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Published in:
Twentieth Century Communism: A Journal of International History

DOI:
[10.3898/175864320829334834](https://doi.org/10.3898/175864320829334834)

Publicerad: 01/01/2020

Document Version
Förlagets PDF, även kallad Registrerad version

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[Link to publication](#)

Please cite the original version:
Braskén, K. (2020). 'Whether black or white – united in the fight!' Connecting the resistance against colonialism, racism, and fascism in the European metropolises, 1926-1936. *Twentieth Century Communism: A Journal of International History*, 18(18), 126–149. <https://doi.org/10.3898/175864320829334834>

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‘Whether black or white – united in the fight!’ Connecting the resistance against colonialism, racism, and fascism in the European metropolises, 1926-1936

Kasper Braskén

Abstract: This article focuses on the ways in which anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and anti-fascism were intertwined within the Third Period, and the extent to which these ideals were already being drawn together in the preceding era of the United Front. Drawing heavily on the articles and imagery of Willi Münzenberg’s *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*, the piece demonstrates the ways in which communist anti-fascist campaigning around the world facilitated the development of sophisticated anti-racist arguments which aimed at undermining the ideological basis of fascist movements and colonial rulers alike. It evidences the extent to which communists felt that countering the pseudoscience of race could play an important role in numerous facets of their campaigning. Furthermore, it highlights the attempts by activists and writers to develop a conception of anti-fascism and anti-colonialism as mutually-reinforcing strategies which could be deployed in tandem, and the ways that this ideological interweaving was drawn into campaigns both against the Nazis’ use of racial science to justify anti-Semitic policy, and fascist Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia based on Social Darwinist precepts.

Keywords: Colonialism, racism, fascism.

In October 1933, the Paris-based 'World Committee against War and Fascism' published a cartoon by the Indian-born, Irish cartoonist Desmond Rowney, showing a seemingly enthusiastic British admiral congratulating Hitler for his recent 'achievements' in Germany. The grinning admiral noted that the British had a much longer history of excellence in the field of 'oppression of the races'. In the background, on Hitler's side, Nazi troops were depicted chasing a Jew, while on the British side a group of colonial subjects are seen herded together in front of uniformed white British soldiers. Rowney's cartoon advanced an uncomfortable comparison between the crimes committed by the British Empire and the Third Reich.¹

The example invites us to investigate how the concept of anti-fascism was interwoven with the fight against colonialism during the interwar period. Instead of focusing directly on the communist parties, this article will analyse publications and activities of international communist-led organisations such as the World Committee against War and Fascism (WCWF), the International Workers' Relief (IWR), the International Red Aid (IRA), and the League Against Imperialism (LAI).² Although designed as quasi-independent organisations, the anti-fascist and anti-colonial initiatives pursued by these organisations were dependent of the changing lines of the Communist International (Comintern) and the sometimes contradictory foreign policy needs of the Soviet Union. The main focus here is on the sectarian Third Period (1928–1934) that was characterised by ultra-left policies and marked hostility towards social democracy, dubbed 'social fascism', and accompanied by a Stalinisation of the Comintern as well as the national communist parties. It was a period that historians have almost unanimously deemed as either catastrophic or suicidal for the international communist movement. Also included here are the two transition periods bookending the Third Period: First, the end of the preceding united front period in 1928, which led to the termination of all co-operation attempts 'from above' with other socialist parties, reformists, and trade unions. In the colonial world it ended all co-operation between communists and bourgeois nationalist movements. Co-operation 'from below' was henceforth only permitted and resulted in efforts to unite, under communist leadership, with the rank-and-file of non-communist and social-democratic

workers.³ Second, the era from the Nazis' seizure of power in 1933, which slowly brought back united front initiatives, to the implementation of the Popular Front line in summer 1935.⁴

Despite the many disastrous effects of the Third Period, not least for the LAI which was compelled to attack some of its most prominent members and supporters, it also represented a historic anti-racist turn and initiated a thoroughgoing analysis of racial divisions, especially in the form of the 'Negro question'. As John Callaghan shows, the Third Period constituted a highpoint of the Comintern's concern for Africa and African Americans. Moreover, it invited communists to fight racism more broadly and to purge the parties from racial prejudice. For some prominent anti-colonial activists the Third Period thus represented a heroic period of anti-colonialism in Comintern history.⁵ The sectarianism of the Third Period was not a prerequisite for the Comintern's anti-colonial and anti-racist turn in the late 1920s, the longer trajectories of communist internationalism and anti-imperialism demonstrate that there was an unfortunate overlap of two separate processes. Most of the anti-colonial and anti-racists initiatives had been prepared and launched during the preceding united front period.

The general history of Marxist and communist theories on colonialism and imperialism has been told elsewhere, yet still the intersections between anti-fascism and anti-colonialism remain insufficiently explored.⁶ Recent studies on opposition to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 forms a significant exception. David Featherstone's important work on black internationalism and anti-fascism in relation to the Ethiopian war and the Spanish Civil War shows how black and Asian radicals and communists made pivotal connections between anti-fascism and the struggles against colonialism and racism.⁷ As Susan Pennybacker argues, for many anti-imperialist activists both in Europe and in the colonies it became a necessity to link analyses of fascism with those of imperialism. From an anti-imperialist perspective fascism simply meant the most brutal form of imperialism.⁸ However, as others have argued, the consequence of the transition to the Popular Front period was that anti-colonialism was deprioritised by the communists. Activists like the Trinidad-born communist, George Padmore began to harshly criticize the Comintern after 1933 for 'its cynical abandon-

ment of the interests of the colonised people in pursuit of Popular Front rapprochement with British and French imperialism'. When forced to choose 'the lesser of two evils' many other anti-colonial activists and communists preferred to 'remain under the protection of imperialism' and fight fascism.⁹ However, studies on the Italo-Ethiopian conflict and the Popular Front period have largely overlooked how anti-fascism and anti-colonialism were crucially entangled already during the second half of the 1920s and early 1930s.

