unrest that spread across the Caribbean in the 1930s, and certainly accelerated the islands' progress towards decolonization.⁸⁸ As in the nineteenth century, multiple difficulties to do with land and labour were at stake. What we can note, however, in the historical light of Morant Bay, are the remarkable resemblances to earlier forms of resistance: refusal to work or harvest crops; occupations of factories; gatherings which invited the charge of 'riotous assembly'; the escalation of simple demands into active rebellion in the face of frustration; ringleaders identified and punished, unleashing further unrest; and, last but not least, frequent violent repression. All of these were followed by the decision of the British government to appoint a West India Royal Commission, which would submit a report of its inquiry. The Moyne Report, submitted in 1939, just over a year after the commissioners arrived in the islands, would in fact be suppressed until after the war, only its recommendations being published in the interim, for fear of further controversy. 'The labour rebellions of the 1930s', noted the labour organizer and historian Richard Hart, 'increased the self confidence [*sic*] of the workers in these colonies and convinced them of the influence they could exert by united action', where there had been none.⁸⁹ As Ken Post, another chronicler of the episode, points out, conditions on the island of Jamaica represented 'the essence of the colonial condition', a distinct mode of production that was nonetheless 'closely bound up with structures of exchange and distribution in the metropolis and was indeed determined in its own structure by the demands of British capitalism'.⁹⁰ This gave the resistance – generally agreed to be spontaneous, if reliant on strong leadership – an international significance of its own. However 'dimly visible', a 'tradition of popular protest, often violent, spanned the years back through Morant Bay to the slave revolts ... When other factors of consciousness, leadership and organisation were added to this tradition things of great importance could happen'.⁹¹

While 'Ethiopianism' was not the primary cause for the strength of this labour militancy, the return to the racial language that also circulated during the Morant Bay rebellion – 'skin for skin and colour for colour' – is striking.⁹² As noted in the joint memorandum submitted by the Negro Welfare Association, the IASB and the LCP in London to the Moyne Commission (which, tellingly, was reluctant to receive evidence from them), Ethiopia had served to consolidate and channel existing consciousness of a material oppression that clearly had a racial basis:

In 1833 there was reason to apprehend a universal Negro rebellion for freedom, and emancipation was granted from above to prevent the cataclysm of emancipation from below, as had occurred in San Domingo [*sic*]. Similarly today, when the rape of Ethiopia has given a great stimulus to growing Negro consciousness, it is not a question of rebellions if, but rebellions unless, democratic government is granted.⁹³

In places like Jamaica, an eccentric mixture of Garveyism, Ethiopianism and Rastafarianism constituted 'an important part of the political culture of resistance in Jamaica' which was marked by 'economic deprivation, social volatility and politicisation'.⁹⁴ Garveyism had already spread a 'Black Nationalist message of racial dignity and pride in an ancestral Africa' even as its economic programme stressed 'racial development through private enterprise'.⁹⁵ Workers' organizations in Trinidad staged agitations in which dockers refused to unload

Italian ships, and actively attempted to illuminate links between issues at home and abroad. For the *IAO*, this rebellion had been some time in the making: ‘And in proportion to the tardiness of their awakening they are now aggressive in their militancy.’ Measures such as instituting a Royal Commission would not suffice any more: ‘There have been too many Commissions and too little action. This is just a method of killing time, in the hope that the temper of the masses may die down and the long-awaited reforms staved off.’⁹⁶ Something had changed irrevocably in the West Indian colonies. ‘Yet to say that Quashee stood up in 1938’, writes Post, referencing the colonial stereotype of the happy and feckless black peasant made famous by Carlyle, among others,

is to say both everything and nothing. It is everything because, for once, the poor of Jamaica made their own history. It is nothing because there was not one Quashee – he is a stereotype, a reification, a device of the ruling class like shackles or wage labour. Rather, there were many Quashees ... thousands of whom had come by May 1938 to feel that the stereotype must be transcended.⁹⁷

While full independence from British rule was still a long way away, Quashee, it could be said, ‘did not bend as low as before, and after the middle of 1938 Jamaica was never quite the same again’.⁹⁸

