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The Evolution of Nationalist Consciousness in Trinidad, in an Age of Global Conflict
(1937-1950)

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Abstract

The study is based on nationalistic activism in Trinidad and Tobago during the first half of the 20th century. It looks at external global events like the Russian working class revolution and Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanist movement and how these external factors affected the nationalist culture. The study also looks at the internal factors of racism, generational poverty and lack of working class political representation for black and coloured people. This study analyses how all these factors influenced the labour movement in its pursuit of political self-governance for Trinidad and Tobago.

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Introduction

Rationale

Trinidad and Tobago like so many of the other English speaking West Indian islands, were former colonial possessions of the United Kingdom. With a history of racial exploitation, oppression of freedoms and disproportionate political representation a struggle ensued for national identity. The main stream historical literature neglect to mention the radical events and conflicts like the Russian Working Class Revolution, Garveyism, and ideologies like Marxism and Pan-Africanism that shaped Trinidad and Tobago's trade union culture. These ideologies shaped the working class response to deprivation and lack of political opportunity due to the oppression of colonialism, the influence of neo-colonialism and capitalist exploitation of the natural resources of Trinidad and Tobago. The events and protagonists prior to the 1950s warrant more attention as a way of getting insight into our struggle for identity prior to independence in 1962. The focus is on the struggles of the working class, national activists and their radical ideologies, which induced a great evolution in nationalistic consciousness and identity formation for the working class population that would lay the foundation for independence in Trinidad and Tobago. This thesis uses the relationship between identity, nationalism and mobilization as a framework to better understand how events in this period contributed to Trinidad and Tobago's identity.

Thesis Statement

In the first half of the 20th century Trinidad and Tobago witnessed nationalistic activism that drove decolonisation but neo-imperialist influences threatened these decolonisation efforts.

Parameters of the Study

The parameters of this study observes the British colonial possession of Trinidad and Tobago from 1937 to 1950. The study will focus on the radical political ideologies and the nationalist figures that used them during the struggle for better political representation in Trinidad and Tobago.

Objectives

The first objective of this study is to identify and assess the political landscape of the colonial possession of Trinidad and Tobago during the decades prior to the 1937-1950 focus of the study. The second objective is assessing how radical political ideologies affected the rhetoric and actions of nationalist figures and their organizations that were struggling for political representation. The last objective is to investigate the impact of nationalist figures besides Eric Williams and how they changed the political landscape before the emergence of the People's National Movement party that led the country towards independence.

Methodology

This study makes use of secondary sources like: appropriate history books, websites, and journal articles.

Chapter Outline

This research paper has three chapters. The first chapter is called *Nationalism, Nationalistic Consciousness and Identity* that talks about nationalism and its development. The Second chapter is called *Race Identity and Class Consciousness in Working Class Mobilization*, its discussion is

about the importance of race and its limitations in a heterogeneous society. The chapter also discusses the unifying ability of class consciousness. The Third chapter is called *The Neo-Imperialists and the Illusion of Democracy* that analyses how neo-imperialist power disrupted the efforts of the working class labour movement.

Limitations

This research paper will be limited to the specific time period from 1937 to 1950 in Trinidad and will not involve Tobago. The general research required for this study will be heavily affected by Covid-19 health and safety protocols that will hinder freedom of movement to the university's library. Another major hindrance was time spent on other university courses necessary for completion of the degree.

Literature Review

The literature review will examine the main sources that will be utilized when discussing the evolution of nationalist consciousness in Trinidad and Tobago from 1937 to 1950 during an age of global conflict.

Nyahuma M. Obika's book, *The Social and Economic Effects of The American Occupation in Trinidad During the 2nd World War 1939-1945* has an extremely thought provoking title. The author is suggesting that even though Trinidad was a colonial possession of the United Kingdom at the time, the American presence during World War two had such an influence on the colony that their presence could be considered an occupation. The book focuses on the United States' imperial power and influence over the colony's natural resources and analyses how the American presence on the colony caused the people to react to a new and powerful imperial power that was practically ruling over them, as if they were the new colonial power.

Richard M. Escalante's book, *Flying on Trinidad Oil: How a British Colony Became a key Producer of Aviation Fuel, 1933-41* analyses how the colony of Trinidad became tremendously valuable for its massive fossil fuel reserves. The book explains, the colony of Trinidad and Tobago became so important during World War Two that the United States' presence in Trinidad and Tobago was largely due to them protecting this valuable war resource. The author explains that the people of Trinidad and Tobago came to realise how valuable oil had become, and this led to unrest as the historically regular act of extracting the territory's natural resources was continuing, with the majority of funds from imperial capitalist activities not being used to develop the society.

CHAPTER 1: Nationalism, Nationalistic Consciousness and Identity

Nationalism was a powerful influence on world politics in the twentieth century. It helped shape Europe and contributed to events that led to World War II. It has been blamed for much global conflict. According to Barrington, “Scholars have linked nationalism to everything from the French and American revolutions to the worst atrocities committed against ethnic minorities.”¹ However, Barrington also credits nationalism for driving decolonization and being a vehicle for mobilization in countries with a quest for independence. Barrington defines nationalism as, “the pursuit-through argument or other activity- of a set of rights and privileges for the self-defined members of the nation, including, at a minimum, territorial autonomy or independence.”²

Nationalistic Activities

A search through the literature and websites to identify activities that demonstrate nationalism, produces the following list:

- Establishment of political parties
- Generation of a national newspaper
- Contribution to constitutional development
- Advocacy
- Unification: Inclusion of minority or marginalized groups
- Establishment of key roles in Trade Union

¹ Lowell W. Barrington, *After Independence: Making and Protecting the Nation in Postcolonial and Postcommunist States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 3.

