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Race and the Legacy of the First World War in French Anti-Colonial Politics of the 1920s

Introduction

The history of ‘black France’ in the interwar period has long been dominated by accounts of artistic and student life in Paris, or the ‘discovery’ of African art by European artists (most famously Picasso). However, alongside and often intertwined with the world of jazz, *la vogue nègre* and Negritude, was also to be found an emerging community of black workers in the major cities (Paris and Lyon) and port towns (Marseilles, Toulon, Bordeaux, Le Havre). The single biggest group of black people in France throughout the interwar period though were the *tirailleurs sénégalais* (African infantrymen), most of whom were stationed at the major colonial military base in the small Mediterranean town of Fréjus. As the US historian Tyler Stovall has argued, the First World War constituted a watershed in race relations in France: during the war, the French authorities brought over half a million soldiers and labourers to the Metropole from its colonies in Africa and the Caribbean, as well as from Asia (and this is without taking into account both British colonial troops and African-American soldiers).¹ The flood of publications that has accompanied the centenary of the war has included some illuminating work on this submerged history, examining the full extent to which this really had been a ‘world’ war, drawing in men from all continents.² This new material builds on the pioneering body of incisive historical work that has emerged, over the past two decades, on the role of France’s colonial subjects in the First World War (in particular the work of Richard S. Fogarty, Joe Lunn, Gregory Mann and Stovall³). However, far less has been written on the relatively small group of African *tirailleurs* who stayed on in France and were involved in black community groups and or/became militants in the radical anti-colonial

movements created in the wake of the 1920 split between French communists and socialists.⁴

From his entry on to the political stage in late 1924 until his early death three years later, aged just 38, the most celebrated and feared of these militants was Lamine Senghor, a decorated war veteran from Senegal, who had been gassed at Verdun in 1917, and who now emerged as a communist-inspired, anti-colonial activist. This chapter will chart the course of Senghor's brief career as an activist from 1924-27, exploring the nature of black anti-colonial activism in France during that period. It will also analyse the ways in which Senghor projected his identity as a war veteran in his speeches and writings, and will examine more generally, how France's 'blood debt' to its colonial subjects became a key theme of anti-colonial discourse in the interwar period.

The First World War on Trial: Blaise Diagne versus Les Continents

On 24 November 1924, Lamine Senghor made his entry on to the French political scene when he appeared as a witness for the defence in a libel trial, at the Tribunal de Paris, which for a few days at least thrust the politics of France's black colonial populations to the forefront of public debate, and in particular the issue of the participation of colonial troops in the First World War.⁵ The antagonists at the heart of the trial were the most (in)famous black Frenchmen of their day: the plaintiff, Blaise Diagne, was a deputy in the French parliament representing the four communes of Senegal. Initially feared as a threat to France's interests, Diagne had become a respected national figure in France through his participation in the recruitment of African troops during the First World War. His pioneering role as a black man operating at the heart of a European imperial nation-state had also brought him to international prominence: and, in 1919, he had used his political capital with both the French authorities and with black internationalists to host

W.E.B. DuBois's landmark Pan-African Congress in Paris. The main defendant René Maran had for several years been a controversial public figure in French life, after he was awarded the prestigious literary prize, the *Prix Goncourt* in 1921 for his novel, *Batouala*, which in its preface had provided one of the most scathing denunciations of French colonialism in recent times (although the novel itself was, in fact, deeply ambivalent in its portrayal of Africans). In reality, very little separated Diagne and Maran in terms of their fundamental attitude to French colonialism: both believed profoundly in France's *civilising mission* and they argued for the full assimilation of black people into French culture.⁶

As with so much of the racial and anti-colonial politics of the 1920s, the fault line between the two men centred on the 'blood debt' that France was deemed to owe to its colonial troops who had played such an important role in the First World War. Over 130,000 black African troops had participated in the war with over 30,000 killed.⁷ Diagne was to become a central figure in the recruitment of the *tirailleurs* as the war dragged on in seemingly interminable fashion: in January 1918, he accepted an invitation from Prime Minister Clemenceau, desperate for the extra troops that might finally bring the war to a successful conclusion while limiting the loss of further French lives, to lead a recruitment tour in French West Africa. Given the title of *High Commissioner for the Republic*, Diagne was greeted in the colonies with the pomp and ceremony normally reserved for white dignitaries from the imperial centre, which initially enhanced his reputation amongst France's many black subjects and its few black citizens. However, by the time of the libel trial in 1924, Diagne had become a figure of hate for some, especially amongst black activists, from moderate reformists such as René Maran to more radical, left-wing figures such as Lamine Senghor. Promises made about black participation in the war leading to reform of the colonial system, as well as increased access to rights and

citizenship, had proven illusory; previously perceived as the scourge of the colonial lobby and in particular of white French dominance in Senegal, Diagne had signed the infamous 'Bordeaux Pact' in 1923, which defended the commercial interests of the major Bordeaux trading houses as part of a deal to gain their electoral support. For his opponents, Diagne had quite simply sold out to colonial interests.⁸

It was in this context, in October 1924, that Maran published an article 'The good disciple', in the black newspaper *Les Continents*, in which he accused Diagne of having received 'a certain commission for each soldier recruited'. Similar accusations had previously appeared in the mainstream French press but an indignant Diagne regarded the publication of such claims in a 'black' newspaper as a danger to his reputation as an advocate for equality. *Les Continents* was the newspaper of the *Ligue Universelle de Défense de la Race Nègre* (LUDRN), founded by the colourful figure of Kojo Tovalou Houénou, a lawyer and dandy, the son of a prosperous Dahomean merchant (who may or may not have been a descendant of the mythical King Behanzin). Although Houénou was a great admirer of Marcus Garvey and his United Negro Improvement Association (at the time of the trial, he was actually in the US where he met Garvey and addressed the UNIA convention), LUDRN and *Les Continents* shared little of the Jamaican's radicalism. In the terminology of the times, LUDRN was 'anti-colonial' in the sense that it called for the reform of the colonial system; it did not call for the independence of the colonies. It was thus closely aligned with the position of the moderate French left (SFIO) and the *Ligue des droits de l'homme*.