Instead of emphasising top-level policy making in the Comintern or the national communist parties, this article approaches the topic 'from below' through focusing on how the popular left-wing press presented and spread the idea that anti-colonialist and anti-fascist agendas were compatible. The main examples are collected from the German *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (*AIZ*), which during the 1920s and 1930s became the most important illustrated weekly that was written from an internationalist, anti-fascist, anti-capitalist, anti-racist and anti-colonial perspective. It formed the crown jewel of Willi Münzenberg's German red media empire of high-profile mass publications produced for a broad working-class audience. These publications were disseminated through the global network of the international communist-led organisations, enabling their spread within the global left during the interwar period. During the Third Period, the *AIZ* reached print runs of over 300,000 copies per week in Germany. The *AIZ* thus became a major platform for distributing knowledge about various international organisations and their ongoing campaigns. In previous research on German communism the *AIZ* is well known, but its potential as an important source for the study of transnational anti-fascist and anti-colonial articulations has been largely overlooked.¹⁰ The article will show how the *AIZ* enabled a globalisation of anti-fascism as it encouraged people to make inventive connections between anti-fascism, anti-colonialism, and the race question.

The *AIZ*, like most other communist-led international organisations, had its international headquarters in Berlin during the 1920s. When Imperial Germany lost all its colonies after the First World War, the Weimar Republic was transformed into a unique space in Europe where both international communists and anti-colonial activ-

ists from the French, Dutch and British colonies could work more freely compared to the colonial metropolises of Paris or London. Due to the double standards of 'liberal imperialism', anti-colonial activists agitating in the colonies faced much fiercer and more brutal oppression by the colonial state than those operating within the liberal democratic framework in Western Europe. One could even compare the practice of anti-colonialism in the colonies with the practice of anti-fascism in fascist countries. In both cases protests were defined as forms of dangerous, subversive and seditious political activity representing a severe threat to the political order. It needed to be suppressed and a vast surveillance apparatus was constructed to monitor the combined threat of anti-colonialists and international communists. As Daniel Brückenhaus convincingly shows, surveillance practices had a direct effect on the geographies of transnational activism. For anti-colonial and anti-fascist protesters this became painfully clear in 1933 when the Nazis came to power in Germany and banned all international communist-led and socialist organisations.¹¹

As Berlin was evacuated in early 1933, Paris became the new centre for the Comintern's 'above party' organisations. Although the *AIZ* was printed in Prague, it was smuggled into Germany and distributed in major cities and centres of German exiles, such as Paris. The forced re-location led to the effective demise of the LAI, while the IWR and the IRA both lost their largest section. It also led to the high profile launch of the WCWF in Paris that combined the new anti-fascist movement with the international anti-war movement that had been formed in Amsterdam in August 1932. Paris thus became the primary global centre for the Comintern outside the Soviet Union. Until the late 1930s, it constituted both the 'anti-imperialist metropolis' and the 'world capital of anti-fascism'.¹² The *AIZ* was published under the auspices of the IWR until the autumn of 1935 when on the Comintern's orders it was handed over to the WCWF. During the Popular Front period it initially altered its name to *AIZ: Das illustrierte Volksblatt* in October 1935. In August 1936 it changed its name completely to *Die Volks-Illustrierte* (*The Peoples' Illustrated*), which ran until October 1938.¹³

Anti-Fascism, colonialism, and racial hatred

The initial connection between fascism and colonialism was articulated in the *AIZ* in late 1926 when an article dealing with 'fascist imperialism' was published. It condemned Italy's 'imperialist-fascist plans' and explained that the Italian people were getting frustrated with the fascists' empty promises of rapid social improvement and development. The *AIZ* concluded that as troubles grew on the domestic front, the fascists would use the idea of war and colonial expansion to divert people's attention.¹⁴ These ideas were also explicitly articulated at the anti-colonial congress in Brussels, organised under the leadership of Münzenberg in February 1927. The Italian delegate Guido Miglioli of the Catholic peasants' movement argued there for a joint struggle against both imperialism and fascism. Miglioli explained to the audience of pre-eminent anti-colonial activists, many of whom would take on leading roles in the LAI and the decolonisation process, that the workers and peasants in Italy and the masses in the African colonies had a common interest in fighting fascism. To Miglioli it was self-evident that the Italian regime was diverting attention from its internal crisis with an international 'adventure' beyond its borders. In this way transnational anti-fascism against Italy was presented as an anti-colonial strategy, as it would obstruct Italy's imperialist ambitions. Already at this point the question of Ethiopia was brought up as Miglioli condemned the pact between British imperialism and Italian fascism that allegedly was planning to divide independent Ethiopia into two spheres of interest.¹⁵ Indeed, Mussolini's fascist foreign policy statements from 1925, expressed in clearly racist and Social Darwinist terms, made clear his ambition to expand Italy's empire and conquer 'inferior' colonial peoples.¹⁶ In the *AIZ*, Italy's colonial ambitions were mainly highlighted as new competition to British and French imperialism, with the question of race not explicitly mentioned. It was about showing that fascist Italy would be an equally evil empire as the other colonial powers, rather than elaborating on any distinct Italian, or even fascist, qualities that might imbue its own colonial agenda.

