

Black World

Review Essay

Garvey
Papers,
Vol. III



by Lou Turner

Different ages in the history of mankind have been labeled with a peculiar brand...The age in which we are living is also acquiring an individuality of its own. It is the age of unrest, the age of dissatisfaction. Never before in the history of the world has the spirit of unrest swept over as it has during the past two years.

—Marcus Garvey, 1920

"...the self-certainty which the subject (here suddenly instead of 'Notion') has in its being in and for itself, as a determinate subject, is a certainty of its own actuality and of the non-actuality of the world." (i.e., that the world does not satisfy man and man decides to change it by his activity.)

—Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks, 1914

The eagerly awaited publication of volume III of the Marcus Garvey Papers,* under the editorship of Prof. Robert Hill, nevertheless carries some disappointments. While it does, as a whole, attempt to have Garvey speak for himself, we actually do not get to hear how the philosophy of Garveyism developed since a great part of the documents are government attacks portraying Garvey and the movement.

The events of the pivotal year covered by the more than 800 pages of volume III, Sept. 1920 to Aug. 1921, extend from Garvey's continuing relationship to the Irish national struggle to the Tulsa, Oklahoma race riot,

(continued on page 4)

*The Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Volume III, edited by Robert Hill, U. of California Press, 1984.

and from the vicissitudes of the Black Star Line and Liberian Liberty Loan to Garvey's Caribbean tour.

Finally, the event which climaxes the volume, the 1921 UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) Convention, marks the pinnacle of Garvey's development, one disclosing new contradictions in the movement. It is here that we see the many conflicts within the UNIA finally give way to Garvey's most outspoken challenge from the Harlem radicals and Communists associated with the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB).

Though I was looking forward to the publication of volume III—and the project remains a momentous work—the critique I began when reviewing volumes I and II now needs to be sharpened. Take Prof. Hill's "General Introduction" in the first volume—and presumably there will be none besides this—I definitely thought the editor was looking at the objective situation as a totality and had therefore called attention to the study's "historical setting." That included the period of the race riots of 1919 and the infamous Palmer Raids spearheaded by J. Edgar Hoover, Attorney General Palmer's lieutenant (whom our age knows much better) against both Blacks and the radical movement.

Because I had taken for granted that such key developments would be taken up and analyzed, I had concluded in my review of the first two volumes that "Prof. Hill didn't fully bring in the impact of the Russian Revolution upon Garvey which the documents themselves point to," and that "anyone seriously looking for the key to Garveyism's emergence out of the triangular movement of Black thought and revolution between the U.S., the Caribbean and Africa cannot ignore the actual writings of Garvey's Negro World..." That was not only in relationship to the Russian Revolution, but had long before developed in relation to Marx's view of the West Indies. Thus I had called attention to the affinity between Marx's and Garvey's views of the Jamaican peasantry and West Indian revolt. (See N&L, Jan.-Feb. and March, 1984 issues.)

However, left unexplained, Garvey's praise of the Russian Revolution and his statements on Lenin and Trotsky give the impression that they did not flow from his view of changing the world or were, as Prof. Hill concluded, some sort of "paradox" or "irony." Far from this being an irony, the truth is that Prof. Hill intended no such connection.

Irish Question, and Russian Revolution

The same attitude toward presenting what is crucial to Garvey's development holds for his relationship to the Irish Revolution, which is Prof. Hill's most original category. Though it is the conclusion of volume II which refers to the telegram Garvey wired to Eamon de Valera, President of the Provisional Government of Ireland, at the opening of the 1920 UNIA Convention, it is necessary to look at it as Garvey expressed it because it is precisely the year, 1920-21, which is the focus of the

new volume. It reads: "25,000 Negro delegates assembled in Madison Square Garden in mass convention, representing 400,000,000 Negroes of the world, send you greetings as President of the Irish Republic. Please accept sympathy of Negroes of the world for your cause. We believe Ireland should be free even as Africa shall be free for the Negroes of the world. Keep up the fight for a free Ireland. Marcus Garvey, President-General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association."