In late 1924, Lamine Senghor occupied a far more radical position in relation to empire than *Les Continents*, and his testimony presented French society with a troubling image of the *tirailleur sénégalais*. The arrival of vast numbers of African troops on French soil had led to a significant transformation of the vision of the African in the

popular imagination: in place of ‘the savage’, the image spread of the *tirailleur* as a ‘big child’ who smilingly served France (most infamously in the imagery for the *Banania* powdered chocolate drink). However, Lamine Senghor’s intervention projected the *tirailleur sénégalais* as a man who had been radicalised by his experiences and who would now devote himself to the denunciation of colonial injustice. Unfortunately, we do not have access to Senghor’s actual testimony but, shortly after the trial, he would write a general account of it for the radical newspaper *Le Paria* (The Pariah):

Instead of attempting to prove precisely how much the great slave trader [Diagne] received for each Senegalese he recruited, they should have brought before him a whole procession of those blinded and mutilated in the war. [...]

All of these victims would have spat in his face the infamy of the mission that he had undertaken.⁹

Senghor’s views on the suffering endured by colonial soldiers were given authority by his own status as a ‘mutilé de guerre’ [war wounded]. In April 1917, his battalion of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* had been gassed near Verdun, and Senghor had suffered terrible injuries from which he never fully recovered, and he would die of tuberculosis in late 1927. As will be illustrated below, his position as a ‘mutilé de guerre’ opened up a space within 1920s France in which otherwise radical ideas could be given a hearing.

At the time of the trial, Senghor had been a militant for just a few weeks within the *Union Intercoloniale* (UIC), an organisation created by the French Communist Party (PCF) in 1921 with the aim of providing a forum in which a broad transcolonial front against empire might develop. Although nominally an independent group run by and for representatives of the colonised peoples (Nguyen ai Quoc, the future Ho Chi Minh, was

one of its most active members in its early stages), the UIC was in fact controlled by the PCF's Colonial Studies Committee. In the columns of the UIC's newspaper, *Le Paria*, were to be found the most violent denunciations of empire of the period, although the word 'independence' itself was rarely mentioned. What made the UIC far more menacing than Houénou's group was its Communist provenance, for the Communist International (or Comintern) of 1920 had adopted a resolutely anti-imperial stance. In practice, this had led to little concrete anti-colonial activity on the part of the communist parties of Europe but communism had come to be seen by many activists from the colonies as an ideology that might permit the creation of a global front to combat the worldwide reach of empire. Of course, one might legitimately question the good faith of the communist movement in its anti-imperialism—many Western communists largely shared the views of their imperialist counterparts regarding the backwardness of the colonised peoples of Africa and Asia—but the fact cannot be underestimated that communism was the sole metropolitan movement of the mid-1920s to call for the independence of the colonies: in the eyes of its colonised members, the UIC represented the potential for fruitful alliances in the imperial centre; while for the French authorities, the movement was a potentially subversive revolutionary force that needed to be closely policed.

Why though did the UIC send one of its newest recruits to speak in defence of a bourgeois, reformist newspaper? In 1924, the Comintern had called on communists to seek alliances with all anti-colonial nationalist movements: and the Diagne-*Les Continents* trial was perceived as an opportunity to create a united anti-colonial front between (bourgeois) reformers and (communist) radicals. This united front would only last a few years but it is in this context that we must situate Lamine Senghor's activism. The newspaper lost the trial but, as was indicated above, the incident cemented a profound change in the perception of Diagne: previously seen by many blacks as a defender of his

race, his status as a deputy constituting proof of the promises of assimilation, he now came to be regarded as a traitor to the black cause. For the radical black movements of the next few years, Diagne was the *bête noire*, often caustically dismissed as a ‘*nègre blanc*’ [*white negro*] or, in an echo of the charge made against him by Maran, decried as a ‘*négrier*’ [*slave trader*]: in a major irony, this prominent black politician became virtually the sole figure around whom disparate, radical black groups could unite in opposition.

What exactly had driven Lamine Senghor, the loyal *tirailleur sénégalais* who had defended the colonial ‘homeland’ in its hour of need to join the far-left militants of the emerging anti-colonial movement? The Diagne-*Les Continents* trial appears to have played a decisive role, for the young militant suddenly found himself face to face with the man who had promised so much to the African soldiers who had fought in the First World War. Indeed, for Sagna, Senghor’s testimony during the trial reveals that ‘more than the UIC militant, it is the war-wounded veteran whose wounds have been reopened who speaks’.¹⁰ From November 1924 until his death three years later, Lamine Senghor would devote himself to various forms of anti-colonial militancy. Initially motivated by his status as a war veteran, this topic would remain central to almost every article and speech he would write. The fact that he had fought for France made it that much more difficult for the French authorities to dismiss him as a subversive, which surely did not escape the PCF leaders who decided to promote him within the movement’s ranks. However, despite his commitment to the cause, Senghor’s desire to return to Senegal never left him entirely. On 9 March 1925, a date by which he was immersed in anti-colonial radicalism within the UIC, Senghor wrote to the Governor General of French West Africa to ask for his intervention to help him to be repatriated. Much correspondence flowed between the colonial authorities in Paris and Dakar but it was

eventually decided that they should accede to this request as Senghor could be more easily controlled in the colonies. However, in the meantime, Senghor had changed his mind, fearing that some form of brutal repression would be waiting for him back home. He would never see Senegal again.¹¹