Surprisingly, the *AIZ*'s critique of racial theories and racism did not originate from fighting the Nazis in Germany. Instead, it was the

globalisation of the communist-led analysis of ‘international fascism’ that proved to be crucial. As communists in Europe and the USA were locating national variations of international fascism, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was highlighted long before the Third Period as the most brutal form of American fascism. The CPUSA’s future General Secretary, Earl Browder, had already declared in 1923 that the KKK was ‘without doubt, the most native, 100% American, expression of the Fascisti movement’.¹⁷ The *AIZ* played a vital role in popularising the idea that the KKK was the most overt manifestation of fascism in the USA. Already in 1925 the cover of the *AIZ* showed a victim of ‘fascist terror in America’ where a worker who had protested against the Klan had been branded with their initials on his chest. In 1931 the *AIZ* re-printed a cartoon from the New York based communist journal *New Masses* in which American fascists were shown saying: ‘We are in reality the true democrats: Whether Negro or Red, both will be lynched’.¹⁸

The discussions of racism in America formed one part of a wider critique of US capitalist society, but they also strived to educate German and European workers about the dangers of racial hatred, most explicitly promoted by the Nazi Party. In 1931 the *AIZ* published its first comprehensive article dealing with racism in Germany, aptly titled ‘Nazi fairy tales about the Nordic master race’. The *AIZ* explained how the German far right was introducing a new myth to the world: that races had different values and that the mission to save the world had been bestowed on the Nordic ‘Aryan race’. Here, Jim Crow and the KKK’s lynchings as a form of ‘revenge punishment’ against blacks who had dared to challenge white supremacy were directly compared with the Nazi cry ‘Death to Judah’ (Juda verrecke). The *AIZ* stated that far right theories on race had been transformed by the Nazis into dangerously deceptive propaganda that had captivated parts of the crisis-stricken middle classes. This was distracting the politically insecure from aligning themselves with the proletariat, the *AIZ* complained. Paraphrasing August Bebel’s note that ‘anti-Semitism was the socialism of fools’ the *AIZ* concluded that the class-conscious proletariat needed to undertake some very difficult anti-fascist educational work. The far right had deformed Darwin’s ‘survival of the fittest’ into a call for ‘death to humanity’s weak’, the *AIZ* charged. Besides being

utterly un-Darwinian, it argued, Nazi race theories constituted an anti-proletarian ideology directed against all those who were sick or weak. The article was accompanied by a picture of white and black workers demonstrating together where the *AIZ* summarised: Capitalism was dividing races and people from each other – proletarian class consciousness united them despite all far right racial fairy tales.¹⁹ Using its trademark style of juxtaposing images, the *AIZ* showed a group of hungry, undernourished lower-class men and children in India. They were placed next to an image of the Indian bourgeoisie, men and women, who were well-dressed and looked healthy and vital. On the basis of the visual evidence the *AIZ* affirmed that neither weakness, superiority, or oppression was in reality about race, but class.²⁰

James W. Ford, the African American communist who headed the Hamburg-based International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW) until October 1931, documented in a piece titled 'Black Race to the Red Front' how black and white workers in the USA were already practicing interracial unity by marching together in the streets against hunger and unemployment.²¹ For the practice of left internationalism, it became increasingly important to display interracial unity as a counter-narrative to the far right notions of different races fighting for hegemony over each other. In this spirit the KPD's leader Ernst Thälmann was for example depicted in the *AIZ* demonstrating 'next to a Negro', illustrating the unity of the German and African proletariat – irrespective of race.²² It effectively united white workers and people of colour in metropolitan spaces, but it also actively imagined through the colonial representative a transnational connection to the colonial peoples around the world.

These ideas were also integrated into the general promotion of workers' international solidarity that envisioned forms of interracial co-operation. The German artist John Heartfield published one of his most famous photomontages in the *AIZ* in 1931 that specifically underscored the idea of a red unity beyond racial boundaries. The caption to the image proclaimed:

Whether black or white – united in the fight! We acknowledge only one race, we all know only one enemy – the exploiting class.²³

Heartfield created an iconic visualisation of the idea that the exploited and oppressed in the colonies and semi-colonial countries were united with white western workers. It presented a clear counter-narrative to Europe's far right and argued that, irrespective of skin colour, they were struggling against common adversaries, be they European colonial powers, or capitalists and fascists attacking workers within Europe or America.²⁴

Exactly in the spirit of Desmond Rowney's cartoon discussed in the introduction of this article, the *AIZ* underlined in December 1933 that just as the concept of race was an indispensable part of the imperialist colonial policy, it had become an indispensable part of the Nazi oppression of the Jews. Moreover, in one of its first major reports on the persecution of the Jews in the Third Reich, the *AIZ* reported that the violence of the SA-troops could only be compared with that of the KKK. It is perhaps not surprising that anti-colonial activists such as the West African Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté also articulated the same connection in 1933, stating that 'today it is the Jews, tomorrow it will be the black people'. Kouyaté himself was arrested by the Nazis in France in 1943, ending up in the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria where he died in July 1944.²⁵ Kouyaté was a close friend and associate of George Padmore, who in spring 1933 still was the head of the ITUCNW, which had been relocated to Paris after the Nazi seizure of power. Padmore was also the editor of *The Negro Worker*. In the April-May issue Padmore described how the 'fascists are preaching race hatred and advocating lynch law' and carried on 'violent agitation against Negroes, Jews and all so called non-Nordics'. Padmore made a direct comparison between the conditions endured by Africans around the world and the victims of German fascism, and connected the Nazi terror with both lynchings in the USA and the Scottsboro trial in Alabama. Moreover, Padmore described the Union of South Africa as 'one of the most classical colonies of fascism' and refuted the idea that there could be a victorious anti-fascism which still perpetuated 'the racist imperial system'.²⁶ As Cathy Bergin convincingly argues, for Padmore anti-fascism *had to be* anti-colonial in practice, which ultimately led to his falling out with the Comintern and the Soviet Union.²⁷

The *AIZ* declared that like all other 'national questions' (clearly

alluding to the 'Negro Question' and racial division) so the 'Jewish question' could only be solved through the rise of socialism. It concluded that in a free socialist Germany 'there will be no room for the barbarous persecution of the Jews'. It added in an anti-capitalist tone, that was somewhat ambiguous on the question of racism, that there would also 'be no room for the exploitation methods of Jewish capitalists'.²⁸ If this turn of phrase represented an effort to re-direct anti-Semites from a misplaced hatred of the Jewish people to a hatred of Jewish capitalists, it stands today as an awkward one. It was in keeping with the Class against Class policy, as communists distanced themselves from elites of all races and nationalities, whether they were European, Jewish, Indian, Chinese, or African American.