² Barrington, *After Independence: Making and Protecting the Nation in Postcolonial and Postcommunist States*, 10.

In a situation where there is domination by a group, Marx suggests that the outcome is, “two-edged; exclusion of officially specified groups has the unintended consequence of defining, legitimating and provoking group identity and mobilization, forging struggles for inclusion between state agents and emerging political actors.”³ Marx highlights the dynamics between access to rights and privileges as citizens, racial identity-formation and social movements as a response to relative deprivation, resource mobilization and the lack of political opportunities.

The Social and Political Climate in Trinidad

Deprivation

The wealth distribution was massively disproportionate, with most people in the colony existing in generational poverty, and the wealth was held by the minority planter-merchant class that sat as Unofficials on the law creating Legislative Council. The deplorable working conditions in the urban and rural regions of the colony, and the inflated cost of living, worsened with the outbreak of World War I (1914-1918).

According to the Roaring Lion, “The “Great Depression” of the 1930’s brought adverse times to Trinidad and Tobago. Phenomenally high levels of unemployment, poverty, anti-colonial sentiment, civil and labour unrest, and the overhanging threat of war.”⁴

³ Anthony W. Marx, “Contested Citizenship: The Dynamics of Racial Identity and Social Movements,” *International Review of Social History* 40 (1995), (April 2021): 159.

⁴ Roaring Lion Foundation, “Trinidad Society In The 1930's and 1940's,” The Roaring Lion, WordPress.com, March 15, 2015, <https://roaringlioncalypso.wordpress.com/golden-age-history/>.

The racist pigmentocracy was in use, as pigment was a qualifying factor that determined the wages and treatment of those employed with the oil companies, Teelucksingh explains that, “most of the oil and sugar workers lived in shabby huts or dilapidated barracks on the companies’ lands, whilst the white employers, overseers, and managers resided in large bungalows.”⁵

Resource Mobilization

Trinidad and Tobago developed both a successful agrarian and later, oil sectors. It was apparent though from the impoverished state of the East Indian sugar workers and the African Oil workers, that the economic wealth was not being mobilized fairly. This culminated to the 1937 Riots, there was widespread labour unrest. The oil industry in Trinidad had made the colony one of the most valuable in the world. Trinidad became valuable because one of the reforms of the, “First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, included conversion of the British fleet from coal power to oil.”⁶ Similar to what was happening with the sugar industry, the massive profits of the mostly foreign-controlled oil industry in Trinidad was being exported to white capitalists that resided abroad. This led to protests and hunger marches by sugar workers and the oilfield workers.

Political Opportunity

The working class had no political opportunity. The British colonial government of Trinidad was extremely authoritarian, Brereton explains that, “The legislative council was authorized to enact Ordinances, to which both the governor and the Colonial Office in London had to assent, and after

⁵ Teelucksingh, *Ideology, Politics, and Radicalism of the Afro-Caribbean*, 98.

⁶ Richard M. Escalante, *Flying on Trinidad Oil: How a British Colony Became a Key Producer of Aviation Fuel, 1933-41* (Arouca, T&T: Kairi Publishing House, 2019), 6.

1831 this became the usual method of making laws in Trinidad, although the British government kept its right to legislate directly by Order of Council.”⁷ Brereton explains that the governing Legislative Council included Officials with strong loyalty to the British Crown, the wealthy and were land owners. The Unofficials who were private citizens that the Governor nominated. This ensured that the Governor would be supported and not be opposed. The governor nominated primarily from the elite plantocracy who he thought were appropriate members of colonial society to serve on the prestigious Legislative Council. The colonial logic was that political power belonged to the influential wealthy white minority that had the greatest economic stake in the colony.

⁷ Bridget Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962* (New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books Inc, 1989), 136.

CHAPTER 2. Race Identity and Class Consciousness in Working Class Mobilization

PART 1: Race Awakening, Identity Formation and Consolidation

A critical influence on the development of nationalist consciousness in Trinidad and Tobago was the rise of Pan Africanism. The Pan-African movement in the British West Indies was led by the Jamaican born Pan-Africanist, Marcus Garvey (1887-1940). In 1914, at the start of WWI, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL, or UNIA for short) in the U.S. state of New York. The *Negro World*, the voice of Garvey and his editors, was used to spread the doctrines of Garveyism throughout the world. Additionally, Kuryla states, “after World War I (1914-1918), Garvey championed the cause of African independence, emphasizing the positive attributes of Black people’s collective past.”⁸ In a few short years Garvey’s influence diffused to the British West Indies, and more importantly, for the present discussion, to Trinidad. Garvey’s contribution to nationalism is summed up by West Indian historian, Teelucksingh, “The publication of the *Negro World* during the period 1918–1933 served as a powerful medium for the promotion of African race consciousness, and the mobilization of the African communities in the Americas.”⁹ The ideology of Garveyism awakened race consciousness among the Africans in Trinidad and Tobago. It became a significant influence on the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association (TWA) as the organisation developed, Teelucksingh draws attention to how close the TWA was to Garveyism, “the dual role of Howard-Bishop who was President of the main UNIA branch in Port-of-Spain and also editor of the *Labour Leader* and

⁸ Peter Kuryla, “Pan-Africanism,” Encyclopædia Britannica, last modified October 1, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Africanism>.