L'Union intercoloniale and the rise of anti-colonialism

In the aftermath of the trial, Lamine Senghor quickly became a mainstay of UIC activities. He had joined the UIC at a moment when its geographical focus was evolving: initially dominated by representatives from French Indochina, it had gradually integrated North Africans, Caribbeans and, now with Lamine Senghor, it reached out to sub-Saharan Africa. While many critics of colonialism would cite violence in the colonies as proof of the need to reform the colonial system, the UIC deemed this violence proof that colonialism could not be reformed. It is also striking that the UIC adopted a strategy in which violence and exploitation in the colonies were regularly evoked in relation to the suffering endured by colonial soldiers during the First World War. For example, a flyer for a UIC meeting in March 1925 announced:

Colonial subjects! Senegalese, Dahomeans! During the war, black men were ground into the dust. Today, your brothers are still exploited to enrich the cotton plantations of Niger. They call it forced labour.¹²

Throughout 1925, Senghor was a regular contributor to *Le Paria*. He wrote about strikes in French West Africa projecting black and white workers united against their capitalist bosses, while condemning forced labour in the colonies as a new form of slavery, and, once again, decrying the failure of France to deliver on its promises to those African

troops who had served the country so loyally during the Great War. In an article on forced labour, Senghor denounced what was essentially a ‘system of slavery’. Outside of the four communes in Senegal (whose inhabitants enjoyed French citizenship), it was the code of *indigénat* that governed relations between coloniser and colonised, and forced labour was a permanent threat for any colonial subject. In denouncing this injustice, Senghor reminded his readership of the ‘blood debt’ and the promises that had been made to the colonised. The sacrifice made by the *tirailleurs sénégalais* was supposed to bring an end to forced labour and other forms of injustice:

So, that’s the recognition shown by the ‘Motherland’ to its children who served as ‘cannon fodder’ from 1914-18; under Painlevé’s premiership when 6,000 negroes were sacrificed in 3 days on 16, 17, 18 April 1917 at the Chemin des Dames! So, that’s the reality of the promises made by the recruiters Diagne and Angoulvant in 1917-18? [sic]¹³

What is more, instead of compensating African soldiers for their sacrifice, they were now sent to fight in colonial wars in Morocco and Syria ‘where 75% of the French army are negroes’; and, for those who might escape these conflicts, all they will be offered is the ‘shameful slavery’ of forced labour.¹⁴

Senghor’s most significant contribution to the UIC was in seeking to forge alliances with representatives of other colonial movements, based on the principle that the transnational reach of empire must be met with a transcolonial front of anticolonial resistance. In particular, Senghor threw himself wholeheartedly into the campaign against the Rif War in Morocco¹⁵—the conflict evoked in his article above in which *tirailleurs* formed the core of the French forces—, appearing at countless rallies alongside prominent

UIC members, such as the Antillean Max Bloncourt and the Algerian Hadj Ali. He also shared a platform with French communists, in particular Jacques Doriot and Paul Vaillant-Couturier, the latter of whom it is possible he may have encountered through the pacifist *Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants* (ARAC). Another speaker with whom Senghor often shared the platform at rallies was the novelist, Henri Barbusse, like Vaillant-Couturier, a war veteran who gravitated from ARAC to the PCF.¹⁶

The Rif campaign completed Senghor's transformation into an anti-colonial militant, thrusting the young man into the limelight, inviting him to take to the stage to deliver tub-thumping speeches evoking solidarity between the workers of the world: the cause of the European proletariat was also the cause of the colonised. It was during this intense period that Senghor appears to have developed his skills as a powerful orator. This was also the period when he began his political education. In 1925, the PCF opened a 'Colonial School' for its growing band of colonised activists in the UIC, designed to improve their knowledge of Marxist ideology. Very few activists attended the classes and the 'school' closed after a few months but, while its doors were open, Lamine Senghor was one of the most assiduous students and his writing for *Le Paria* bears the imprint of this ideological training: essentially, the nationalist anti-colonial movements were considered by communists of the mid-1920s to be the prelude to a global world revolution (although later in the decade the Comintern would turn away from alliances with nationalist movements, denouncing 'bourgeois' nationalists as enemies of the workers). However, as will be shown below, Senghor's anti-colonialism deployed a rather heterodox form of communist ideology. The most important issue (as with Ho Chi Minh before him) was the attempt to imagine an anti-colonial discourse capable of mobilising all colonised peoples: communist orthodoxy counts for far less than the ability to unite the colonised of the world.

The PCF-UIC campaign against the colonial war in the Rif Mountains was led by Jacques Doriot who saw in the resistance of the Moroccan indigenous leader, Abd El-Krim, against Spanish and French domination of the Rif region the perfect occasion for the PCF finally to prove its anti-colonial credentials to an increasingly impatient Comintern.¹⁷ It seemed at last as though the PCF was fully embracing the Comintern's anti-colonial agenda but, in reality, much of the PCF hierarchy was reluctant to lend the campaign its full support. Ironically, the Rif War was won by the French primarily with the help of its colonial troops, which meant that Doriot's fraternisation strategy was largely irrelevant to conditions on the ground, a fact that was all too familiar to Senghor. His status as a former colonial soldier and a communist lent weight to the idea that common ground could be found between coloniser and colonised. In the transnational politics of post-war communism, Senghor's voice became a necessary part of the debate but the PCF generally insisted that he stick to a script devised by it.