‘What are you going to do about it?’ Solidarity as Imperative

Solidarity with such forms of resistance underway in the colonies emerged as a keynote in many articles in the *IAO*. ‘The great masses of the British people’, announced the first issue, ‘must see what is being done in their name’.⁹⁹ In an echo of Marx’s famous observation to the effect that white labour could not be emancipated while black labour was being oppressed, an article on the importance of the Anti-imperialist Exhibition in Glasgow, which was set up to counter the imperialist one (see [Chapter 9](#)), noted that ‘while the colonial workers are in bondage, the British workers labour but in vain to free themselves from the burdening yoke of Imperialism’.¹⁰⁰ It was therefore incumbent on British labour to support Caribbean workers ‘without reservation’.¹⁰¹ One of the most striking editorials in this vein was produced as an open letter from the executive of the IASB to the delegates of the Trades Union Congress at Blackpool in September 1938. Having offered to make blacks everywhere aware of their common cause with British workers, the letter poses in turn a series of not-quite-rhetorical questions to white British trade unionists: ‘At the present moment Africans and West Indians are struggling for their elementary democratic rights. What are you going to do about it?’¹⁰² Traditions of resistance must be honoured in their global provenance without ignorance providing an alibi:

You celebrated the centenary of the Tolpuddle martyrs not long ago. All politically conscious Africans celebrated it with you. But Ulric Grant in Barbados, for daring to organise the Barbados workers, is now serving a sentence of ten years’ imprisonment. If you did not know it before, gentlemen, then you ought to have known it, and you know now. What are you going to do about it?¹⁰³

From land-and cattle-grabs in Kenya to restrictions placed on trade unions in Trinidad,

British labour was imperilled if it was not as ‘vigilant in protest and action on these issues’ as with its own concerns. Importantly, this call for solidarity was not only issued across race lines but, in another sharp open letter a few months later, directed at West Indian intellectuals and their own overlooked responsibilities.¹⁰⁴ The West Indian uprisings, this letter began by noting, ‘have forced themselves into the consciousness of the people and rulers of the British Empire and the whole world, and the method by which this has been done is at once a reproach and a sign-post to the better-educated people of African descent in these colonies’.¹⁰⁵ Admonishing the intellectuals of the islands for not having undertaken any noticeable political activity in support of the labour cause, the letter reminds them that the demands of the workers are theirs to espouse too, that their own liberties are threatened when those of the workers are threatened. If equality is to replace racism globally, so too are West Indian intellectuals tasked with ‘eliminating from their movement the reactionary discriminations that exist between those who differ in shades of colour’. Nor were the West Indian masses to be treated as ‘raw material for the political activity of the few’.¹⁰⁶ The intellectual did have something to give to them, but ‘they have more to teach him’.

Towards a Theory of Colonial Fascism

This letter returns to a recurrent theme in the literature of the IASB – the nature and scope of fascism and its relationship to forms of imperial rule:

Fascism, which is the most brutal form of imperialism, puts a firm brake on all liberal ideas, all freedom, on every concept of human equality and fraternity. In Germany, it bases itself on a fanatical nationalism, and exaggerated racial arrogance. Its inhuman persecution of the Jews is a sop to national discontent and a convenient distraction [sic] from the real issues at stake. With giant strides it stalks all over the world. In Italy, Germany, Poland, Rumania, in diverse forms, it raises its foul head everywhere. It has appeared in Britain and in the British House of Commons.¹⁰⁷

Unambiguous in its insistence that Hitler was an irredeemable entity, and crystal clear that both he and Mussolini had to be strenuously opposed, the journal raised a question which would become a point of discussion on the British left more broadly: what was the relationship between imperialism in its supposedly ‘democratic’ form and fascism of the German and Italian varieties? ‘The British democrats of property are democrats’, the open letter to intellectuals warned, ‘just so long as democracy serves them’.¹⁰⁸ The treatment of trade unionists and workers in the West Indies rendered nugatory the frequent declaration by liberals, socialists, communists and Tory humanitarians – with regard to similar arrests in Germany and Italy – that this ‘could happen only in a Fascist country’.¹⁰⁹ The term ‘colonial fascism’ was put into play by an unsigned article, possibly drafted by Padmore, to signify those authoritarian and violent practices of rule undertaken specifically in colonial contexts by the putatively ‘democratic’ powers.¹¹⁰ Another IAO editorial made a point that would be picked up in British left-wing papers, such as the *New Leader*, in the run-up to the Second World War:

We will not shed our blood to maintain the yoke around our necks. Let it be known that as far as we are concerned,

the 'Democratic' imperialisms are fundamentally no different from the dictator Powers, for the conditions under which the vast majority of colonial peoples live savour of Colonial Fascism. For example, what rights have the natives in South Africa to lose? If we must fight, then Africans and peoples of African descent will fight for themselves, confident that in taking this course we, like the blacks of San Domingo, will be playing an historical role in liberating not only ourselves but other sections of oppressed humanity.¹¹¹

To no small extent, this view drew on the bitter colonial experience of the previous war and a now deeply felt aversion to being used as 'cannon-fodder' in a war that aimed at a 're-division of territory' from which black people would 'gain nothing'.¹¹² As a black anti-war manifesto, probably drafted by Padmore, and reprinted in the *International African Opinion* (which had received several communications on the topic from across the colonial world) asserted: 'Black brothers, what do we know of democracy? This is just a bait to catch us. In 1914 they also talked to us about Democracy and self-determination. Millions of us died on Flanders Field, in Palestine, in East, West and South Africa. But what did we get? More slavery, more oppression, more exploitation.'¹¹³ In another essay, the journal noted that blacks had 'a strong sympathy with the Jews' as a persecuted people, and that it was vital 'not to cease to point out in Africa the greed, savagery and brutality which distinguished the Nazi régime and its ignorant and insolent claim to racial superiority'.¹¹⁴ At the same time, plans to resettle the Jews in East Africa constituted a way out of European capitalism's difficulties 'at the expense of Africans'. The *IAO* urged the pursuit of solutions that were 'unconnected with the mean subterfuges of imperialism', since that plan for resettlement also entailed ignoring the ways in which the Kenyans had been penned into reserves and deprived of their own lands.¹¹⁵ But it was also clear that 'the struggle against anti-Semitism is an important part of the struggle against imperialism'.¹¹⁶

The situation in Kenya was also at the heart of a later editorial on the topic of 'Hitler and the Colonies', which delineated the practice of 'colonial fascism' even more unsparingly, 'closing the rhetorical distance European powers tried to create between empire and fascism'.¹¹⁷ As plans were discussed for the possible 'return' of the East African 'protectorates' to Germany – another measure of appeasement – East African white settlers called for resistance to the proposals and solicited the support of black Africans in this. This situation was layered with rich historical ironies, as the *IAO* was quick to note. It was 'a new phenomenon for East African whites to acknowledge coloured races in the same breath with themselves', still less to allow them a voice in matters.¹¹⁸ The white settlers were not objecting to fascist methods as such, the editorial observed astutely, but only to becoming themselves victims of fascist annexation; after all, they had already taken land and forced Kenyan blacks, paid miserable wages, to carry a *kipande* or pass-book 'like common criminals, register their finger-prints, live in filthy, stinking hovels. What further degradations could Hitler heap on them?'¹¹⁹ The sudden concern about how white minorities might be treated under German rule ought to raise the equally pertinent question of how Britain had been treating Africans, and black labour in particular: 'Fascism is not a monopoly of Mussolini and Hitler, but is employed by the "democratic" nations throughout their colonies.'¹²⁰ The Africans, for their part, opposed the transfer of the protectorates to Hitler because they did not wish 'to be bandied about by one European Power to another', and 'not

because they envisage any fundamental difference in treatment'.¹²¹ Where the false war between fascism and imperialism was concerned, the only legitimate response was 'A plague on both camps!'¹²²

Freedom's Backstory

Consider the chronology of these fateful years 1935–1938. A sugar strike in St Kitts, 1935; a revolt against increase of customs duties in St Vincent, 1935; a coal strike in St Lucia, 1935; labour disputes on the sugar plantations of British Guiana, 1935; an oil strike, which became a general strike, in Trinidad, 1937; a sympathetic strike in Barbados, 1937; a sugar strike in St Lucia, 1937; sugar troubles in Jamaica, 1937; dockers' strike in Jamaica, 1938. Every governor called for warships, marines and aeroplanes. The torch had been applied to the powder barrel.