⁹ Jerome Teelucksingh, *Ideology, Politics, and Radicalism of the Afro-Caribbean* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 8.

General Secretary of the TWA. Additionally, Howard-Bishop's articles in the *Labour Leader* were occasionally reprinted in Garvey's *Negro World*.¹⁰ His operation at these levels reflected the combined African membership of the UNIA branches and the TWA. Both of these organisations inspired the mobilisation of African labour. Racial identity was a unifying factor and served as a catalyst for protestation against the oppression of their people and lobbying for greater political representation in the colony. The shared ethnic ideology between the UNIA and the TWA was of concern to the colonial government. The *Labour Leader*, the newspaper of the TWA, uttered African rhetoric similar to the UNIA that signalled a developing unification of working class Africans in the colony. This alarmed the ruling white minority of Trinidad and Tobago, especially in a climate of growing hostilities within the colonies that eventually gave rise to the 1930's labour riots.

The journalist, Michel duCille indicates that Garvey asked questions that was empowering to blacks, "Where is the black man's government? Where is his king and kingdom? Where is his president, his country and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs?"¹¹ This allowed for the successful introduction of Garvey's influential rhetoric on racial consciousness. Garvey drew attention to the many disparities between opportunities for white and black people, since whites ruled the world. Garveyism's main goal was to uplift the African people through education, and most importantly to establish black owned industries to create opportunities for other members of the African Diaspora.

¹⁰ Teelucksingh, *Ideology, Politics, and Radicalism of the Afro-Caribbean*, 12.

¹¹ Michel duCille, 'BLACK MOSES, RED SCARE', *Washington Post*, 12 February 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/1997/02/12/black-moses-red-scare/8a6aff0a-6f38-4b50-8c45-77ba7eb5d714/>.

The first two to three decades of the 20th century witnessed a period of progressive labour protests that eroded the power of the colonial institution. Cost of living had increased when imports to the colony were disrupted by the outbreak of World War I (1914-1918), Singh reported that, “the rapid war-time rise in the price of basic consumer items served only to exacerbate this situation. By 1919 the general rise in prices above the pre-war level was: Port-of-Spain 126%, San Fernando 167%, the country districts 140%, and Tobago 171%.”¹² Deprivation in working conditions on the colony further fuelled the Pan African Movement and racial consciousness. The 1917 to 1920 period were turbulent years and represented an opportunity for the TWA to prove itself a force to be reckoned with. The TWA decided that it would represent the black and coloured working-class protesters who demanded an increase in their wages. The first major win that made them famous in the colony for labour negotiations was their representation of the workings at the Trinidad Lake Asphalt Company, Teelucksingh wrote that, “The Company met with the Association and in May 1919 workers were given a 33.3% wage increase.” This victory boosted the status of the TWA among the working class and attracted additional members. The colonial administration and capitalist interests viewed this as a premium on enduring peace. However, this was not to be. The TWA and the labour force it represented were the only winners, and organized labour came to realise its strength in working together.

The spreading of enlightened African-centric educational ideas played a significant role in inspiring black labourers to unite against the colonial government is undeniable, and is linked primarily to Garveyism and other Pan-Africanists efforts during this time in the colony of Trinidad

¹² Kelvin Singh, *Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State: Trinidad 1917-1945* (Kingston, Jamaica: Press-University of the West Indies, 1994), 15.

and Tobago. While this was beneficial to African people, it also posed a serious problem when it came to race relations with other ethnic working class groups in the population. Teelucksingh observes that, “the leadership of the WMA contended that imported Indian labour kept wages depressed and thus affected free labour in the colony. This attitude soon translated into hostility to the Indian presence in Trinidad, and inevitably deterred free Indians from joining the Association.”¹³ The alienation was so harsh towards the Indians that they also went through an ethnic awakening, Brereton reports that, “In 1897 this sense of group identity was crystallized by a formal Indian organization, the East Indian National Association (EINA).”¹⁴ The divided labour force on the colony was an advantage to the white minority, as it meant that if labour was ethnically divided, then the masses would not be able to move as a united front against the colonial establishment. If the population remained divided by race, then they were not likely to develop a sense of a united national consciousness, as neither of these ethnicities would be able to govern peacefully without the other. There would only exist resentment for each other, and this would lead to a weak and divided governing body in Trinidad and Tobago.

¹³ Teelucksingh, *Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago*, 14.

¹⁴ Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962*, 109.

PART 2. Class Consciousness

The Racial identity-formation within the heterogeneous society of Trinidad and Tobago reinforced the racial conflict between Indians and Africans that had existed decades prior and had increased with the introduction of Garveyism and Pan-Africanism. Racial conflicts divided the labour movement, this disunity was favourable to the white colonial authority retaining control. This would come to change as the radically conscious working class supported the Russian Revolution (1917). Revolutionary outcomes of working class empowerment would diffuse a class conscious culture that would unite the labour movement of Trinidad and Tobago against the colonial institution.

The Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution (1917) resulted in the collapse of the Russian monarchy in 1917, and the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR: 1922-1991) after the Russian Civil War (1917-1923). This sent political and cultural shock waves throughout the world. The USSR was modelled from *The Communist Manifesto*, the intellectual work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, published in 1848, that condemned capitalism for its exploitation of the proletariat, Cole explains that, “the modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.”¹⁵ Marx and Engels stated that even if monarchy was abolished, the working class would continue to be exploited because the means of production would fall under the control of the bourgeois minority. This is why the

¹⁵ Nicki Lisa Cole, “The Main Points of ‘The Communist Manifesto’,” ThoughtCo, Dotdash, November 18, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/communist-manifesto-4038797>.

Russian Revolution and Civil War were so bloody. It was not just about removing the monarchy but ensuring that it was not replaced by a bourgeois class group of people that would continue to abuse the Russian proletariat.

The US Response to the Russian Revolution

The United States was totally against the existence of the USSR. The US stood for democracy, and free market capitalist economy, where the, “means of production are privately owned and production is guided and income distributed largely through the operation of markets.”¹⁶ The U.S. associated the U.S.S.R. with totalitarianism because of how bloody Vladimir Lenin’s rise to power was. It was the political, economic, and social clash in ideology between the two countries that resulted in the US government taking security measures to ensure socialist dissidence did not infiltrate and infect American society and politics. It came to be known as the “Red Scare” The American government considered Pan-Africanism and the call for civil rights by the African Diaspora as “bringing down the American way of life”. The Red Scare acted as a mask for racism in white dominated America. The United States Attorney General Alexander Mitchell Palmer produced a report in 1919 that cited the danger in Marcus Garvey’s *Negro World* newspaper, duCille articulates that:

One article that he quoted seemed to advocate violence: “Negroes should prepare. Black men all over the world should prepare to protect themselves. Negroes should match fire with hell fire....The

¹⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica Editors, ‘Capitalism’, Encyclopedia Britannica, 23 September 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/capitalism>.

Negro must now organize all over the world, 400,000,000 strong, to administer our oppressors' Waterloo.¹⁷

In 1922, Marcus Garvey was arrested in the United States for mail fraud. The time spent in prison had damaged his reputation and in Trinidad and Tobago Garveyism had started its decline, duCille reports that, “President Calvin Coolidge commuted his sentence on Nov. 18, 1927. He was released and deported to Jamaica. Despite major efforts to revive the UNIA in his homeland, Garvey's movement never regained its former momentum.”¹⁸ The U.S and the U.K acted to protect their capitalist systems. They felt uneasy that the sphere of influence that had been created from Russia's successful working class revolution would spread to their societies in the form of Garveyism and Pan-Africanism. They stamped down on this form of socialist dissidence. These events led to the development of a unified working class labour movement in Trinidad and Tobago.

Unification of the Working Class in Trinidad

The next phase of evolution for nationalist consciousness was the development of a class conscious labour movement that officially started when the TWA's 1923 election results made Captain Arthur Andrew Cipriani (1875-1945) President. The entrance of the French creole into the Africanized TWA marked a change in attitude of the association when it came to race. The immediate goal of Cipriani was ensuring that the TWA's labour movement included the Indians that were now completely free of the grip of the Indentureship system since its abolishment in 1920. The association under the command of Cipriani would fight for the rights of labourers

¹⁷ duCille, “BLACK MOSES, RED SCARE,” The Washington Post, WP Company, February 12, 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/1997/02/12/black-moses-red-scare/8a6aff0a-6f38-4b50-8c45-77ba7eb5d714/>.

¹⁸ duCille, “BLACK MOSES, RED SCARE.”

regardless of their racial orientation, Teelucksingh states, “the TWA was receptive to Fabianism which preferred social change through peaceful democratic means, through trade union activity and the education of the masses.”¹⁹ The Fabian method was that working class socialism could be achieved without the death and destruction of revolutionary Marxism used by the Bolsheviks to seize control of Russia. Captain Cipriani lived up to his world of Indian inclusion with the 1925 opening of the San Fernando branch of the TWA, Teelucksingh observes that, “for the first time since the formation of the TWA in Trinidad, Indians occupied major Executive positions in a branch of the Association.”²⁰ This was proof that efforts were being made to bring these two ethnicities together to produce the united front needed to challenge the absolute power of the colonial authority.

The TWA’s representative performance of the working class during the 1917-1920 labour protests received international recognition from the British Labour Party (BLP) as the official representing organisation for the labour struggle in Trinidad and Tobago. This meant that when the TWA called for constitutional reform of the Legislative Council, the Labour MPs became their voice in the House of Commons. This ultimately resulted in a Royal Commission of 1921-1922 led by Major E.F.L. Wood which investigated the British West Indian appeal for more political representation, Teelucksingh states, “Major Wood’s recommendations for the introduction of the elective principle was accepted by the Secretary of State and formed the basis of Trinidad and Tobago’s new constitution which came into effect on 21 August 1924.”²¹ The reform took effect

¹⁹ Teelucksingh, *Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago*, 47.

²⁰ Teelucksingh, *Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago*, 41.