It is important to note that the *AIZ*'s efforts to discredit Nazi racial theories were not limited to individual articles, but were a constant feature. In May 1933 it launched an attack on Nazi racial theories with a satirical cover featuring the caption 'do not forget to get your nose measured'. The *AIZ* mockingly noted that only after this test was it possible to know whether or not someone was a 'Jewish-Marxist subhuman creature' or if they belonged to the pure-bred elite.²⁹ It then declared 'race against race' was not the solution to this problem, but a struggle of 'class against class'.³⁰

The many articles dealing with race and racism demonstrate that there was a continuous need to actively fight the suggestive power of racial hatred and its pseudo-scientific foundations. A cover story in April 1935 was dedicated to the theme 'Race research – Race swindle'. The main article celebrated the existence of different cultures and races, and showed images of peoples of various ethnicities, including an Indo-Iranian Hindu family in Mumbai; Native Americans in the Buffalo region, USA; Bedouins in the North African desert; Mongols in Southern China; 'Hoeh-warriors' from Nigeria; and various peoples from Central Asia. In the same article it was proclaimed that unlike in Nazi Germany and the colonial empires, in the Soviet Union racial hatred had been outlawed. While Russian Tsarist imperialists had defined most of these peoples as 'inferior races', under Soviet rule they had transformed themselves from 'nomads without culture' to leaders of their own lands, the *AIZ* rather euphorically claimed.³¹

In another attack on racial theories in general, and Nazi variations of them in particular, the *AIZ* invited a contribution by Professor M.S. Plisedsky from the anthropological museum in Moscow, in which the history of racial theories was explicitly connected to the European history of colonialism. Plisedsky informed the *AIZ*'s readers that the idea of higher and lower races was by no means a Nazi innovation, but was directly connected to the transatlantic slave trade. Back then there had simply been a concept of white supremacy that legitimised the colonial projects of the 'bankers and businessmen' in Europe. However, the British-led campaign against slavery (which was intended to limit the financial power of its former colony) led slave owners in the South to allegedly turn to an anthropology professor, Samuel George Morton, to deliver 'scientific' proof that the African slaves were 'half animals'. The aim was to use pseudo-science to justify slavery as the most effective way to transform Africans into good Christians. Morton analysed the skulls of humans and apes, and then fabricated evidence that 'proved' that the Caucasians (those of European descent) were more advanced than the inferior African race. According to Plisedsky the intensification of European struggle over colonial territories was the main reason why new pseudo-research was produced addressing variations within the 'Caucasian race'. This, it was claimed, was why the Nazis believed that the North Germanic race was predetermined to rule.³²

According to the *AIZ*, the German bourgeoisie had been quick to accept the racial theories that placed them on the top of the global food chain. Unsurprisingly the 'highest' races were also representatives of the 'exploiting classes', while, on the other hand, the working classes were part of the 'lower races' that were defined by their 'servile nature and slave-instincts'. Nazism therefore represented a double win for the German bourgeoisie: firstly, it confirmed that the Germanic peoples represented the highest race and were justified in obtaining colonies. Secondly, race theory was used against the revolutionary workers' movement and the 'Bolshevik races'. The German bourgeoisie could even argue that the very idea of class struggle and Marxism merely represented a lesser ideology of an inferior race.³³

The *AIZ*'s efforts to debunk the 'scientific' basis of Nazi racial theories was therefore not only a question of anti-racism, but about

defending the fundamentals of communist thought. The *AIZ* repeatedly asserted that the theories had nothing to do with science, but were swindlers' theories to mask the fascists' predatory and exploitative intentions.³⁴ Nazism was described as the philosophical clothes for a new German imperialism seeking world domination.³⁵ Their ideas of 'racial purity' and of eternal, unchanging races were a pseudoscience (*Afterwissenschaft*), a reworking of medieval religious animosity in an age when assimilation had lessened cultural differences, and were incapable of standing up to scientific scrutiny. It was further emphasised that Lenin had criticised this form of anti-Semitism as a distracting tool used by capitalists to direct the ignorant sections of the working class and peasantry against an imagined Jewish foe, thus emphasising a lineage of communist anti-racism.³⁶ No race stood above any other, the *AIZ* repeatedly affirmed, but the publication of so many educational articles on the topic indirectly acknowledged that the Nazis' racial ideology was finding listeners among the working classes.

The *AIZ*'s anti-racism was enhanced by articles in which scientists were invited to undermine racist ideology. The Serbian-born doctor Theodor Balk was employed by the *AIZ* to attack the Nazi Party's chief race theorist Hans F. K. Günther, whose work Hitler frequently cited in *Mein Kampf*. Balk had emigrated to Berlin in 1929 and worked as a journalist writing for the socialist and communist press. He had also published a book in Paris in 1935 debunking scientific racism.³⁷ Balk, in a March 1936 article, centred his criticism in a March 1936 article, on the fact that Günther had moved on from measuring noses to discussing the souls and mentalities of different races. This was more convenient for Günther as it provided the Nazis with more leeway to invent stories and fabricate 'evidence' about the Jews, as no contradictory hard evidence could be produced to refute the results. Balk declared unequivocally that the Nazi race theories were total 'quackery, humbug and fraud'. The sole purpose of this pseudo-science, according to Balk, was to incite racial hatred between the masses and to re-direct their class hatred to a racial enemy. Distraction, cover-ups, confusion, war mongering – these were the social functions of racial theories.³⁸ Looking back at these critiques of the far right's racism, it shows how elaborate and thought-provoking discussions were disseminated through the *AIZ*. Anti-racism was not

only portrayed as a crucial part of the anti-fascist fight, but the *AIZ* strived to establish racism's historical roots in colonialism and transatlantic slavery. It was determined to empower anti-colonial activists by arguing that they were on the same front, fighting a common enemy, be it against fascist Germany or the colonial empires.