Eric Williams, *The Negro in the Caribbean*

With the transportation of the Negro from Africa to the Caribbean the germ of political revolt was transplanted to the New World. Contrary to the belief widely accepted among both whites and Negroes, the Negro slave was not docile and devoted to his master. The moment he was placed on the small tubs which made the Middle Passage, that moment he became a revolutionary, actual or potential.

Eric Williams, *The Negro in the Caribbean*

The Caribbean rebellions and their mix of racial and class consciousness injected urgency into a series of anticolonial pamphlets which the IASB disseminated. One of these, *The Negro in the Caribbean*, written by the historian and future first prime minister of Trinidad, Eric Williams, who would also go on to write the hugely influential *Capitalism and Slavery*, also suggested that there was an arc of continuity to be drawn from slave rebellions to the present-day insurgencies, an understanding of which required a 'correct idea of the revolutionary role of the Negro slave' who fought for his freedom.¹²³ Explicitly referencing the Morant Bay rebellion, Williams notes the emergence and persistence, once again, of fault lines within black struggle. For the black middle classes in the Caribbean, 'it was a struggle for a share in political power, for extension of the franchise, for jobs', while for the working-classes, 'it was basically an economic struggle, a struggle for land-ownership, for better wages, for decent living conditions, for the right to organize in trade unions' – two sets of interests that nonetheless coalesced at times.¹²⁴ Inasmuch as they marked the passing of the initiative 'from the brown middle class to the black working class', the years from 1935 to 1938 were something of a revolutionary watershed: 'Rawle, Marryshow and Cipriani (a white liberal), gave way to Butler and Mentor, Payne and Grant.'¹²⁵ Like others, Williams noted that political democracy would be taken where not given: 'The explosions in the British West Indies indicate the danger of continued exasperation and continued repression: there is still time to heed the signals and so correct, by democratic reforms, an unsound economy and the present abuses of the sugar industry.'¹²⁶ It was a view Padmore had articulated even more bluntly in an article for the ILP discussion journal, *Controversy*, in 1938, calling for British workers and socialists to support their Caribbean brethren: 'This is the task which history has placed on the toiling masses of the West Indies – Indians as well as Negroes; for the West Indian bourgeoisie is one of the most reactionary colonial ruling classes and will never make any concessions unless forced to.'¹²⁷ Another IASB pamphlet,

The West Indies Today, demanded universal adult franchise, federated constitutions, higher direct taxation, land settlement, labour legislation, industrialization and greater social services. It reiterated the centrality of self-liberation: ‘West Indians know this. They know that unless they act for themselves they will get little; but they know, too, that if they are sufficiently well organised their rulers cannot but give in to their demands if unpleasant consequences are to be avoided.’¹²⁸ West Indians had ‘taken the situation in their own hands ... no longer prepared to acquiesce silently in their present intolerable conditions’.¹²⁹ In this the solidarity rather than the leadership of white British allies was sought.¹³⁰ To white British workers, there was a reciprocal offering of friendship on shared terrain in the face of the fight for real democracy, ‘Though you have neglected us in the past, to-day in this hour of common crisis, we want you to know that we Blacks bear you no ill will ... Our freedom is your freedom.’¹³¹

‘Whatever the future of tropical Africa will be’, wrote James a few years later, ‘one thing is certain, that it will not be what the colonial powers are trying to make of it. It will be violent and strange, with the most abrupt and unpredictable changes in economic relations, race relations, territorial boundaries and everything else.’¹³² In his important comparative study of anglophone and francophone black internationalism, Brent Edwards takes this to mean that what James and Padmore were involved in producing was ‘an other epistemology of blackness’ altogether.¹³³ While it is certainly true that the milieu of the IASB sought to create something new which broke out of the dead ends of both race essentialism and mechanistic forms of Marxism, framing this black radicalism as epistemologically ‘other’ is to miss a crucial aspect of the work in question – indeed, the very source of its radicalism.¹³⁴ What emerges in the historically grounded polemics produced by the radicals of the IAFE/IASB milieu – in the wake of the Ethiopian invasion – is precisely an insistence on reclaiming and reframing universalism and humanism as neither singularly European in provenance nor (therefore) radically ‘other’. The task they set themselves is radical in its very simplicity: to demonstrate that impulses towards freedom and equality can be seen to arise across multiple contexts and cultures, not least those of Africa, and as such would be impulses towards reclamation *from* rather than bestowal by Western benevolence. That multiple resources nourished such aspirations could be seen from the history of rebellion itself. Or, as Williams put it in relation to the Caribbean: ‘Slavery was a state of war, a constant struggle for freedom on the part of the slave. Liberty or death!’¹³⁵ Freedom was not a discursive object to be passed down from a superior culture to a ‘backward’ one; rather, it was defined and forged precisely through the historical experience of oppression and resistance.