Lamine Senghor adopted the 'official' Comintern line and promoted an alliance between all those engaged in anti-colonial struggle: for instance, in his one (revealingly titled) article on the question for *Le Paria*—'The People of the Rif are not alone. They have by their side the oppressed of the world'—, he began by linking the events in Morocco with the communist-nationalist revolt in China. However, his contributions went beyond Doriot et al. in thinking through the specific nature of the uprising in the Rif, in particular articulating the potentially revolutionary nature of Islam and its role in fomenting anti-colonial revolt:

The eyes of Islam, in particular, are turned towards the struggle unfolding between the valiant people of the Rif and the might of French militarism; the

whole Islamic world, carried along on a wave of enthusiasm, is watching this victorious march towards independence.

In light of this, French capitalism, which oppresses tens of millions of Muslims, screams in despair and rage.¹⁸

Whereas Doriot ‘translated’ the actions of the Rif rebels into a proto-communism, Lamine Senghor regarded the sense of despair and oppression felt by the Islamic world as sufficient motivation in itself for their revolt. Indeed, his analysis of the role of Islam in popular resistance to Western military intervention was couched in terms that resonate with our own contemporary post 9/11 world:

With its usual hypocrisy, [French imperialism] presents the success of the Rif armies as the prelude to an Islamic crusade against the Christian world.

Islam, represented by 300 million slaves, crushed under the heel of different European imperialisms, thus receives the label of ‘Barbarism’ while European capitalism becomes ‘Western Civilization’.¹⁹

The Rif war was presented here not as the result of a Samuel Huntington-style clash of civilisations but rather the understandable resistance of a colonised people to external domination. Indeed, Senghor believed that there was considerable hypocrisy in the demonisation of Islam, for it was a ‘spiritual force’ that France itself had recently tried to win over to its cause: ‘Can French imperialism not recall that France itself has built in Paris a mosque demanded by the faithful so that it could attempt to bring the spiritual force of Islam under its tutelage and rally its “partisans” under its flag?’²⁰ Senghor’s article referred to a decision taken by the French parliament in 1920 to build a mosque in

central Paris, which offered official recognition for the contribution of France's Islamic subjects to victory in the First World War: at a moment of existential crisis for the nation, Islam had been a friend to France and Senghor was reminding the Republic of its gratitude towards the Muslims in its Empire. (Given that France had forgotten this gratitude within six years of the decision to build the mosque it is unsurprising that this is a part of the historical record that is rarely dusted off in contemporary debates about secularism in France.)

After loyally serving the PCF and the UIC throughout the Rif campaign, Lamine Senghor had gradually come, by early 1926, to resent the limited space devoted by the communist movement to black questions in general as well as to his own marginalised status in particular. Many historians of French communism have signalled 'the imperial patriotism which coloured the colonial policies of the French Communist Party'.²¹ Although seeking to situate themselves as the natural allies of the colonised, the communists often saw themselves as culturally, intellectually and politically more advanced than those they were purporting to help. In March 1925, Lamine Senghor had already expressed his frustration when asked by the PCF to stand in the local elections in the 13th *arrondissement* in Paris, a bourgeois district in which he had little chance of winning (a tactic not unfamiliar to French political parties today when 'promoting' minority candidates). As Philippe Dewitte argues, Senghor was increasingly aware that he served as a 'token' figure for French communism.²² The final straw came when the PCF was invited to send two representatives to the Congress of Black Workers in Chicago in October 1925. They selected Senghor and Bloncourt but, at the last minute, informed them that they would have to pay for the journey out of their own pockets. When Senghor objected, it was suggested that he either work his passage to America or stow away: he refused. From this moment on, Senghor appeared to have decided that, in order to

promote the interests of black people, it was necessary to create independent black organisations, and in March 1926 with the creation of the *Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre*, he did just that. However, it would be wrong to assume that Senghor had split definitively from the PCF: for the final 18 months of his life, he kept both his friends and his enemies guessing about his motives and his allegiances, seeking to carve out a political discourse in which both race and class might carry equal weight.

The Defence of the Negro Race

On 26 March 1926, Lamine Senghor officially registered his new association and embarked on a tour of France's port cities in order to encounter the small working-class black community and attempt to convince them of the utility of joining the CDRN: his skills as a public speaker, honed during the Rif campaign, served him well and by the summer of 1926 it was estimated by the agents of the CAI, the system of surveillance overseen by the Ministry for the Colonies, that he had recruited over 500 members (in a black population numbered at less than 20,000).²³ Throughout the rest of the year, it appeared that he had broken entirely with the PCF and had decided to devote himself to defending the black community, deploying the reformist language of the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* and parts of the French Socialist party. Senghor's self-presentation was yet again that of a 'mutilé de guerre', thereby underlining his service to 'the homeland'. In early CDRN documentation, there was no mention of capitalist imperialism; instead, the group diplomatically positioned itself within the lineage of France's great humanitarians and philanthropists. The respectable CDRN fired off letters to the President of the Republic and the Minister for the Colonies proclaiming their loyalty and devotion to France, and requesting financial and logistical support. On 4 October 1926, the Secretary

General of the CDRN wrote to the French President asking him to support those who had given so much to France:

We are asking France for a favour (indeed, we are asking all French people), for their support, in recognition of the blood shed on the battlefield... We are not engaging in politics by speaking about the rights of Negroes, for it was the French republic that first proclaimed them and it must now work to maintain them.²⁴

The 'blood debt' owed by France to its African troops is here invoked as a more general debt owed to all of France's black colonial subjects; a legacy of the First World War must thus be the improved treatment of France's African colonies and greater recognition for the rights of those black subjects, such as Senghor, who had remained in France after the conflict. However, the CAI archives reveal that this letter and other requests were met with silence by distrustful French authorities: there was discussion between colonial officials behind the scenes but no official response was ever given.