Connecting the dots: racism, colonialism, fascism

In the same issue that the *AIZ* discussed anti-Semitism and the new uses of racial theories to justify attacks against the Jews, Georg Forster presented an overview of the transatlantic slave trade and 'lynch-justice' in the USA. The international 'Negro Question' was here declared to be the clearest example of the hatred incited by racial theories. The ridiculous assumption that whites were superior to blacks was nothing but an effort to morally justify the imperialists' plunder of the colonial and semi-colonial countries. Reviewing the history of European colonialism and the establishment of the transatlantic slave trade, Forster presented a clear line from colonialism to fascists' incitement of racial hatred. Moreover, it described racial segregation in the USA for German and European readers, explaining how African Americans were not permitted to mix freely with the white population in public areas such as trains, restaurants, parks, theatres, or hotels. Structural racism also had social consequences such as high unemployment amongst black people, and poor education being offered by the state. Black people were thus wrongly assumed to be less intelligent, which had a clear effect on their political rights. They received moreover the lowest salaries, and were often forced to take the hardest, most dangerous, dirtiest and unhealthiest jobs. This was not an isolated American phenomenon, and Forster noted that European colonial exploitation and the slave trade had stalled political and cultural development within Africa, too. Forster changed focus from America to Africa, depicting the horrific labour conditions that were being enforced by European colonisers, with a particular focus on railway construction projects and the resultant deaths of workers due to poor conditions. Forster also described the labour conditions in South Africa where he stated that African workers were held in slave-like

conditions. However, in the harbour cities of Durban, Port Elizabeth, and Cape Town, he claimed that white and black workers were treated with equal contempt, although African labourers were also forced to live in ghetto-like conditions. The experience of working alongside white workers had apparently helped the black workers to see that exploitation was not based on racial differences, but on class. The *AIZ* strove to repeatedly point out that whites too were oppressed, and that, despite instances of white chauvinism in the workers movement, there existed no white solidarity across class boundaries.³⁹ The report's accompanying illustrations showed that the practice of flogging was still being used in the African colonies as a form of punishment against workers. Next to it there was an image of two African Americans who had been lynched by the KKK. The caption stated that during the past eighty-five years (ca. 1850–1935) in total 5,600 blacks had been lynched in America.⁴⁰ The other illustrations cast doubt on whether slavery had ever actually been abolished in colonial Africa.⁴¹ The main point was that on both sides of the Atlantic, Africans were oppressed by the white elites who were still using gruesome ways to maintain their rule.

When the *AIZ* turned to the treatment of black Africa, it was frequently the escalating imperial struggle over Ethiopia, the last truly independent country in Africa, that was in the limelight. In a piece titled 'To Whom Belongs Africa?' the *AIZ* focused on the background of the British-Italian conflict. As a background the readers were informed that during the scramble for Africa, the Fashoda Incident (near contemporary Kodok) had nearly plunged Britain and France into war due to a conflict over imperial domination in 1898. For the *AIZ* it provided proof of British imperial brutality and preparedness to start a war to protect its interests. What was then different in 1935 when fascist Italy threatened British interests in Ethiopia, the *AIZ* asked? The article went on to state that the main interest of the British was the continued control of the route to India via the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. Although the Italians were dreaming of reinstating the Roman Empire and making the Mediterranean its 'mare nostrum', the *AIZ* reminded readers that the Mediterranean had for a long time been de facto ruled by the British.⁴²

From the *AIZ*'s perspective the situation had changed in one significant means between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s: back then

African anti-colonial protests had been weak. By 1935, however, black Africans had been awakened, such as the thousands of Egyptians who had signed up as volunteers for the Ethiopian armed forces. What was then in the final analysis more dangerous for Britain: the acceptance of Italian colonial expansion in Ethiopia or the potential breaking out of national liberation struggles in northern Africa? The *AIZ* assessed that a British war against Italy in Ethiopia might spread to the surrounding countries and lead to wars of liberation by colonial subjects in Egypt and even potentially India. The *AIZ*'s conclusion was that the British fear of its own oppressed colonial peoples was in fact steering Britain's more-accommodating stance towards Italy in 1935. The *AIZ* was confident that the fight between the 'imperial plunderers' in Africa would conclude with the rising of the coloured peoples: 'Africa belongs to the Africans!' it proclaimed, promoting the global right of all peoples to self-determination.⁴³

Ethiopia: the moment of anti-fascist and anti-colonial unity?

In February 1935, the *AIZ* dedicated its cover to the Ethiopian situation, showing Italian colonial soldiers ready for war at the border between Italian-controlled Eritrea and Africa's last independent nation.⁴⁴ 'Mussolini wants his African war' the cover of the *AIZ* declared on 20 June 1935. 'Without war', the *AIZ* continued, 'fascism cannot live'.⁴⁵ The *AIZ* discussed extensively Italy's 'feverish' preparations for war against Ethiopia that from their perspective had started to look increasingly inevitable.⁴⁶

On 3 October 1935, Italian troops crossed the Eritrean-Ethiopian border, starting the war. G. Bruce Strang has recently argued that very few studies have seriously discussed Mussolini's ideological motivations for the Ethiopian war. Strang compellingly argues that Mussolini's thinking was determined by Social Darwinism and his millenarian belief that it was Italy's destiny to rule over inferior peoples.⁴⁷ When comparing Nazism and Italian Fascism it has rightly been concluded that anti-Semitism never played a central role in Italian fascism. This does not however mean that Italian fascism was free from either biological or cultural racism.⁴⁸ It was perhaps only with the war against Ethiopia

that fascist Italy's clear racist ideological fundament came into the open air. Once in power in Ethiopia the Italians enforced fierce segregation between the white Italian population and the Ethiopians. If Mussolini's social Darwinism is taken into consideration, Italy's war connections both to European colonialism and radical racial theories in particular become clear.⁴⁹ The war itself should not be downplayed as an old style 'colonial war', and in fact represented the first fascist, total war.⁵⁰