One of the first texts to make this case with some force was *A History of Negro Revolt*, James’s exploratory companion to his monumental *The Black Jacobins*. It was a lengthy pamphlet produced in 1938 for Raymond Postgate’s *FACT* magazine, in which James detailed the continuity of the many attempts of the Negro ‘to free himself from his burdens’ in Africa, America and the West Indies. ‘Negroes have continually revolted’, James notes, beginning his treatise with ‘the only successful slave revolt in history’, that in Saint-Domingue in 1791–1804: the Haitian Revolution.¹³⁶ While he attributes the success of that

great rebellion, as he does in his later, more famous work, to the scaffolding provided by the French Revolution, here he makes a more controversial claim: 'The success of the San Domingo blacks killed the West Indian slave-trade and slavery.'¹³⁷ It is less the case, James suggests, that insurgent slaves 'embraced' a revolutionary doctrine from Europe, than that the French Revolution provided a ready-made language as well as material support for aspirations that were already there but had been kept in check by the degradation and violence of the slave system. With their revolution, 'these slaves, lacking education, half-savage, and degraded in their slavery as only centuries of slavery can degrade, achieved a liberality in social aspiration and an elevation of political thought equivalent to anything similar that took place in France'.¹³⁸ Rebellion itself, James stresses repeatedly, is rooted not in systems of thought but in a human response to intolerable conditions: 'First of all, as we have seen, the Negro was no docile animal. He revolted continuously.'¹³⁹ The persistence of this spirit could be documented in multifarious forms of resistance, from Sierra Leone and the Gambia to Nigeria, Nyasaland and the Union of South Africa. In the case of 'the extraordinary women's revolt' of Aba, Nigeria, in 1929, in which over fifty women were killed, the rebels were protesting taxes levied on their work by chiefs under so-called 'indirect rule': 'The women seized public buildings and held them for days. The servants refused to cook for their white masters and mistresses and some of them made the attempt to bring the European women by force into the markets to give them some experience of what work was like.'¹⁴⁰ It was only in the wake of this unprecedented uprising that a more widespread agitation ensued, other workers also refusing to pay taxes and demanding redress for their economic and political grievances. Another form of rebellion, James observes, was religious in form but deeply anti-European in nature: 'Such education as the African is given is nearly always religious, so that the leader often translated the insurrection into religious terms.'¹⁴¹ As Walter Rodney indicates, James stressed that the language of religion which inflected such revolts 'should not obscure the fact that they sprung from such things as forced labour, land alienation and colonial taxation'.¹⁴² One such was the Chilembwe uprising in Nyasaland (present-day Malawi), in which coffee estate workers rose up against syndicates that maximized profit and offered no development in return, whether in the form of schools or hospitals or missions. In the Belgian Congo, such resistance took the form of leaving European-controlled churches in favour of independent African ones under the leadership of Simon Kimbangu.¹⁴³ In Kenya, the movement named after Harry Thuku agitated in more secular terms against high taxation and forced labour, among other grievances, meeting with suppression at the hands of the King's African Rifles.