²¹ Teelucksingh, *Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago*, 59.

in 1925 with the addition of seven new elective positions being added to the Legislative Council. The problem were the restrictions that prevented an adequate exercise of the labour movement's franchise, Teelucksingh reports:

In Trinidad, property, income and literacy in English determined the names on the electoral list. These requirements placed electoral participation beyond the reach of the masses, several of whom were labourers earning less than \$1 per day when employed... The effect of electoral restrictions was obvious. Out of a total population of 364,828, only 21,797 or 6% were qualified as voters, and on polling day 6,822 cast their ballots.²²

The many restrictions for both who could get elected and who could vote was purposely done to restrict “radicalism” coming from working class. The colonial government wanted to reassure foreign capitalists that that the exploitation of Trinidad and Tobago's oil and agrarian sectors were safe to continue, while the workers received a wage that made existence in the colonial society a perpetual struggle.

The constitutional reform of 1925 did not satisfy the demands of the labour movement which were further exacerbated by the effects of the Great Depression (1929-1939) that furthered the deterioration of labour conditions. Richard H. Pells reports that, “although it originated in the United States, the Great Depression caused drastic declines in output, severe unemployment, and acute deflation in almost every country of the world.”²³ In a bid to appease the labour movement, the colonial government made a concession, and just like the constitutional reform of

²² Teelucksingh, *Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago*, 60.

²³ Richard H. Pells, “Great Depression,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified September 10, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Depression>.

1925 there were restrictions in place to ensure that the colonial authorities maintained authority over the activities of the labour movement, Teelucksingh states:

After persistent and relentless appeals for the introduction of trade union laws in the colony, the long-awaited Trade Union Ordinance was laid in the Legislative Council on 27 May 1932... The provisions of the Ordinance were designed to closely monitor the activities of all trade unions.²⁴

The Trade Union Ordinance of 1932 was viewed with suspicion by the TWA as a method of the colonial authorities to infringe on the protest culture of the labour movement. The ordinance made no allowances for the working class to participate in demonstrations, and it provided no immunity from state prosecution. The TWA, as a result of the unacceptable trade union ordinance decided to change its name to the Trinidad Labour Party (TLP) in 1934.

In the next few years there would be new labour leaders and a drastic shift in the type of socialist approach used to communicate with the colonial government, Teelucksingh explains:

In December 1935, prominent members severed ties with the TLP. Adrian Rienzi left the Party and together with Uriah Butler...founded the Trinidad Citizens League (TCL) consisting primarily of East Indian and African supporters who had defected from the TLP.²⁵

This was a move away from Cipriani's Fabian socialism that preferred peaceful communication with the colonial authority and a move to more revolutionary socialism where violence became an option. The Africans in the oil industry definitely had reason to be rebellious as Trinidad and

²⁴ Teelucksingh, *Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago*, 119.

²⁵ Teelucksingh, *Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago*, 133.

Tobago had become valuable because of reforms of the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, Escalante reports that, “Churchill had grasped the vital importance of oil fuel for ships: increased speed.”²⁶ The massive profits of the mostly foreign controlled oil industry in Trinidad and Tobago was not severely threatened by the Great Depression, however, their mostly African workers suffered from poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, illiteracy, and poor housing. The Indians in the agrarian sector did not fare any better.

The national consciousness of the labour movement in 1937 finally turned to violent rebellion, after decades of colonial interference in the democratizing process of politics and the continuous exploitation of the labour force without proper compensation. The people’s tolerance towards the colonial government and the exploitive foreign capitalists finally gave way to the violent “Butler Riots” (18th June - 6th July 1937), Teelucksingh describes Uriah Butler’s rise, “he became disillusioned with the TCL and on 1 August 1936, he founded his own organization—the British Empire Workers and Citizens Home Rule Party (BEW+CHRP) which eventually replaced the TCL as the major opposition voice in political matters in the colony.”²⁷ Uriah Butler became militant in how he considered communicating with the colonial government, and the oil companies. It was this attitude that allowed him to succeed Captain Cipriani as the new face of labour in Trinidad and Tobago, Teelucksingh observes that, “the Butlerite vision was based on the premise that sacrifice was necessary for the procurement of liberation of the working class, as he reminded followers in Fyzabad, on 9 May 1937, Your conditions are like slavery, and we are

²⁶ Richard M. Escalante, *Flying on Trinidad Oil: How a British Colony Became a Key Producer of Aviation Fuel, 1933-41*(Arouca: Kairi Publishing House, 2019), 6.

²⁷ Teelucksingh, *Ideology, Politics, and Radicalism of the Afro-Caribbean*, 91.

prepared to fight, and fight like hell...we are prepared to fight and shed blood to be free.”²⁸ The “Butler Riots” of 1937 were a spontaneous occurrence that Butler claims he did not authorise, it was not just the African oil field workers that started to rebel, the social unrest spread to the sugar estates where the East Indians worked, Escalante reports that:

On June 18, 1937, the much-feared rebellion happened. The workers at Trinidad Leaseholds’ Forest Reserve and Fyzabad oil fields rebelled. The unrest soon spread to other oil fields in the south of the colony. Workers at other oil companies also identified with the Trinidad Leaseholds’ workers and their issues and rebelled. Now, an industry-wide strike erupted throughout the oil sector in the Southland.... Soon the strikes crossed the ethnic barrier to the agriculture sector (the sugar industry) of the colony. There was now widespread labour unrest.²⁹

This was the ideal situation for a working class socialist revolt, the two major ethnicities in Trinidad rebelled together, and this was a pivotal moment in Trinidad and Tobago’s history. This was part of developing a nationalist consciousness, where regardless of whether you gained anything from this rebellion, at least you stood by your fellow comrade against the oppressors as a united people.