Fearful of the social and political consequences of its importation of millions of colonial soldiers and workers during the First World War, France had sought to repatriate them as soon as possible after the end of the conflict. However, the war had let the genie out of the bottle and the black population in metropolitan France, although it would remain small, was there to stay. The war also posed serious questions about France's colonial ideology of assimilation: the presence of so many culturally and racially different colonial subjects on French soil raised questions about the feasibility and/or desirability of attempting to assimilate millions of Africans into French culture. As Gary Wilder has illustrated, the interwar period saw French colonial administrators adopt a 'colonial humanism' that was far more positive regarding the value of 'native' cultures: this made

assimilation appear less desirable as an outcome of the French imperial project and this would later prompt the likes of Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire to promote the notion of Negritude, as the valorization of black cultural difference within the French imperial nation-state.²⁵ The cases of René Maran and Kojouhar Houénou (cited above) illustrate that calls for France to deliver on its stated aim of assimilation would not disappear but, in the aftermath of the war, the recognition of racial difference was now also firmly on the agenda.

As with many contemporary groups seeking equality for black people in France, the CDRN posited slavery and racism towards black people as a betrayal of Republican France (rather than a paradox inherent in the alleged universalism of the post-revolutionary nation). It is thus unsurprising that one of their first acts was to organise a procession in July 1926 to lay a wreath on the grave of Victor Schœlcher (a procession to Schœlcher's grave was the default gesture on which almost all black associations fell back at some point during this period). Far from the scathing attacks on imperialism found in *Le Paria*, the CDRN evoked the notion of 'the Great Family of Man'. Almost pleadingly, the group claimed that all they wanted was for 'the Negro to be treated with a bit more humanity' and they proposed a set of concrete proposals for black community institutions: a museum, a library, a bar-restaurant, and a hostel.²⁶

This might appear to situate the CDRN less within the frame of an emerging black internationalism and radical anti-colonialism than within the type of reformist assimilationism that critics have seen as the hallmark of black politics in France, especially in the 1920s. However, despite a (temporary) toning down of the radicalism that had marked the UIC, the CDRN continued to probe at the open wound of France's treatment of its African veterans. In the first issue of its newspaper, *La Voix des Nègres* [The Voice of the Negroes], an unsigned article focused on an issue dear to Lamine

Senghor, namely the pensions awarded to the *tirailleurs*. In a litany of rhetorical questions—that begin with the title of the article, ‘Why are we treated as inferior?’—, the author (who may well be Senghor) exposed the hypocrisy of France regarding the debt it owed to the *tirailleurs*:

Why does a tirailleur sénégalais, wounded in the ‘Great War’, now domiciled in France, receive a pension worth between 6 and 8 times less than that paid to a French veteran with the same injuries and adjudged to have the same level of invalidity? [...] Is the blood of a Negro not worth the same as that of a white man? Why was there equality when it came to responsibilities, but then two weights and two measures when rights were assessed?²⁷

In what was perhaps a conscious echo of Shakespeare’s Shylock (‘Is the blood of a Negro not worth the same as that of a white man?’), Senghor revealed the racial prejudice that underlay supposedly dispassionate financial calculations. The article concluded in a fashion reminiscent of *Le Paria*—with a table comparing the pensions of the *tirailleurs* and French veterans (the emerging anti-colonialism of the period consistently used statistics and other information provided by the colonial system to denounce the injustice of that very system).²⁸

What is most original about the CDRN, however, as both Christopher Miller and Brent Hayes Edwards have shown in their meticulous analysis of CDRN writings, was its critical reflection on the language of race, its exploration of the modes of self-definition available to black people.²⁹ The CAI records indicate that there had been much internal discussion within the CDRN about whether to use the term ‘noir’ or ‘nègre’ in their title,

and Lamine Senghor appeared to have played a decisive role in pushing the committee towards the latter term.

The two key newspaper articles in which Senghor articulated his ideas on the language of race were: 'The Negroes have Awoken', published in *Le Paria* in April 1926, which constituted an intellectual 'manifesto' announcing the creation of his new movement; and 'The Word "Negro"' from the first issue of *La Voix des Nègres*, published in January 1927. The latter article has received by far the greater critical attention, but, in fact, the two pieces are almost identical, the latter essentially a minor reworking of the former. This complicates the notion of the 'racial' turn in Senghor's thinking as evidence of his complete disillusionment with communism: the publication of such an article in the columns of *Le Paria* makes it clear that in many respects the break with his former communist allies was only partial.

In 'The Negroes have awoken', Senghor articulated a racial identity that was based not on shared racial characteristics but (as with the Islamic identity outlined in his article on the Rif War) on a shared sense of oppression:

One of the great questions of our age is that of the awakening of the Negro.