This gives a view of both the sweep of world events in Garvey's thought and the confidence and vision of what he represented of the Black world. Nevertheless, Prof. Hill's conclusion that "the Irish cause provided the major ideological mainspring for Garvey's radical political transformation" stops short of the full dialectic of revolution that inspired Garvey's vision. It was not only Ireland but the Russian Revolution that inspired Garvey's nationalism.

This was obvious to everyone from Garvey's ideological enemy, W.E.B. Du Bois, who believed that Garvey was "allied with the Bolsheviks and the Sinn Feiners in their world revolution," to an interviewer who stated that Garvey assigned the following significance to the UNIA's tricolor: "The Red showed their sympathy with the 'Reds' of the world, and the Green their sympathy for the Irish in their fight for freedom, and the Black—The Negro." (Vol. I, p. lxxv)

In order to see the methodological problems inherent in Prof. Hill's editing of the mass of Garvey/UNIA documents, let us follow the two events which predominate in volume III: Garvey's Caribbean tour, with Hoover's attempt to bar him from the U.S., and the second UNIA Convention, in August, 1921.

The Caribbean and J. Edgar Hoover

A decade after he left, Marcus Garvey had gone back—not to Africa—but to his native Caribbean where it is neither the visionary "back to Africa" nor the dubious Black Star Line that he confronts as the most objective moment of the Black mass movement, but rather

er the power of negativity, the dialectic negativity of masses in motion. It is that which permeates Garvey's speeches to agricultural laborers and dockworkers in Colon, in talks with cane cutters on sugar estates in Cuba, at mass meetings in union halls and in speeches to sprawling rallies of canal workers and their families in open fields in Panama. Here, the organizational capacity and international expanse of Garveyism gain a

rich concreteness, one in which the innermost certainty that Black consciousness has of itself as an historic subject determined to be free becomes actual.

In an interview, on his arrival in Jamaica, Garvey reported that during his stay in Cuba he had traveled to the interior "where there were thousands of Jamaican laborers on the cane farms," and spent ten days there speaking with them. Furthermore, U.S. State Department reports acknowledged that "Garvey's activities here (in Jamaica) indicate that he would arouse considerable racial antagonism among the Negroes at the Canal Zone and in the Republic of Panama." (Vol. III, p. 356)

While in Costa Rica, Garvey spoke to agricultural and dock workers at the Labor Union Hall in Colon on April 27, 1921, and "several times addressed the many negro laborers of the United Fruit Company," according to a government report of May 2, 1921. In one of his speeches to workers in Cuba which both appeared in the *Negro World* (March 21, 1921) and was contained in the summary report on Garvey's activities as part of Hoover's summary case for excluding him from the U.S., Garvey spoke on the question of force in historical developments. It was a view born of a profound grasp of the objective situation, as a totality, following World War I and the Russian Revolution.

Garvey's planned five-week Caribbean tour was lengthened to four months due to the machinations of American consular officials to deny him a visa to re-enter the U.S.

Contradictions at 1921 Convention

However, the significance of the Caribbean tour drew a sharp line between the Caribbean masses and the government intrigues. And though the hostility of the powers-that-be is rightly stressed by Prof. Hill, we hardly hear the masses speak for themselves. Outside of Garvey's editorials and speeches there is so little from the *Negro World*, the most popular Black newspaper of the period, that we never see how the movement itself viewed the objective situation.

The editing of the Papers gives such an "internal" stamp to the movement that objective reality barely enters as a footnote. Garvey, instead, appears through the documentation as an existential figure divorced from the objective forces which gave birth to Garveyism. Clearly, the government machinations were not phantasms of Garvey's imagination, as he noted innumerable times. Why then does the overwhelming majority of the documents consist of government investigative reports attacking Garvey, while there are only a bare few taken from the journalism of the *Negro World*? In allowing the personality of Garvey to overshadow the objective reality and historic movement, Prof. Hill fails to show the full stature of Marcus Garvey.