Mussolini claimed that Italy was pursuing a noble civilising mission in Ethiopia. The *AIZ* disagreed, and on its back cover a full-page photomontage criticised the alleged benevolence of Italian Fascism as a giant Mussolini figure and his pledge to civilise East Africa was centred on a background that was filled with his so called civilising methods: fascist justice (Africans hanged from tree branches, reminiscent of lynchings); forced labour for the Africans (comparable to British and French colonialism in Africa); mortgage slavery and child labour; and death by imperialist warfare.⁵¹ The *AIZ*'s attack against Italy continued on another back cover where it satirically quoted Mussolini's statement that he 'wanted to get a place in the sun for his people'. The photomontage depicted Italian soldiers killed in an African desert landscape, and was ironically titled 'The Place in the Sun'.⁵²

The cover of the *AIZ*, published on 24 October 1935, did not hold back its criticism, showing two innocent Ethiopian children smiling towards the reader, and the caption stated 'Sentenced to death by air bombardment'. Citing a press notice from the United Press Service, it was confirmed that Italian aerial bombings had resulted in 10,000 largely-civilian casualties.⁵³ In an effort to develop a humanitarian connection to the Ethiopian people amongst the readers, the *AIZ*'s back cover showed an image of two brothers saying farewell to each other as they were forced to war. They were prepared to fight the mighty enemy and defend their freedom, the *AIZ* asserted, because they knew that all who wanted to protect peace stood with them. Dramatically the *AIZ* proclaimed to, and about, the two men: 'They have brothers in the whole world!'⁵⁴ As Italian propaganda maintained that slavery was persistent in Ethiopia, the *AIZ* was quick to note that the Italian territories in Africa had been equally unsuccessful in completely abolishing slavery. The 'Italian fascist colonial exploiter' had no moral high ground, and no legitimacy to call themselves

‘slave liberators’.⁵⁵ If the Popular Front initiative hindered the spread of anti-colonial sentiments, it was clearly absent from the *AIZ*’s reports on the Ethiopian war where anti-fascist and anti-colonial agendas could still converge in a unique and striking way.

It seems that the *AIZ* also functioned as an important vehicle to unite disparate protest actions around the world. It showed how anti-fascists, workers’ organisations, and pacifists were protesting to ensure that the League of Nations’ sanctions against Italy would be implemented as soon as possible. These actions inspired Greek, British and French dockers to resist loading ships with war materials for Italy. British shoe workers prevented a shipment of military boots from going to Rome. Belgian railway workers declared that they would not approve any cargo with munitions for Italy. Even as far away as China, the Soviets fighting imperialist oppression reportedly sent their solidarity to the Ethiopian anti-fascist struggle.⁵⁶

The *AIZ* in summer of 1935 was enthusiastic about the League of Nations’ decision to implement sanctions against Italy. Indeed the *AIZ* celebrated the Soviet Union’s role fighting for peace within the League, although we, in hindsight, know that the USSR on Stalin’s direction did not strive for a leading role in determining the sanctions as it would disrupt Italo-Soviet relations. The *AIZ* believed that effective sanctions against Italy could swiftly push Italy into a situation of internal crisis and force them to abandon the war. Moreover, it envisioned that this example of collective security would in the future also discourage other potential aggressors. Every setback that Mussolini experienced was declared to be a defeat for Hitler and Göring who allegedly were eager to set up ‘their own Ethiopia’ in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.⁵⁷

The *AIZ* believed that through continued pressure by the international working class it would be possible to impose sanctions. When governments refused to implement them, the *AIZ* reported on workers who themselves had imposed sanctions: in South Africa, Indonesia, France, Britain and Canada, harbour workers had put up blockades and refused to load ships with war materials that were bound for Italy.⁵⁸ Ironically, the *AIZ* placed great emphasis on the potential of an oil blockade. Perhaps unaware of the vast Soviet oil exports to fascist Italy during the Ethiopian war – or perhaps in a disguised critique of it – the *AIZ* argued such a blockade would, after several months, leave Italy’s African troops stuck with empty

fuel tanks, ending the war. Moreover, a disastrous end to Italy's war would weaken Italian fascism to such a degree that its overthrow could be close at hand, the *AIZ* announced in an unusually-optimistic tone.⁵⁹ In this way it effectively reconnected to Miglioli's statement in Brussels in 1927 when he had argued for the mutual reinforcement of anti-fascism and anti-colonialism. The question of oil was even brought to the back cover of the *AIZ* under the heading 'Superman in Distress'. The photomontage shows a huge petrol can in the African desert and Mussolini begging on his knees to have some. A lion is ominously and mockingly smiling on the other side of the canister.⁶⁰ Although the *AIZ*'s hopes of Italian failure turned out to be illusory, the envisioned unity of anti-colonial and anti-fascist efforts showed how it was possible to effectively negate, discredit and ridicule concepts of racial superiority inherent within the Italian fascist, Nazi and imperialist world views.

Conclusions

This article has shown how the concepts of anti-fascism and anti-colonialism were significantly entangled within a communist-led critique of Social Darwinist and Nazi conceptions of race. In an effort to investigate how the concept of anti-fascism was entangled with the fight against colonialism in the European metropolises I have used the *AIZ* as a central source for evidence of the popular spread of anti-fascist and anti-colonial ideas. It challenged both fascist and colonial claims of white supremacy and criticised 'scientific' race theories and the oppression practiced under colonialism, fascism and Jim Crow. From an anti-fascist and anti-colonial perspective, the main fight was not between the races, but constituted an interracial, multi-ethnic and global fight of the oppressed against the ruling classes. Paradoxically it envisioned a highly sectarian, but still inherently global struggle. The Class against Class line welcomed co-operation between African, African American, Asian and European workers in a common 'red front'. The communist analysis of racial theories and racist practices in the USA, the European colonies and Nazi Germany helped the *AIZ* to connect these practices with Nazi anti-Semitism in Germany. The capitalist countries were thereby presented

as inherently flawed in comparison to the multi-ethnic USSR that was represented through glossy images of ethnic and cultural autonomy and harmony. Finally, in the context of the Italian war in Ethiopia, the concepts of anti-fascism and anti-colonialism were most explicitly united.