[...] To be a Negro is to be exploited until one's last drop of blood has been spilt or to be transformed into a soldier defending the interests of capitalism against those who would dare try to stop its advance.³⁰

The references to 'one's last drop of blood' and 'a soldier defending the interests of capitalism' clearly echoed Senghor's comments elsewhere equating exploitation in the colonies with the sacrifice of so many African lives during the First World War. However, the call for 'the awakening of the negro' was inspired by another context entirely. In 1926,

such a call was immediately to evoke a set of ideas and a vocabulary that had been rendered popular by Marcus Garvey. In the course of his seemingly inexorable rise as a major leader of black America (until his conviction for mail fraud in 1925), Garvey had consistently called for the black world to wake from its long sleep, and his calls for black people to take pride in themselves had resonated around the world. Indeed, although not directly acknowledging his influence, the CDRN clearly owed a lot to Garvey—in terms of iconography (the shooting star in the naïve, romanticised image of Africa featured on the association’s headed paper, and the black star of its official stamp) and of language, especially the repeated appeals to black pride and solidarity: equally, Senghor and the CDRN rejected the elitism of the Jamaican’s African-American rival W.E.B. DuBois who argued that racial progress should be led by a ‘talented tenth’ of black people. The influence of Garvey on black politics in interwar France has commonly been underplayed, as the general assimilationism that marks these French groups seems in many ways to be the antithesis of Garvey’s identitarian discourse, and the Jamaican’s anti-communist stance meant that it would have been difficult for Senghor and other militants to embrace him openly (Garvey did meet black groups, although not the LDRN, successor to the CDRN, when he finally visited Paris late in 1928). However, from Kojo Tovalou Houénou to Lamine Senghor and later Césaire, Damas and Senghor, these black French activists were operating (consciously or not) within a discursive space opened up by Garvey; this was clearly visible when they argued for the dignity of ‘le Nègre’ and called for the rejection of the white world’s stereotypical and racist vision of the black world. This dialogue between Garvey and the militants of the CDRN should not come as a surprise, for as Brent Hayes Edwards has convincingly argued, the black movement of the interwar years is a resolutely transnational phenomenon in which translation (both literal and metaphorical) of ideas from one context to another plays a central role. Such

translation can often appear as *mistranslation*, but, for Edwards, the translational and transnational nature of black diasporic practice inevitably highlights differences across black communities in the very process of seeking to imagine unity.

The most striking aspect of this transnational process of translation of Garvey's ideas is the CDRN's use of the term 'Nègre' as a proud badge of self-identification, just as Garvey had proclaimed himself a 'Negro' (always with a capital 'N'). In an era when the term 'noir' was widely gaining prominence as a more dignified replacement for 'nègre', seen as derogatory and demeaning, Senghor and the CDRN deliberately choose 'Nègre' as the term that encompasses all black people:

It is our honour and our glory to call ourselves Negroes with a capital N. It is our Negro race that we wish to guide along the path towards its total liberation from the yoke of slavery. We want to impose the respect due to our race, as well as its equality with all of the other races of the earth; which is our right and our duty.³¹

According to Senghor, the 'nègre' is an individual who has been downtrodden and oppressed through slavery, colonialism, segregation: the terms 'noir' and 'homme de couleur' were, to him, seen merely as escape routes for educated blacks seeking a place in a dominant white society. The first step towards liberation is to embrace one's identity as a 'nègre': for that allows one to perceive the true nature of Western oppression of the black world. The transnational black identity evoked here is, in sociological terms, 'thin', that is, a strategic identity designed to create a coalition against empire: it was not until Negritude a decade later that a 'thick' black identity, based on culture and philosophy would begin to be articulated.³² Negritude would tie the celebration of difference into a

reformist politics of empire but, for Lamine Senghor, one's identity as a 'nègre', forged in the suffering of colonial exploitation or in the carnage of the battlefields of the First World War, could lead only to a radical anti-colonial politics.

The dream of an anti-imperialist global revolution

Despite the projection of a unified 'Negro' community, dissent and conflict consistently undermined Lamine Senghor's efforts. Even as the first issue of the CDRN's newspaper, *La Voix des Nègres* proudly and insistently proclaimed the unity of 'les nègres', the CDRN was in fact in the middle of a long and protracted schism that would several months later lead to the break-up of the organisation with Senghor and his fellow radicals deserting en masse to create the *Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre*. In the midst of the CDRN in-fighting, Lamine Senghor enjoyed one final moment of glory, which sealed his reputation as the leading black anti-colonialist of his day, when he was invited to speak at the inaugural meeting of the League against Imperialism (LAI) in Brussels (10-14 February 1927).³³ The LAI was largely a communist initiative—the main organiser was Willi Münzenberg, the famous 'red millionaire' and communist deputy to the Reichstag³⁴—, but in its initial phase it sought to rally all anti-colonial forces together (a realisation of the Comintern's 1924 call for alliances between communist and nationalists that would within a year of Brussels be superseded by a shift to the promotion of class-versus-class struggle). In his speech at the Congress, Lamine Senghor, liberated from the moderation that had marked most of his contributions to the CDRN, launched into a vehement attack on imperialism as a renewed form of slavery: Imperialism cannot hope to bring civilisation to the colonies for it is an inherently unjust system of domination. Senghor denounced the cruel treatment of the colonised, the violence, forced labour and,

yet again, the iniquity and double standards of the pensions paid to colonial veterans of the First World War:

You have all seen that, during the war, as many Negroes as possible were recruited and led off to be killed. [...]

The Negro is now more clear-sighted. We know and are deeply aware that, when we are needed, to lay down our lives or do hard labour, then we are French; but when it's a question of giving us rights, we are no longer French, we are Negroes.³⁵

The speech was a huge success not solely in the Congress hall but around the world: W.E.B. DuBois's *The Crisis* reported Senghor's words approvingly in its July 1927 edition, the author having discovered a translation of the speech in the 15 May edition of *The Living Age*.³⁶ In a fascinating article published just a few months after the Congress, Roger Baldwin, the director of the American Civil Liberties Union, cited Senghor as one of the most eminent of the 'men without a homeland', those political exiles who had made Paris their home.³⁷ In the final stages of the Congress, the LAI placed Senghor at the head of the working party asked to draft the 'Resolution on the negro question' and the finished document bore all the hallmarks of his fiery rhetoric.³⁸ Little more than two years after his first public appearance, this young man from Senegal had managed to carve out a position as a radical spokesman not only for black people in France but also internationally.