The value of James's work from this period, Rodney noted, was that it gave African freedom from colonial rule a backstory, allowing the resistant consciousness of contemporary Africans to be 'heightened by knowledge of the dignity and determination of their foreparents'; to 'give historical depth to the process of resistance'.¹⁴⁴ Silences in colonial history about the fact of rebellion proliferated through the first half of the twentieth century. Underscoring the significance of James's work, in an observation arguably applicable to the the IASB's output as a whole, Rodney reminds us that 'African resistance to European colonization was not supposed to have existed as far as colonialist scholars were

concerned'.¹⁴⁵ For James, such silences were facilitated by omissions in the historical records: 'The British send out their punitive expeditions against revolting tribes and do not necessarily mention them in the annual colonial reports. But if the revolt awakens public interest, a commission will investigate and make a report.'¹⁴⁶ He compares the organization of South Africa's Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), which undoubtedly achieved great momentum in its first years, to the Haitian Revolution: 'There is the same instinctive capacity for organization, the same throwing-up of gifted leaders from among the masses.'¹⁴⁷ The dimension of self-emancipation, he suggests, might be even more relevant here given that there was nothing radical happening in Britain, like the French Revolution in the Haitian case, 'needing the black revolution, and sending out encouragement, organizers and arms'.¹⁴⁸ In the eventual – and, for James, inevitable – decline of its leader, Clements Kadalie, was the lesson that intellectual heft was needed for movements to succeed; what ultimately doomed the ICU was that Kadalie 'lacked the education and the knowledge to organize it on a stable basis – the hardest of all tasks for a man of his origin'.¹⁴⁹

While he appreciated and drew attention to the indigenous dimensions of black revolt, James in this work was scathingly critical of Marcus Garvey's pan-Africanist movement. He nonetheless understood it in terms of a misdirected articulation of sincerely felt liberationist impulses. Though James dismissed Garveyism as 'pitiable rubbish' and demagoguery, he was able to concede that 'desperate men often hear, not the actual words of an orator but their own thoughts', particularly when they are looking for a leader.¹⁵⁰ For all that Garvey is a proto-fascist and chauvinist, and in James's acidic rendering a 'hare-brained' schemer and a 'dishonest' anti-communist 'reactionary', he has to be credited with creating 'for the first time a feeling of international solidarity among Africans and people of African descent. In so far as this is directed against oppression it is a positive step.'¹⁵¹ The impulse to achieve human freedom runs deep and wide across Africa, James suggested – a fact obscured by misleading colonial representations of many revolts as merely labour strikes that had got out of hand. Reading a powerful 'native translation of the call for the strike' written by one G. Lovewey, James observes that its language goes well beyond a 'mere appeal to strike', being rather 'a summons to relentless struggle with mortal enemies':¹⁵²

Listen to this all you who live in the country, think well how they treat us and to ask for a land. Do we live in good treatment, no; therefore let us ask one another and remember this treatment. Because we wish on the day of 29th April, every person not to go to work, he who will go to work, and if we see him, it will be a serious case.¹⁵³

As surely as the Haitian blacks destroyed the French plantocracy, if world events were to give them a chance, many of the currently colonized, now too ready to resist to the death, 'will destroy what has them by the throat'.¹⁵⁴ Speaking of the influence of the secret religious movement, Watch Tower, on the Northern Rhodesian workers, James again stressed the ways in which religion had 'become a weapon in the class struggle', and was able to 'represent political realities and express political aspirations far more closely than programmes and policies of parties with millions of members, numerous journals and half a century of history behind them'.¹⁵⁵ The Executive Committee summarized the situation in an open letter to the workers of the West Indies:

Writing in *The Tribune* (June 17, 1938), Mr Bevan said: 'A short time ago we had a discussion in the House of Commons on Labour in Trinidad. Tuesday we discussed Jamaica. Why? Because the conscience of Britain is disturbed at the sufferings of the natives in our colonies? No. It is because these natives have at last rioted against British masters. Even now, it is not their sufferings that are stirring us to laggard action. It is their protests. *If they cease their protests, we will cease giving redress.*

If the work of the *International African Opinion* and its associated writers in parsing African and Caribbean insurgencies was vital in its own right, contributing powerfully to the anticolonial discourse of the coming decades, it is worth noting that these uprisings were not without wider metropolitan impact. Ken Post asserts: 'They shook the whole colonial system so severely that it was never quite the same again.'¹⁵⁶ For all that sections of the British media attempted to explain away the convulsions as 'one of those sudden explosions of excitement to which negro labour suffering from a sense of grievance is notoriously prone', it also became clear that imperial rule would have to make significant changes in its mode of operation.¹⁵⁷ Even the secretary of state for the colonies, Malcolm MacDonald, would admit that the disturbances in Jamaica pointed to a 'condition [which] constitutes a reproach to our Colonial administration'.¹⁵⁸ Questions were raised in parliament by Arthur Creech Jones, an IASP patron, and others (on 12, 16 and 25 May 1938), while the Trades Union Congress created a colonial advisory committee to study conditions in the colonies.¹⁵⁹ Even Stafford Cripps, pilloried in the pages of the *IAO* for advocating 'trusteeship' in Africa, would announce in 1938 when he was a guest at the founding of Jamaica's People's National Party:

I want to see the new peoples of the world rise in their power giving us a new and great and glorious, more humane civilization, and I hope that in the development of your new political life you will all develop the cultural life of the Jamaican people until here in the Caribbean there grows, perhaps small at first but gradually widening in its influence, a new culture, new people, a new humanity which can gradually take over the reins of government from the dying and decadent peoples of Western Europe.¹⁶⁰

Others, like the British socialist Arthur Calder-Marshall, would warn that unless significant changes were enacted, 'troubles such as have occurred in Barbados, Trinidad, Jamaica and British Guiana will become more and more frequent'.¹⁶¹ As the influential liberal economist from the Caribbean island of St Lucia, W. Arthur Lewis, remarked in a pamphlet he wrote for the eminently moderate Fabian Colonial Bureau, 'even before the emancipation of slavery the free coloured people were in constant conflict with the plantocracy, and throughout the nineteenth century that conflict continued'.¹⁶² Workers had become 'very bitter and militant' over long periods of unemployment, wage cuts and increased taxation, and there was a tendency in official reports to describe them erroneously as 'hooligans'.¹⁶³ The political consciousness of West Indian workers had been increased by the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, Lewis tells his readers, making them 'more willing to take their fate in their own hands', and news of industrial action in France and America had also galvanized them.¹⁶⁴ Lewis's pamphlet remains a usefully succinct account of the unfolding of the rebellions, beginning with St Kitts in 1935, moving on to St Vincent, St Lucia, Barbados, British Guiana, Trinidad and Jamaica. He notes that the resultant formation of trade unions and labour legislation is less significant than the fact that 'on the political front nothing short of a revolution has occurred', with the working classes rather than the middle classes setting the agenda.¹⁶⁵ In

addition to the British government being ‘forced to appoint a strong Royal Commission specifically to investigate social conditions’, the concessions obtained were not insignificant: fixing minimum wages, making land settlements, expenditure on public works, slum clearances, old-age pensions, and workmen’s compensation.¹⁶⁶

If the British left were largely preoccupied by the growing threat of fascism and the Spanish Civil War during this decade, the political and intellectual stage was nonetheless being set for the rapid advance of decolonization in the post-war period. The criticisms of benevolence and gradualism would gather force in the 1940s, as would the rejection of such concepts as ‘trusteeship’. The ‘legend that the British Colonial Office patiently “taught” the Africans of the Gold Coast to govern themselves is a bubble which badly needs pricking’, James would observe in his later reflections on George Padmore and his protégé, Kwame Nkrumah.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, James would go so far as to suggest that his own argument in *The Black Jacobins* had to be revised as it became increasingly clear that self-government and independence in Africa would come not from the metropolitan proletariat rising up against capitalism, but from ‘struggle in Africa itself’, led by black personalities.¹⁶⁸ The IASB merged with the newly formed Pan-African Federation, which hosted the famous Pan-African Congress of 1945 – an event that could be said to have closed one era in the history of Afro-Caribbean anticolonialism and heralded another. Looking back on the period, Ras Makonnen recalls: ‘We were operating in the midst of a radicalism unmatched in Europe, but it was a gay period, a period of purposefulness. You had the feeling that the truth was being told once and for all. Britain was really in a ferment – seething, in fact, like an African pot.’¹⁶⁹ Determinate efforts at sustained campaigning and organized institutions of consciousness-raising and education would continue into the war years and beyond, with conscious endeavours to forge crossracial and cross-political alliances. This involved an identification of common cause, but also an engagement with fractures and tensions. The next chapter explores more closely the role of IAO editor and centrifugal force George Padmore in London, not just as a catalyst for black radical organization, but also in putting pressure on liberal and left formations – specifically the British dissidents associated with the Independent Labour Party and its journal, the *New Leader*.