The truth is that the crisis in the objective situation had not only intensified, but had manifested a "new radicalism" in the Garvey movement as it moved to its climactic Second UNIA Convention in 1921. That new objective situation also disclosed a shift in global politics ushering in a period of reaction in which all movements came under the whip of counterrevolution during the turbulent 1920s.

That this remained background to the 1921 Convention cannot be attributed simply to the "visionary" program of Garvey, nor even to the ideological struggles which surfaced in the movement in the year leading up to the Convention. Something more was involved.

The climax of volume III is the 1921 UNIA Convention. It is there that Garvey had invited a white American woman Communist, Rose Pastor Stokes, to make

an address on Aug. 19, 1921, at the same time he was to expel the Harlem radicals belonging to the ABB. Having listened to Stokes' remarks, which definitely called for unity between white and Black, and leaving no doubt that she meant Communism, Garvey then quite shrewdly reserved for himself the right to answer her by telling the enthusiastic Convention that had received her: "Liberty Hall being a great university...tonight we

have had a Soviet professor. Some few nights ago we had an Irish professor. Later on we will have a Republican professor, a Democratic professor...and then we will decide, later on what we will do..."

Then turning to Rose Pastor Stokes, he concluded:

"We give to you, Mrs. Stokes, the best wishes of the representatives of the Negro peoples of the world to the struggling workers in Russia and elsewhere. They are seeking, I understand from you, freedom from their capitalistic oppressors. We are seeking freedom in Africa. Later on, if the Soviets can help us to free Africa, we will do all we can to help free them." Because it is not made clear what actually was involved in Garvey's assigning Stokes to Russia and reserving for himself the Black world, it would have been helpful not to limit the theoretical-historical framework of the Marcus Garvey Papers to Prof. Hill's "General Introduction."

The point is that the mere presenting of the empirical data, the overwhelming proportion of which are government surveillance reports, documenting the vicissitudes of a single subject—Garvey—rather than enhancing his stature actually diminishes it.

We would have a far deeper appreciation of Garvey if the first three volumes had a dialectical framework, that is, if the concrete material had been grasped in its universal significance. Then, the breakup of the revolutionary movement under the whip of counterrevolution, from the Palmer Raids to Churchill's intrigues against the Russian Revolution, would not end up by having Garvey

reduced to being only Jamaican, or even only Black, but Garvey and Garveyism would gain a world-historic significance.

In his wanting to limit Marxism to Russia, while making the Black world, especially in the U.S., his domain, Garvey's attitude anticipated the critique of American Communists that Black radicals such as Claude McKay made later when he considered himself a Communist. Garvey never wavered from his enthusiastic support of the Russian Revolution, though the 1921 UNIA Convention marked the beginning of his conflict with American Communists, Black and white, because of their attempt to undermine his leadership.

The whole question of the relationship of leadership to masses, however, is nowhere taken up by Prof. Hill, though it is central to this critical period in the UNIA. Thus, the "new radicalism" that Garvey wrote of in a letter to William Ferris, the editor of the *Negro World*, referred not only to the Nationalist/Marxist relationship within the Garvey movement, which first made its open appearance at the 1921 Convention, but was derived from his encounter with the revolutionary masses of the Caribbean.

It was, therefore, the totality of both the objective reality and the movement of subjective forces, as Reason, which had set the stage for Garvey's August 14, 1921 speech before the UNIA convention when he declared of the Russian Revolution that, "Lenin and Trotsky were able to turn down the Czar; they were able to turn down the despotism of Russia, and today they have given to the world a social republic, the first of its kind. If Lenin and Trotsky were able to do that for Russia you and I can do that for Africa."

The ambivalence in Marcus Garvey, not as "irony" or "paradox," is one which is inherent in a movement or a leadership when it has not worked out, in relationship to theory and practice, the dialectics of revolution which would make the future more than just a vision.

Though it is my hope that some of the questions raised will be dealt with by Prof. Hill, since there are three more volumes to come on Garveyism in the U.S., two on the Caribbean, and two on Africa, we will have to reserve judgement until that is done.