The final highpoint in Lamine Senghor's career was the publication of *La Violation d'un pays* [*The Rape of a Land*]. This slim volume of about 30 pages related in polemical fashion the bloody history of slavery and colonialism. Sometimes described as a brochure or pamphlet, it is in fact a deeply hybrid text that mixes the form of the fable (it even begins with the traditional 'once upon a time' opening) with a highly didactic

approach, utilising the political language of revolutionary communism: the text is also accompanied by 5 simple line drawings designed to reinforce the political message. The text concluded with the overthrow of the colonial regime by a world revolution that liberated not only the colonies but also the metropolitan centre from the yoke of capitalist imperialism:

The same day, at the same time, in the land of the [darker nations], the revolution erupted in concert with the white citizens [...]. The slaves were free! The citizens of every country were able to form their own government. They formed a fraternal alliance of free countries. LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTION!!!³⁹

This resolution to the story would prove unrealistic in the context of the 1920s in Africa but it acted within the context of Senghor's story as a form of ideological wish fulfilment: we might usefully describe it as the 'performance' of an international anti-colonialism.

Whatever conclusions we draw about the resolution of the text, *La Violation d'un pays* is, I would argue, a remarkable work which attempts for the first time under the French imperial nation-state to give narrative form to the independence of the colonised world. Some historians of the period, such as Philippe Dewitte, have argued that independence was pretty much 'unthinkable' in the 1920s; but the case of Lamine Senghor illustrates that the desire to overthrow Empire was fostered by many on the radical fringes of colonial society, even if the means to achieve independence escaped them. Senghor's suffering on the battlefields of the First World War lent an urgency to his critiques of empire: the likes of Blaise Diagne and René Maran, far from the cottonfields and the battlefields, might call for the long-term reform of colonialism but the downtrodden 'nègre' could not wait for such incremental improvements. The anti-

colonial movements of the interwar period are often dismissed as failures on the basis that their militancy did not lead to independence. However, as Frederick Cooper, the renowned historian of Francophone Africa, has argued in another context (the collapse of a federal project linking France and Africa under the Fourth Republic in the 1950s): ‘the failure [...] is explainable, but explainable does not mean that failure was inevitable and that the attempt is a minor detour along the path of history’.⁴⁰ The movement created by Lamine Senghor did not achieve success in his time but that does not mean we should simply write it off as a failure, for as Gary Wilder reminds us: ‘Insofar as political imagination pivots around historical reflection, it requires us not only to examine the paths that led us to our present but to remember futures that might have been’⁴¹

Conclusion

Within a month of the publication of *La Violation d'un pays*, Senghor's health faltered, and he would pass away just a few months later. The anti-colonial cause lost one of its prominent figures and it is debatable whether the black community in France has ever known a more effective political leader. The issue of France's blood debt to its colonies would remain a source of division throughout the interwar period, and would of course become a key component in the challenge to Empire that occurred after the Second World at the end of which France was famously liberated (in part) by its colonies. An engagement with the black radicalism of the 1920s, embodied in the career of Lamine Senghor, helps us to understand better the role of the First World War in sowing the seeds of the Empire's ultimate demise. Anti-colonial thought of that later period often imagined France's colonial troops as stooges of empire. However, as a former veteran, Senghor knew that the *tirailleurs* were both agents of empire and its victims.

¹ Tyler Stovall, 'Love, Labor and Race: Colonial Men and White Women in France during the Great War', in *French Civilization and its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race*, ed. by Tyler Stovall and Georges van den Abbeele (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2003), pp.297-331. See also Richard S. Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) for an influential analysis of the social significance of France's use of colonial troops during the war, and David Murphy, 'Love, Trauma and War: the *tirailleurs sénégalais* and sexual-racial politics in 1920s France', *Irish Journal of French Studies*, 13 (2013), 111-28.

² See, for example, Santanu Das (ed.), *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and David Olusoga, *The World's War* (London: Head of Zeus, 2014). The Olusoga volume is a companion to his two-part BBC series of the same name, screened in August 2014.

³ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*; Joe Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of World War One* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; Oxford: James Currey, 1993); Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Stovall, 'Love, Labor and Race'.

⁴ Two key early texts on this subject are Philippe Dewitte, *Les Mouvements nègres en France 1919-39* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985); Olivier Sagna, *Des Pionniers méconnus de l'indépendance: Africains, Antillais et luttes anticolonialistes dan la France de l'entre-deux-guerres (1919-39)*, PhD thesis, Université Paris VII, 1986. Important recent scholarship includes: Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators': Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-39* (London: Hurst, 2008) Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010); Minkah Malakani's *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011) looks at this radicalism in a wider Atlantic context.

⁵ For a brilliant account of this landmark trial, see Alice L. Conklin, 'Who Speaks for Africa? The René Maran-Blaise Diagne Trial in 1920s Paris', in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, ed. by Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp.302-37.