The “Butler Riots” (1937) failed to have any immediate effect on the financial situation of the workers in the oil and sugar industries, however, it more importantly revealed to the colonial authority that the ethnic conflict that existed in the labour movement could be overcome, and their anger directed to the colonial government and the foreign investors operating in the colony. The riots of 1937 were eventually contained but it was now clear that the authority of the colonial

²⁸ Teelucksingh, *Ideology, Politics, and Radicalism of the Afro-Caribbean*, 93.

²⁹ Escalante, *Flying on Trinidad Oil*, 89.

government was in decline. This could interfere in foreign investment for the colony. Butler turned himself into the police on September 9th 1937 where he was sentenced to two years in prison for inciting the riots, Encyclopedia.com states that, “it was left to one of his earlier collaborators, the lawyer and political radical Adrian Cola Rienzi (1905–1972), to rally the workers and consolidate them into a union called the Oilfield Workers' Trade Union (OWTU).”³⁰ The way Butler described the entire event, he made it clear that this was not an attempted coup but was more of an outcry for better wages. The labourers were exhausted of being abused and being treated as inferior just because of their pigment, Teelucksingh reports that, “The working people...made it clear that they would no longer be defined as merely the cheap labour of sugar kings and oil lords. The stage was set for the Colonial Office to hasten the process of “Home Rule.”³¹ The Colonial Office’s conservative stance for decades was that the black, and coloured people of Trinidad and Tobago were incapable of self-governance, this was partly a racist opinion, but was partly based on the fact that there existed racial tension between the Indians and the Africans. What the “Butler Riots” (1937) proved to the Colonial Office was that the people had attained a level of nationalist consciousness that allowed them to put aside their differences and work together towards a common goal that involved rebelling against the colonial state.

³⁰ “Butler, Uriah,” Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History, Encyclopedia.com, CafeMedia, April 7, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/butler-uriah>.

³¹ Teelucksingh, *Ideology, Politics, and Radicalism of the Afro-Caribbean*, 102.

CHAPTER 3. The Neo-Imperialists and the Illusion of Democracy

PART 1. The Americans and the Colonials during World War Two (Neo-Imperialists)

The Monroe Doctrine (1823) and the ideology of Manifest Destiny (1845) boasted of the desire of the United States to achieve supreme hegemony over the Western hemisphere. It was during a speech to Congress in 1823 that the then U.S. President James Monroe declared that there should be a division between the European dominated Old World and the desired American dominated New World. The philosophy of the U.S. expansionism, coined “Manifest Destiny” by the American press in 1845, held that the United States was destined by God, “to expand its dominion and spread democracy and capitalism across the entire North American continent.”³² The United States used the Monroe Doctrine as a self-declaration of Western hemispheric dominance. Accordingly, they proceeded to use military might, unequal treaties, and the ideology of Manifest Destiny to expand their sphere of influence and impose their brand of imperialism over the affairs of Latin America and the Caribbean.

The United States did not invade any British colonies, however, they regarded these colonies as being of strategic importance during World War II. The United States in 1941 joined the military alliance of the Allies during World War II that comprised of the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and France against the military alliance of the Axis that comprised of Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan. In the years prior to the outbreak of World War Two (1939-1945) the United Kingdom came to depend heavily on the United States’ military might to secure the Panama canal, a vital

³² The Editors of History.com, “Manifest Destiny,” History.com, A&E Television Networks, last modified November 15, 2019, www.history.com/topics/westward-expansion/manifest-destiny.

military and economic significant canal that connected the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans. The British colonies in the West Atlantic were forced to allow the United States to establish bases on their colonies in the Caribbean, the Robert H. Jackson Center describes Churchill's desperation, "Winston Churchill had recently assumed the premiership of Great Britain when, on May 15, 1940, he sought assistance from the United States. Churchill's May 15 cable to President Roosevelt described the dire situation that England was in.... "Nazified Europe established with astonishing swiftness, and the weight may be more than we can bear." ”³³ When Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of the U.K (1940-1945), Nazi Germany had succeeded in occupying most of Europe, the Robert H. Jackson Center adds that, "Churchill asked the United States for the loan of "forty or fifty of your older destroyers," and warned that without them Britain would be unable to fight the "Battle of the Atlantic" against Germany and Italy.”³⁴ This discussion between Prime Minister Churchill and President Franklin D. Roosevelt resulted in the Destroyers for Bases Agreement (2nd September, 1940). It was a much hated agreement, as the British were well aware of the United States' ulterior motives, they had witnessed the military threats first-hand that came with the Monroe Doctrine during the Second Venezuelan Crisis (1902-1903), Baptiste states that, "The Colonial Office, led by Lord Lloyd, had opposed the destroyers-base deal...Lord Lloyd reportedly referred to the Americans as "gangsters".”³⁵ The deal gave the United States 99 year-long leases for their bases in exchange for their military assistance during the war. It is important

³³ "Destroyers For Bases Agreement, September 2, 1940," Robert H. Jackson Center, last modified September 2, 2015, <https://www.roberthjackson.org/article/destroyers-for-bases-agreement-september-2-1940/>.

³⁴ "Destroyers For Bases Agreement."

