
Letter to Theodore Draper in New York from Cyril Briggs in Los Angeles, March 17, 1958 [long extract]

Document in the Theodore Draper Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Box 31.

March 17, 1958.

Mr. Theodore Draper
The Fund for the Republic, Inc.
360 Riverside Drive
New York 25, NY

Dear Mr. Draper:

I am only too happy to aid in your efforts to dispel the myths and confusions that have risen around the history of the African Blood Brotherhood and the question of self-determination as applied to the American Negro....

Now to clear up some of the myths, let's begin with myself. All assertions to the contrary, I was never a member of the Socialist Party, although I had a number of close friends who were members, like Dick Moore and the late Hubert Harrison. I did not consider that the SP had anything to offer the Negro, or any interest in the anti-imperialist struggles of the colonial peoples. Nor was I, or Dick Moore to my knowledge, ever associated with [Philip] Randolph and Owens of *The Messenger*, or with the Messenger group, except in the sense that they were all representative of the radical New Negro Movement of that period.

My interest in Communism was inspired by the national policy of the Russian Bolsheviks and the anti-imperialist orientation of the Soviet state

birthed by the October Revolution. I was at the time more interested, as you will gather, in the national liberation revolution than in the social revolution. I joined the Communist Party after several visits to my office by Rose Pastor Stokes [CPA] and Bob Minor [UCP], each representing what they claimed to be the official CP. I chose Rose's group. You will, I am sure, know the faction she represented at the time, so there's no necessity for me to look it up.

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I resigned from *The Amsterdam News* in 1918 in protest against the publisher's attempt to censor my editorials, following their intimidation by government agencies. In those editorials, and in other writings — letters to the daily press, etc. — I opposed the war as an imperialist war and assailed as a sham and fraud Wilson's slogan of "making the world safe for democracy," and played up in my news columns cases of lynchings during the war, treatment of Negro soldiers in France, etc. One of the first issues of *The Crusader* magazine carried, incidentally, a documentary exposé of the Jim Crow treatment and persecution of our Negro soldiers in France, including attempts to dissuade the French from having any social relations with them. This was followed by efforts to intimidate me. I was also honored by a Southern Senator, who proposed on the floor of Congress that the editors of the *Chicago Defender*, *The Cri-*

sis, and *The Crusader* be shot for treason. I think the gentleman was from Florida.

As soon as my resignation from *The Amsterdam News* was announced, several Harlem citizens who approved my position came forward with offers of financial aid and the suggestion that I start a publication of my own. Chief among these was the late Anthony Crawford, a Negro ship broker with offices at 80 Wall Street. This group also helped in raising money through affairs, etc.

Publication of the magazine definitely preceded organization of the Brotherhood. The idea of the ABB [African Blood Brotherhood], including its name, was mine. If I would not choose that name today, it is also true that there was no racist implication of any sort in its selection. Its selection was inspired by the blood brotherhood ceremony performed by many tribes in Black Africa. According to early European explorers, black and white men, as well as members of different tribes, often swore blood brotherhood by mingling drops of their blood. The ABB then, was not conceived as an exclusively Negro organization, although that is what it turned out to be. At least, I know of no instance of a white person joining it. Nor did we make any attempt to recruit whites.

The Brotherhood never attained the proportions of a real mass organization. Its initial membership was less than a score, and all in Harlem. At its peak it had less than 3,000 members. It had Posts, however, in many sections of the country, and in several West Indian islands. It was not comprised solely or mainly of West Indian Negroes living in the US. West Indians, however, did constitute the bulk of its New York membership and played a role in its Supreme Council out of proportion to their total membership vis-a-vis native born members.

Most of its members were recruited through the magazine, which had a peak circulation of 36,000 and reached many Negro communities throughout the country. The number recruited

by agents sent into the field was small in comparison to those recruited by readers of the magazine who sought authority to organize Posts in their communities. Among those was a Mr. White of West Virginia, who hitchhiked to New York with his teenage daughter to propose he be appointed organizer for his state. Too, quite a few out of town people were recruited during their attendance at conventions in New York. Among these were members of the Garvey movement, of which thousands of native-born Negroes were members. Neither Garvey's UNIA nor the ABB was composed wholly of West Indians.

You may be interested in the fact that the Brotherhood's Post in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was accused of instigating the race riot in that city [1919], one of the series of post-war race riots in which Negroes not only fought back but carried the fight into the white sections. The *New York Times* quoted columns to this canard. It also carried a long interview with me as head of the Brotherhood. I think the charge was based mainly on the military connotation of the word "Posts," and the fact that most of the members of the Tulsa Post were ex-soldiers, returned from the war to "make the world safe for democracy."

I would say that the Brotherhood was more of a regional than a truly national organization since, with the exception of one small Post in San Francisco, we made no inroads on the West Coast. That is, west of the Rockies, I should have said. It must be borne in mind that there was little Negro concentration west of the Rockies in those days. On the other hand, the Garvey movement did succeed in organizing several branches in that territory. And the magazine had quite a few readers in California and other states west of the Rockies, while the news service served most of the Negro papers in those states. But then Garvey had the advantage of being able to put a number of paid organizers in the field and of making attractive financial offers to leading elements in Negro communities. Not to mention its highly emotional and

dramatic appeal, compounded of feudal titles and pageantry, building Negro business (a theme dear to the hearts of the Negro bourgeoisie), and a triumphant return to Africa to create a mighty black empire, to mention just a few of its components. I would say, too, that Garvey successfully capitalized on the seeds of militancy sown by the New Negro Movement, including our agitation for African freedom.