Still there were differences in the ways that anti-colonialism and anti-fascism were interwoven. In the case of Italy, it was mostly in the context of an impending war against Ethiopia. Although the *AIZ* did not criticise the domestic racial policy in Italy, like it did with Nazi Germany, Mussolini's outspoken vision of a vast empire in which Italians would rule over 'inferior peoples' enabled it to be linked to a broader anti-colonial critique. Anti-fascism in connection to Nazism was on the other hand specifically connected to the question of race. However, as I have shown, the initial connection between racism and fascism was not made in Germany but through the study of international fascism, and particularly the KKK. This fascist oppression was then compared and connected to violent British and French colonial practices in Africa and against persons of colour around the globe.

Looking at the legacy of the Third Period and the anti-colonial and anti-fascist initiatives articulated during the years of sectarianism the balance sheet is best described as ambiguous. Perhaps one of the most important trajectories of this period was the enhanced importance given to 'interracial' organising and campaigning. Interracial activity would continue even during the Popular Front period in the European metropolises, although its anti-colonial emphasis would be toned down. Interracial solidarity was not only of importance in the anti-colonial context, but played a vital role in the continued working class struggle against fascism, war, and for common economic demands. It continued to represent a powerful symbol of global unity in multi-ethnic metropolises during the rest of the twentieth century – a thorn in the side of fascists, colonialists and racists alike.

Notes

1. Desmond Rowney (pen-name Maro), Untitled cartoon, *Weltfront Gegen Imperialistischen Krieg und Faschismus*, 1, 5, October 1933.

- Rowney later served in the International Brigades in Spain, but was fatally wounded in 1937. See Ben Hughes, *They Shall Not Pass. The British Battalion at Jaram*, Oxford, Osprey, 2011, p120.
2. See further in Holger Weiss, *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity. Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939*, Leiden, Brill, 2017.
 3. Kevin McDermott, 'Stalin and the Comintern during the "Third Period", 1928–33', *European History Quarterly*, 25, 1995; Matthew Worley, 'Courting Disaster? The Communist International in the Third Period', in Matthew Worley, *In Search of Revolution. International Communist Parties in the Third Period*, London, IB Tauris, 2004, pp1-17.
 4. On communist periodisation and anti-fascism, see Stanley G. Payne, 'Soviet Anti-Fascism. Theory and Practice, 1921–45', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 4, 2, 2003.
 5. John Callaghan, 'Storm over Asia. Comintern Colonial Policy in the Third Period', in Worley, *In Search of Revolution*. For the most recent discussion on the race question in the Comintern, see Oleksa Drachewych, *The Communist International, Anti-Imperialism and Racial Equality in British Dominions*, London, Routledge, 2019.
 6. See for example Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism. An Historical Introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001; Fredrik Petersson, 'Imperialism and the Communist International', *Journal of Labor and Society*, 20 March 2017.
 7. See for example, Ashley Dawson, 'The rise of the Black Internationale. Anti-imperialist activism and aesthetics in Britain during the 1930s', *Atlantic Studies*, 6, 2, 2009; Susan D Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich. Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009; Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic. African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, Leiden, Brill, 2014.
 8. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*.
 9. Daniel Brückenhaus, *Policing Transnational Protest. Liberal Imperialism and the Surveillance of Anticolonialists in Europe, 1905–1945*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp184-5; Susan Campbell, "'Black Bolsheviks" and Recognition of African-America's Right to Self-Determination by the Communist Party USA', *Science & Society*,

- 58, 4, 1994/1995, p457; Tom Buchanan, “‘The Dark Millions in the Colonies are Unavenged’”. *Anti-Fascism and Anti-Imperialism in the 1930s*, *Contemporary European History*, 25, 4, 2016.
10. The *AIZ* was published by International Workers’ Relief which provided it a distinct internationalist character. See further in Kasper Braskén, ‘In Pursuit of Global International Solidarity? The Transnational Networks of the International Workers’ Relief, 1921–1935,’ in Weiss, *International Communism*.
 11. See for example, Fredrik Petersson, ‘Hub of the Anti-Imperialist Movement. The League against Imperialism and Berlin, 1927–1933,’ *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 16, 1, 2014; Nathanael Kuck, ‘Anti-Colonialism in a Post-Imperial Environment. The Case of Berlin, 1914–33’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 49, 1, 2014; Brückenhaus, *Policing Transnational Protest*.
 12. Anson Rabinbach, ‘Paris, Capital of Anti-Fascism’, in Warren Breckman, et al., *The Modernist Imagination. Intellectual History and Critical Theory. Essays in Honor of Martin Jay*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2009; Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperialist Metropolis. Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.
 13. RGASPI, 495/20/913, 29-30, Beschluss über die Tätigkeit und Organe der bisherigen IAH-Arbeit in the ECCI resolution ‘Resolution über die Arbeit der Kom.Parteien auf dem Gebiete der sozialen Fürsorge und Hilfstätigkeit und über die Umstellung der Internationale Arbeiterhilfe’, September 1935.
 14. ‘Neue imperialistisch-faschistische Pläne’, *AIZ*, 22 April 1926.
 15. Liga gegen Imperialismus und für nationale Unabhängigkeit (ed.), *Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont. Offizielles Protokoll des Kongresses gegen koloniale Unterdrückung und Imperialismus, Brüssel, 10–15 Februar 1927*, Berlin, Neuer Deutscher Verlag, 1927, p162.
 16. Wolfgang Schieder, *Der Italienische Faschismus*, München, CH Beck, 2010, pp53-4.
 17. Earl Browder, ‘Introduction’, in Andreas Nin, *Struggle of the Trade Unions against Fascism*, Chicago, The Trade Union Education League, 1923, p4.
 18. Special issue of the *AIZ* titled ‘Leben und Kampf der Schwarzen Rasse’, *AIZ*, 26, 1931. On the production of the special issue, see Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, pp407-10.

