

# A Negro Looks at British Imperialism

By George Padmore

**T**HE present moment, when British "democracy" has betrayed even more callously, more cynically than it did in the case of Abyssinia, the efforts of a small sovereign state to withstand the inroads of Fascist aggression, is perhaps a very opportune one to consider the race relationship between the British and the coloured people within their Empire.

In discussing this problem, it is impossible for any progressively minded Negro to isolate himself from the broader aspects of the subject and view the Colour Bar Question in Britain from the purely personal standpoint. This approach would be very superficial and would avoid the pregnancy which the race problem has gained in British Imperial and international affairs today.

If in America coloured peoples are subjected to a pronounced racial discrimination, they are, nevertheless, an integral part of that nation. Despite repression and cruelty, often assuming the form of terror, the blacks of the New World have been drawn into the life of the American people, whose culture, language, religion and general social outlook they have assimilated. Long ago forgotten are the tongues, mores and customs which their slave ancestors brought with them from Africa.

Within the British Empire racial contact has assumed a different relation, since the British Negroes are confined to colonial areas. With the exception of the blacks in the West Indies, who, like the Afro-Americans, have more or less assimilated the culture of the ruling nation, the great majority of coloured colonial subjects still retain their own languages, religion and social customs. British Imperialism in Africa, with its tendency to indirect rule, has to a large extent left these intact, while rooting up the political and economic foundations of the indigenous institutions. It is these factors which account for the very different outlook which Africans have on life when compared with that of the ruling group.

Without thinking too heavily on the subject, the majority of British people, in their typically off-hand way, consider these colonial races on organic part of their Empire in the same way that Mussolini now claims the Abyssinians as an integral part of his new Roman Empire. But we would remind such people that this incorporation of subject nations has only been achieved through coercion and

*Great Britain's maintenance of an iron-clad color bar while pretending to democracy comes in here for a scorching denunciation*

force and maintained by the same methods.

There is nothing new or original about the blustering exploits of Hitler and Mussolini. They have all been used before by the British in their efforts to obtain the subjection of less powerfully armed and more industrially backward people. With this point well in mind, readers of the North Lands will be better able to understand the viewpoint of coloured races towards Britain and the British people. For when foreign people speak of British democracy they think in terms of the national Constitution as it applies to the English population but any consideration of British democracy must include the wider perspective of the relation of the rulers towards the subject peoples within their Empire.

## British "Superiority"

The intensity of the race conflict resulting from imperialism depends in some measure upon the difference in cultural background and economic status between the blacks and whites, as Professor Ralph Bunche correctly points out in his book, "A World View of Race." "Imperialist propaganda has taught the world to regard the coloured races as helplessly backward and incapable of keeping step with the modern industrial world. They are classified as 'inferior' to the 'superior' white ruling nations. And strenuous efforts are used to make these people think of themselves as backward. But this classification is not merely a theoretical one. It is used as the basis for justifying conquest and exploitation and for dividing the world into dominant and subordinate peoples."

Thus imperialism has attempted to mask its cruelly selfish economic motives behind high-sounding phrases like "Trusteeship," "Paramountcy of Native Interests," "Mandate System," etc. Belief in such sophistries is not confined to the drawing rooms of aristocratic Mayfair but is also widespread in the homes of the English middle and working classes.

Towards all peoples of whatever race the British have built up a characteristic

attitude of cultivated aloofness, but most Britons, irrespective of social status, display an added aversion to peoples of darker skin. It is this racial egotism and national arrogance which has created a conflict between the British and coloured peoples of the Empire, which will render a social reconciliation between them extremely difficult even after a political and economic adjustment has been effected.

The tolerance and cordiality which the French exhibit at least towards their coloured subjects in Europe, if not in the colonies, seems foreign to the English racial temperament. There is not the same ease and freedom in the relations between the races in England as in France. The liberal attitude of the French can perhaps be traced to the philosophical ideas of the Revolution of 1789 which found expression in the doctrine of the "Brotherhood of Man." This does not imply, however, that there are no cordial relations, and even warm friendships, between individual members of the two races in Britain. The writer can testify to many such friendships. But here we are discussing group behaviour rather than individual attitudes. Most coloured students coming to England politically unconscious and with great illusions about British democracy and hospitality, drummed into them by their missionary teachers at home, soon have all this nonsense knocked out of them by boarding house and hotel keepers. The Colour Bar in Britain is certainly creating much anti-British feeling among colonial intellectuals and students. It has helped to mould many a future anti-imperialist leader of the coloured peoples. The British people are creating their own grave-diggers!

## Perfidious Albion

Colour disaffection in England, however is of a peculiar type and largely hypocritical. In some parts of the United States of America, the Negro is plainly told where he is not wanted. He is segregated into certain quarters, has his own schools and universities, and eats in his own restaurants. A British Negro, for instance, landing in New York, probably would go immediately to Harlem to find living quarters. But a coloured student coming to London may telephone an hotel, and being assured that rooms are vacant, will hurry around to the address. Imagine his feelings

when a surprised clerk or landlady discovers he is not white! Shamefacedly they will declare that it was all a mistake; that after all, there are no vacant rooms. Or else, merely annoyed at having to waste their time, they will bang the door against his nose. Few Negroes in England, I imagine, have not passed through the bitter experience of looking for apartments and being told constantly: "We do not take coloured people." In five weeks of flat-hunting the writer learned to find his way competently about London.