The Brotherhood, as later the Crusader News Service, was organized with the objectives of combatting several aspects of the Garvey movement and in particular its “Back to Africa” philosophy; promoting a militant fighting unity among the Negro people; emphasizing the identity of interests between the Negro and colonial peoples; and enlisting support for the anti-imperialist struggles of the latter; combatting the illusion so assiduously and successfully spread by the Negro bourgeoisie in that period — with the aid of the anti-Negro policies and practices of the trade unions — that the “best white people” were our friends, the white working man our enemies; promoting unity of Negro and white workers and agitating for abolition of Jim Crow practices in the unions. We were also in sharp disagreement with NAACP reformist policies, and Booker Washington survivals. What we were seeking, in effect, was a fundamental change in the Negro’s pattern of thinking.

If organizing the Brotherhood was not inspired by any particular event or development, the creation of the Crusader News Service was inspired by our fight against certain policies and tactics of Garvey and his lieutenants. We wished to set the widest possible audience for our polemics against those tactics and policies and accordingly organized the news service, sending it to some 200 Negro papers throughout the country, and in the West Indies and Africa. Since we made no charge for the service, it found immediate acceptance, particularly among the smaller Negro papers. Factually, it was a weekly service, not semi-weekly.

The CNS, or CNA as it was later called to avoid confusion with the new Capital News Service sent out from Washington, was the first Negro national news service to be organized in this country. It preceded by several months the Associate Negro Press (ANP); probably inspired organization of the latter.

* * *

I am unable to state the exact date that organization of the Brotherhood was begun. I am positive, however, that it was a few months after the publication of the first issue of *The Crusader* magazine. Thus in early 1919, if, as I believe, the first issue of the magazine appeared in November 1918.

You are quite correct in assuming that the Communist Party had no part in initiating the organization of the Brotherhood. Nor did the Brotherhood owe its inspiration to the Communist movement. It was certainly already in existence when I had my first contact with the Communists, through the visits of Rose and Bob to my office at 2299 Seventh Avenue [New York City]. Nor did the Communists inspire the ABB program you have seen.

After I, Dick Moore, and some other members of the Supreme Council joined the CP, we sought to and succeeded in establishing a close relationship between the two organizations. This was successful, however, only in northern industrial centers. Few of our Southern members joined the CP or followed us into the American Negro Labor Congress when we decided to liquidate the Brotherhood and turn our efforts to building the Congress. The West Virginia organization continued to function independently for some time, according to information I received from Mr. White. On the other hand, most of the Chicago Post joined both the Congress and the CP.

[Joe] Zack [Kornfeder], of whom you make mention, worked with me personally as CP liaison. He was never, however, invited to any meetings of the council. We accepted some of his pro-

posals, rejected others. We considered ourselves far more familiar than Zack with the Negro Question and its many ramifications. Or, for that matter, the CP in that period.

When I joined the party, there were only two other Negroes in it, [Otto] Huiswoud and Hendricks. Hendricks, whose first name I don't recall, dropped out of the party — and the ABB — during an organizing tour for the Brotherhood. This was, I think, before the tour of Huiswoud reported in *The Worker* of August 11, 1923. Both Huiswoud and Hendricks joined the Brotherhood after I had entered the party — presumably on assignment by the party. Huiswoud would later become a member of the Council.

* * *

Huiswoud, [Harry] Haywood [Hall], and [Lovett] Fort-Whiteman were not among the founders of the Brotherhood. All three came in later. The last two were recruited into the party from the Brotherhood. The Supreme Council approved and aided such recruitment — the majority, that is.

It would seem from available evidence that few Negro members of the SP followed the Left in the split of that party. I strongly doubt that there were many in the first place.

The Brotherhood, by the way, played a leading role in a movement initiated by the late William Monroe Trotter, head of the National Equal Rights League and editor of the *Boston Guardian*, to effect some measure of liaison and unity among the various groups, a sort of leadership council. Trotter enlisted the support of the Brotherhood in the first place, making a special trip to New York for the purpose. He was accompanied by a

Rev. Shaw, a Boston minister and a leader in the Equal Rights League. The Brotherhood promptly endorsed Trotter's proposal. *The Guardian*, *Cru-sader*, and CNS then projected it with a mighty fanfare, and with such vigor and insistence that even the NAACP, then as now top dog in the civil rights field, was forced, albeit reluctantly, to participate in a conference of leaders of the various organizations.

The conference set up a sort of leadership council known as the Sanhedrin — in the tradition of the highest ecclesiastical and judicial body of the ancient Jewish nation. That name was suggested by the late Kelly Miller who, despite the opposition of the two sponsoring groups (the League and the Brotherhood), was elected its chairman. Miller promptly proceeded to isolate the militants, and the Sanhedrin suffered an early demise.

Trotter's role in that period has been greatly neglected, too. He was the Stormy Petrel of the times, one of the most militant, dynamic, and popular (with the man in the street) leaders of his day. He was utterly selfless in his dedication to the fight for Negro freedom. Nor was he afraid of associating with "Reds." He and Dr. DuBois were the leading spirits in the initiation of the Niagara Movement, and in opposing the servile philosophy of Booker T. Washington as expressed in his infamous Atlanta Compromise Address...

Yours very truly,

Cyril Briggs.

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Edited by Tim Davenport.

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