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- ⁶ See René Maran, *Batoaula: véritable roman nègre* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1921).
- ⁷ The most comprehensive overview of African participation in the First World War is to be found in Marc Michel's *Les Africains et la grande guerre: l'appel à l'Afrique (1914-1918)*, 2nd edition (Paris: Karthala, 2003), whose first edition appeared in the early 1980s.
- ⁸ The best account of Diagne's career remains G. Wesley Johnson's *The Emergence of Black Politics in Senegal: The Struggle for Power in the Four Communes, 1900-1920* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971).
- ⁹ 'Un procès nègre' [A Negro Trial], in Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays et autres écrits anticolonialistes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012), pp. 33-34. All translations are mine.
- ¹⁰ Sagna, *Des Pionniers méconnus*, p.311.
- ¹¹ See Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, pp.79-80.
- ¹² Flyer for UIC meeting, March 1925. **Archives Nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM): Slotfom 3, Carton 3.**
- ¹³ 'En A.O.F.—Le travail forcé pour les indigènes', in Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, p. 40.
- ¹⁴ Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, p. 40.
- ¹⁵ For an overview of the campaign against the war, see David H. Slavin, 'The French Left and the Rif War, 1924-25: Racism and the Limits of Internationalism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26:1 (1991), 5-32.
- ¹⁶ Gregory Mann has studied the ways in which a shared experience of the battlefield had the potential to bring French and African veterans together. See Mann, *Native Sons*. The possibility that ARAC played a role in forging bonds between left-wing French and African militants is a topic worthy of further exploration.
- ¹⁷ When Abd el-Krim won a remarkable victory over the Spanish colonial army in September 1924, Doriot and Pierre Semard sent a congratulatory telegram on behalf of the *Jeunesses communistes* (published on the front page of *L'Humanité* the following day), which expressed the wish that 'after its definitive victory over Spanish imperialism, the people of the Rif will continue, together with the French and European proletariat, the struggle against all imperialists, until Moroccan soil has been fully liberated'. *L'Humanité*, 11 September 1924; cited in Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, p.121. Doriot's notoriety increased when he suggested in parliament on 4 February 1925 that French troops in Morocco desert rather than fight their 'proletarian' brothers in the Rif.
- ¹⁸ 'Les Riffains ne sont pas seuls—Ils ont avec eux le monde des opprimés', in Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, p.35.

¹⁹ Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, p.36.

²⁰ Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, p.36.

²¹ See, for example, John D. Hargreaves, 'The Comintern and anti-colonialism: new research opportunities', *African Affairs*, 92 (1993), 255-61 (p.261). Dewitte's *Les Mouvements nègres* and Sagna's *Des Pionniers méconnus* are also very critical of the PCF.

²² Dewitte, *Les Mouvements nègres*, p.109.

²³ The full title of the Service de Contrôle et d'Assistance aux Indigènes (generally known as the CAI) indicated its twin mission to police (*contrôle*) and to assist (*assistance*) the 'indigenous' populations from the colonies resident in France; however, the primary, unspoken mission of the CAI was to carry out surveillance on colonial subjects.

²⁴ See Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, p.92.

²⁵ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²⁶ Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, pp.43-46.

²⁷ Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, p.53.

²⁸ An article in the first issue of *La Race Nègre* (June 1927), the successor to *La Voix des Nègres*, 'Réponse d'un ancien tirailleur sénégalais à M. Paul Boncour' deploys a different method to give voice to African war veterans: written in the first person in the 'petit nègre' [pidgin French] taught to its *tirailleurs* by the French army, the article allows a (real or imagined?) *tirailleur* to tell his story in his own terms. See Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, pp.104-05.

²⁹ Christopher L. Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads: Essays on Francophone African Literature and Culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998). Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003).

³⁰ Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, p.41. Once again, Senghor links military service for Africans as part of a continuum linked to other forms of colonial exploitation.

³¹ Senghor, *La Violation d'un pays*, p.43.

³² As Senghor believed that only the independence of the colonies and liberation from the white man could bring freedom and equality for 'les nègres', this meant that there could be no liberty within the western colonial system. His articles for *Le Paria* envisaged a colour-blind community bound together by communist ideals, and the revolutionary conclusion to his most sustained piece of writing, the allegorical *La Violation d'un pays*

(1927), might be deemed an attempt to imagine a multiracial future in the post-imperial world.. However, as he wrote in an article in the first issue of *La Voix des Nègres*: ‘Negroes are not of any European nationality and do not wish to serve the interests of one imperialism against another’. Under empire, black people cannot and will not be French. Senghor, *La Violation d’un pays*, p.47.

³³ Generally known as the LAI, the League’s full title was the League against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression.

³⁴ Sean McMeekin, *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow’s Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003).

³⁵ Senghor, *La Violation d’un pays*, pp.61 & 63.

³⁶ ‘The Browsing Reader, *The Crisis* (July 1927), 160; ‘A Black Man’s Protest’, *The Living Age*, 332:4306 (15 May 1927), 866-68.

³⁷ Roger Baldwin, ‘The Capital of the Men without a Country’, *The Survey*, 1 August (1927), 460-68.

³⁸ The situations of blacks in Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas were brought together within a history of oppression dating back five centuries: ‘For almost five centuries, the negro peoples of the world have been victimised and cruelly oppressed’. Senghor, *La Violation d’un pays*, p.63. The unity of all ‘nègres’ and all colonised would finally bring such oppression to an end. The July 1927 issue of *The Crisis*, mentioned above, published a long extract from the ‘General Resolution on the Negro Question’ in its ‘The Far Horizon’ section (pp.165-66).

³⁹ Senghor, *La Violation d’un pays*, pp.29-30.

⁴⁰ Frederick Cooper, ‘From Imperial Inclusion to Republican Exclusion? France’s Ambiguous Postwar Trajectory’, in *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France*, ed. by Charles Tshimanga, Didier Gondola, and Peter J. Bloom (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp.91-119 (p.117).

⁴¹ See Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), p.13. For a more in-depth analysis of these issues in relation to Lamine Senghor, see David Murphy, ‘Success and Failure: Frantz Fanon and Lamine Senghor as (false) prophets of decolonization’, *Nottingham French Studies*, 54:1 (2015), 92-106.