However rich or cultured he may be, no Negro is allowed into the grand hotels and restaurants. Even the Press has from time to time given publicity to cases of celebrated persons being refused entry by well-known hostesses. But worse than this is the refusal of medical schools and hospitals to enrol Negro students and nurses. There is a case on record of a young West Indian girl anxious to study nursing in England. She applied to 25 hospitals and was in every case turned down on account of colour.

If this were done overtly, if Negroes were told openly and frankly: "Keep out, we don't want you," they would know how they stand. They would realise, if they had never done so before, that although part of the British Empire, they were that part of it which has obligations and no rights.

But the double edge of British policy is best exhibited in the fact that while West Indians are only allowed to practise medicine in their native countries if they have passed through British training, the opportunity to acquire this training is more and more being denied them by reason of the hospitals' refusal to admit them as students. And that the British Government should lend itself to this colour discrimination is indeed scandalous. A recent issue of the *British Medical Journal* carried an advertisement for a Government doctor for Jamaica, stipulating that the applicant must be white. This is outrageous when there are many West Indian doctors well qualified for the post.

To insist that there is no colour bar in England and to enforce one in practice meanwhile is particularly insidious, and it is small wonder that coloured people are convinced that the British are the most hypocritical people in the world. They always have the feeling that although an Englishman may welcome them with a smile on his lips, he has derision in his heart. And it is for this reason that the majority of them prefer to travel on any boat but a British boat. They know that they will not be subjected to the patronage which the Englishman who assures them he "is without colour prejudice" will give; nor will they have to face the amused curiosity

and prying of those who are anxious "to learn the ways of dark folk," or submit to the insolent rudeness of those who, by their refusal to sit with them at table or talk to them on deck, express their true racial aversion. A Negro would far rather travel by a Greek or even an Italian boat, for he realises that while there are imperialists among the Italians, the bulk of the people are not colour conscious in the same sense that the British are.

But while retailing such specific symptoms of racial discrimination, we do not whine about them. We understand them to be a reflection of the whole British Imperial policy and the result of the jingo education and propaganda which makes the average Englishman point with such pride to "the Empire upon which the sun never sets." We see them in their real relation to the whole Colonial Question, from which they cannot be divorced.

### Colorful Fascism

Viewing this inter-racial contact in its imperialist context, the blacks have never had any reason to be grateful to the British people. From the time the two races have come into contact the blacks have been made to carry the "White Man's Burden." This has taken the form of the slave trade, expropriation of land, taxation, forced labour and dangerous diseases like syphilis, with which the Africans had no previous contact.

Whatever of good the white man has brought to Africa, the natives have paid for a thousandfold. They have produced untold wealth for the imperialists in peace time, and in war time have been forced on to the battlefields to defend for their rapacious masters the wealth that was filched from them. More than this could not be expected of slaves!

It would be well for British people, and more particularly Left-wingers, when they are denouncing Nazi racialism to remember what is happening in their own colonies. While we all detest Fascist savagery, it is shamefully apparent from the facts that Hitler has nothing to teach the British ruling class in the matter of race baiting.

In South Africa, Southern Rhodesia and Kenya the Africans enjoy as little democracy as the Jews in Germany. Their lands have been confiscated, they are taxed beyond measure, they are denied the most elementary democratic rights and civil liberties. They are subjected to a restriction of movement, speech and thought associated with the Dark Ages of Europe, and their punishment for any slight breach of regulations is hardly less vicious.

Were they not the geese that lay the golden eggs, it is only too probable that

they would long ago have suffered the same fate as the Aborigines of Australia and the Indians of North America. Space prevents me from giving a more detailed description of Colonial Fascism in British Africa, but I hope that I shall have the opportunity of doing so in a future article.

### Abyssinia's Betrayal

Here it is sufficient to say that today Africans and peoples of African descent have little enough loyalty and esteem for Great Britain, if ever they had any in the past. The treacherous role of the British ruling class in the betrayal of Abyssinia has branded itself into the hearts and minds of coloured peoples throughout the world. Africans have long memories and will never forget the infamous Hoare-Laval pact. The black man's attitude towards England is at best one of veiled hostility and concealed contempt.

For as much as the Negroes hate Mussolini and Italian Fascism, they despise even more the political acrobatics of their noble English masters. The hypocrisy of the speeches of Lord Halifax, that pillar of the Church of England, at Geneva was glaringly revealed in the unscrupulous manoeuvres of the British Government to expel Abyssinia from the League. Together they made clear to the Africans the poverty of British morality, which was exhibited to them in all its ugly nakedness.

The Abyssinian affair was but a prelude to the speedier abandonment of Czechoslovakia, whose sovereign integrity has been made subservient to the needs of British and French Imperialism. In ceding this small State to Hitler, Chamberlain has behaved no better and no worse than any other British Premier would have done in the circumstances. He has simply acted in accordance with imperial dictates; from an imperialist standpoint, he has taken the only action which could have avoided war. For he knows that war would place the British Empire in jeopardy. While there is peace the *status quo* can be maintained. What matter to British imperialists if small states are dismembered as long as they keep their colonial plunder? I hope that the coloured people of America will draw the moral from Czechoslovakia's experience.

Today the name of England is one of scorn and derision in the market places of Africa and the bazaars of India. British democracy! Why, the very words stink in the nostrils of every coloured subject in the Empire. Those who talk of the honour of England will have a big job to retrieve this "honour" and win back the confidence of the blacks.