- 19 'Das Nazi-Märchen von der nordischen Herrenklasse. Ein Kapitel Rassenkunde', *AIZ*, 51, 1931.
20. 'Das Nazi-Märchen von der nordischen Herrenklasse,' *AIZ*, 51, 1931.
21. J.W. Ford, 'Die schwarze Rasse stösst zur roten Front!' *AIZ*, 26, 1931. On the relation between race and class in the USA, see Oscar Berland, 'The Emergence of the Communist Perspective on the "Negro Question" in America: 1919–1931. Part Two', *Science & Society*, 64, 2, 2000; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie. The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950*, New York, WW Norton & Company, 2008, pp43-7.
22. 'Tag der Solidarität,' *AIZ*, 26, 1931.
23. John Heartfield, 'Ob schwarz, ob weiß', *AIZ*, 26, 1931.
24. 'Rasse? Klasse!,' *AIZ*, 49, 14 December 1933.
25. Brückenhaus, *Policing Transnational Protest*, p185, p203.
26. George Padmore, 'Fascist Terror against Negroes in Germany', *The Negro Worker*, 4, 5, 1933. Quoted from Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*, pp77-8, pp85-6.
27. Cathy Bergin, 'African American Internationalism and Anti-Fascism', in Kasper Braskén, Nigel Copsey & David Featherstone, *Anti-Fascism in a Global Perspective: Transnational Networks, Exile Communities, and Radical Internationalism*, London, Routledge, 2020. See also Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators'. Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918–1939*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008, pp281-304.
28. 'Der Gelbe Fleck,' *AIZ*, 15, 8 April 1933.
29. 'Vergessen Sie nicht, Ihre Nase messen zu lassen,' *AIZ*, 19, 18 May 1933.
30. 'Rasse oder Klasse,' *AIZ*, 19, 18 May 1933.
31. 'Rasse: Rassenhetze, Rassenforschung, Rassenschande,' *AIZ*, 15, 11 April 1935.
32. M.S. Plisedski, 'Aus Schwarz mach Blond. Ein Kapitel faschistischer Afterwissenschaft', *AIZ*, 15, 11 April 1935.
33. Plisedski, 'Aus Schwarz mach Blond'.
34. Ibid.
35. Bruno Frei, "'Der Judistschuld! Vom Nutzen der Rassenantisemitismus'", *AIZ*, 15, 11 April 1935.
36. Ibid.
37. Théodore Balk, *Races, Mythe et Vérité. Adapté d'après le ms. sous la*

- direction de l'auteur par Lydia Staloff. Préf. de Marcel Prenant, Paris, Éd. Sociales Internationales, 1935.*
38. Theodor Balk, 'Rasse. Der Mythos des Dritten Reichs', *AIZ*, 12, 19 March 1936.
 39. See, for example, the 'Yokinen trial' in New York, March 1931 in Berland, 'The Emergence of the Communist Perspective on the "Negro Question" in America. Part Two', pp208-9.
 40. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, opened in Montgomery, Alabama, in 2018, includes 4,400 confirmed lynchings of black people in the United States between 1877 and 1950. <https://ejournal.org/national-lynching-memorial>
 41. Georg Forster, 'Sklavenhandel und Lynchgericht', *AIZ*, 15, 11 April 1935.
 42. 'Wem gehört Afrika? Die Hintergründe des Italienisch-Englischen Konflikts', *AIZ*, 36, 5 September 1935.
 43. Ibid.
 44. 'Kriegsschauplatz Abessinien,' *AIZ*, 8, 21 February 1935.
 45. [cover] 'Mussolini will seinen Afrika-Krieg', *AIZ*, 25, 20 June 1935.
 46. 'Chronik der Woche,' *AIZ*, 25, 20 June 1935.
 47. G. Bruce Strang, "'Places in the African Sun". Social Darwinism, Demographics and the Italian Invasion of Ethiopia', in G. Bruce Strang, *Collision of Empires. Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, pp11-31.
 48. For an introduction to the discussion, see Patrick Bernhard, 'The Great Divide? Notions of Racism in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: New Answers to an Old Problem', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 24, 1, 2019.
 49. Thomas Schlemmer and Hans Woller, 'Essenz oder Konsequenz? Zur Bedeutung von Rassismus und Antisemitismus für den Faschismus', in Thomas Schlemmer and Hans Woller, *Der Faschismus in Europa. Wege der Forschung*, München, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2014, pp130-2.
 50. Giulia Brogini Künzi, *Italien und der Abessinienkrieg 1935/36. Kolonialkrieg oder Totaler Krieg?*, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2006.
 51. "'Wir haben in Ostafrika eine Zivilisatorische Aufgabe zu erfüllen!'", *AIZ*, 29, 18 July 1935.
 52. 'Der Platz an der Sonne', *AIZ*, 41, 10 October 1935.
 53. 'Zum Tode verurteilt durch Fliegerbomben', *AIZ*, 43, 24 October 1935.

54. 'Brüder nehmen Abschied,' *AIZ*, 43, 24 October 1935.
55. 'Zwischen Makalle und Gorrahai. Der Krieg in Abessinien,' *AIZ*, 47, 21 November 1935.
56. 'Bombenflieger und Tanks – Völkerbund und Volksfront!,' *AIZ*, 43, 24 October 1935.
57. 'Der Krieg geht weiter ...,' *AIZ*, 44, 31 October 1935.
58. 'Berge und Wüste. Die Schwierigkeiten beim Vormarsch der Italiener,' *AIZ*, 46, 14 November 1935.
59. 'Zermürbender Kleinkrieg. Wendung an den Fronten in Abessinien,' *AIZ*, 50, 12 December 1935. Romania and the Soviet Union were the largest exporting countries in 1935. Between January and June 1935 Romania and the USSR were responsible for 40.6 and 16.0 percent of Italy's oil imports, whereas between August and 15 November 1935 the import percentage was 59.1 and 10.0 respectively. G. Bruce Strang, "'The Worst of all Worlds". Oil Sanctions and Italy's Invasion of Abyssinia, 1935–1936', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 19, 2, 2008, p215.
60. 'Übermensch in Nöten,' *AIZ*, 50, 12 December 1935.