³⁵ Fitzroy Andre Baptiste, *War, Cooperation, and Conflict: The European Possessions in the Caribbean, 1939-1945* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1988), 92.

to note that the colonies had very little say concerning the establishment of the American bases. They voiced their concerns but the metropolitan government had the absolute authority on important matters like this, Baptiste writes that, “on September 2nd, 1940, the Destroyer-Bases Agreement gave the United States the right to construct naval and air bases in eight British transatlantic territories from Newfoundland to Bermuda in the northwest and West Atlantic off Canada and the United States to British Guiana near Brazil’s bulge and astride the Straits of Dakar. This agreement was perhaps the most tangible example of Anglo-American collaboration in Atlantic defense up to that time.”³⁶ This brought the Americans to Trinidad and Tobago where they set up the Waller Air Force Base (1941-1949), the Carlsen Army Airfield Base (1941-1949), and the Chagaramas Base that was established in 1941 which acted as a Naval Operating Base, and a Naval Air station. The Chagaramas military installation was problematic because the Americans sought to keep this base many years after the war had ended.

The reality of American Neo-imperialism quickly manifested itself, as they became the de facto authority in Trinidad and Tobago. The concern that the colonial government of Trinidad and Tobago had during World War Two was the presence of the American troops that profoundly changed colonial society, Obika states that, “The following article appeared in the ‘Trinidad Guardian’ as early as July 1941, just four (4) months subsequent to the official occupation...” “So many U.S. soldiers are stationed on the British island, so many U.S. ships are anchored in the harbor and so many U.S. labourers are working on the new U.S. base that Trinidad today looks almost more American and British.”³⁷ The colonial society of Trinidad came under “American

³⁶ Baptiste, *War, Cooperation, and Conflict: The European Possessions in the Caribbean, 1939-1945*, 51.

³⁷ Nyahuma M. Obika, *The Social and Economic Effects Of The American Occupation In Trinidad During The 2nd World War 1939-1945* (Point Fortin: Nyahuma Obika Development Foundation, 2018), 17-18.

occupation”, and was politically, economically, and socially affected by the neo-colonial law and order that came with their military presence. Their power and influence was so profound that their authority had come to supersede the authority of the Governor of Trinidad and Tobago, Baptiste adds that, “Governor Young did not fare well. He was removed from the governorship of Trinidad and Tobago in about April 1942...To succeed Young, the British government appointed Sir Bede Clifford...As governor of the Bahamas in the 1930s, Clifford had close working relations with the United States authorities in many areas.”³⁸ The reason that Governor Young was removed was because he had an overall problem with the American military installations on the colony, especially the Chagaramas Base that forced hundreds to be relocated and cut off one of the most desirable locations on the colony for leisurely activities. His greatest problem with the military installations was the fact that the colonial authority basically lost their authority over the leased zones, essentially excluding them from colonial interference, Baptiste writes that, “The United States claimed, inter alia, an overriding right to regulate and to control all internal and external communications of whatever nature from, to, and within the area leased.”³⁹ The Americans came to dominate the society of Trinidad and Tobago, the labour movement was angered that outsiders had gotten so much authority in the colony in a matter of a few years while they continued to struggle for political representation.

³⁸ Baptiste, *War, Cooperation, and Conflict: The European Possessions in the Caribbean, 1939-1945*, 162.

³⁹ Baptiste, *War, Cooperation, and Conflict: The European Possessions in the Caribbean, 1939-1945*, 91.

PART 2. The Illusion of Democracy 1945-1950.

The labour unrests that had engulfed the British Caribbean during the 1930s had warranted an investigation into their root causes. An investigative team was assembled in 1938, after the most violent of these unrests had occurred in Trinidad and Tobago, “the appointment in late 1938 of a ten member Royal Commission of Enquiry chaired by Lord Moyne.”⁴⁰ The investigation revealed the expected in terms of the economy, the economic effects of the Great Depression had forced down wages that had already been difficult to survive off of even before the economic depression. The lack of political representation, and the absence of legislature allowing the practice of political franchise from the majority of the working class angered the majority of people on these island colonies, as it was extremely difficult to change this reality without adequate legislature that allowed them to vote, “The most threatening of these strikes were those that developed in the oilfields of Trinidad in June 1937 and spread quickly to sugar and cocoa plantations.”⁴¹ The 1937 riots or the “Butler Riots” was a multi-ethnic struggle that the estranged working class Africans and East Indians were able to relate to and work together. In the post-1937 period, these riots are considered a major unifying event in multi-ethnic relations in Trinidad. These riots failed to accomplish their short term goals which was to get better wages, in the oil sector, Escalante states that, “only the lowest paid of them were given an increase of 25 cents to their pay.”⁴² and in the

⁴⁰ “Moyne Commission,” Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History, Encyclopedia.com, CafeMedia, assessed April 15, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/moyne-commission>.

⁴¹ “Moyne Commission.”

⁴² Escalante, *Flying on Trinidad Oil*, 93.

agrarian sector, Teelucksingh states, “companies maintained wages for their labourers at a miserly 40–55 cents per day.”⁴³ The Moyne Commission arrived in the British Caribbean late in 1938, and spent close to six months assessing each colony that had experienced a significant deterioration between the working class and their colonial government.

The problem was that the Moyne commission’s report that contained recommendations to mitigate the problems in the colonies was submitted to the British government at the end of 1939, several months after the United Kingdom had declared war on Nazi Germany. The commission’s report was withheld until after World War II (2nd September, 1945), the report did cause outrage when it recommended that an imperial fund called the West Indian Welfare Fund be established. The United Kingdom’s government would grant the fund one million pounds annually for twenty years that would serve to fund the development of social welfare programs throughout the British Caribbean, “the Trinidad labour leader and lawyer Adrian Cola Rienzi, who pointedly observed that Great Britain was spending six million pounds sterling per day on war but could only afford one million pounds sterling a year for twenty years to remedy the disgraceful and shocking conditions which exist in the colonies and for which she, as Trustee, must be held accountable.”⁴⁴ The fact was that one million pounds a year for twenty years was a gross underestimation of the British West Indian working class across the region, and was an inefficient amount to properly mitigate the social problems. The short comings of the financial grant to the British Caribbean did nothing to stop the demands for self-governance from labour leaders throughout the British Caribbean, “it was prepared to concede constitutional reform but not

⁴³ Teelucksingh, *Ideology, Politics, and Radicalism of the Afro-Caribbean*, 100.

⁴⁴ “Moyne Commission.”

political independence for the islands either as individual units or collectively as a federation...The commission was, therefore, not prepared to dispense with executive control by colonial governors over local legislative councils.”⁴⁵ The political perspective of the Moyne commission’s report after World War Two reignited regional discussion among British West Indian labour leaders on self-governance and the possibility of federation. The labour leaders were convinced that only self-governance and limited inference from the metropolitan government could help them achieve true social and economic mitigation from centuries of colonial exploitation.

In the years following the 1937 “Butler Riots” Trinidad and Tobago elevated in military status in the British Empire, as the outbreak of World War II (1939-1945) loomed ahead threatening to drag the British Empire into another major war started between world powers. What made Trinidad valuable was that it was the largest producer of oil in the British Empire, its oil installations were away from the possible primary warzones of Europe and the Suez Canal, Obika reports that, “The fact that the colony produced 25% of the aviation fuel required by the Royal Air Force added to its importance.”⁴⁶ The possibility arose that the United Kingdom’s access to its oil installations in Rangoon and Bahrein East of the Suez Canal could be cut off if the projected conflict with Nazi Germany and Italy broke out in the coming years. The 1937 riots in Trinidad where oil installations were damaged proved to the United Kingdom that internal dissidence from colonial subjects could be viewed as a possible threat if war was being waged in Europe, Baptiste describes the defensive measures that were taken, Baptiste reported that, “the police and the

⁴⁵ “Moyne Commission.”

⁴⁶ Obika, *The Social and Economic Effects Of The American Occupation In Trinidad During The 2nd World War 1939-1945*, 5.

volunteer forces were strengthened from 958 to 1,169 and from 363 to 1,637 respectively.”⁴⁷ This led to the colonial government being granted emergency powers by the Colonial Office. The possibility of another labour rebellion during the period of World War II, Eccles and McCollin add that, “the perceived threat to the inhabitants’ civil liberties and freedom of speech were the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act of 1939 and the Colonial Defence Regulations.”⁴⁸ When Britain declared war on Nazi Germany on the 3rd September, 1939, in response to the Germany’s invasion of Poland, the declaration of war reverberated throughout the British Empire, and quickly reached Trinidad and Tobago.

The colonial government under the command of Governor Sir Hubert Winthrop Young (1938-1942) rearrested Uriah Butler under the emergency defence regulations. Even though he served his two year sentence for his involvement in initiating the 1937 riots, Richardson states that, “when World War II broke out in September 1939, he was re-arrested and detained as a security risk under the Defence Regulations. He spent six years in detention on Caledonia Island, not being released until the war was over in 1945.”⁴⁹ It was not just Uriah Butler, many labour leaders, and their organisations were looked at with suspicion from the colonial authorities, Eccles and McCollin state that, “the office of the *People* was searched on 28 May 1940 by five members of the police force. Also, the homes of Bertie Percival, Jim Baratt, Clement Payne and Councillor

⁴⁷ Baptiste, *War, Cooperation, and Conflict: The European Possessions in the Caribbean, 1939-1945*, 9.

⁴⁸ Karen E. Eccles and Debbie McCollin, *World War II and the Caribbean* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2017), 195.

⁴⁹ Stephon Richardson, “1937, Oilfield Riots,” Trinidad and Tobago: Struggle for Independence, WordPress.com, last modified, April 10, 2013, <https://stephrichardsonblog.wordpress.com/uriah-buzz-butler/1937-oilfield-riots/>.

Albert Gomes, prominent leaders of the trade-union movement, were searched.”⁵⁰ The British government was actually against West Indian participation because they did not want coloureds and especially black Africans fighting and killing white men in combat. The previous instances of rebellion that occurred in the 1930s throughout the British Caribbean were partially blamed on racism, like the 1937 riots in Trinidad and Tobago. The British government was forced to compromise and allow British West Indian participation in the war, Prakash reports that, “the formation of the Caribbean Regiment which comprised members of the Caribbean...went to serve overseas in July 1944 in the Middle East and Italy...consisting of 1,200 volunteers from the British West Indies.”⁵¹ The labour movement at this point in time in Trinidad and Tobago and in many British West Indian colonies desired self-governance, however, they understood what was at stake if the Allies lost to the Axis powers, and succumbed to the description of Germany’s Nazism, the Encyclopaedia Britannica describe Nazism as, “a vision of annihilation of all enemies of the Aryan *Volk* as the one and only goal of Nazi policy.”⁵² The nationalist labour movements in Trinidad and Tobago and the wider British Empire understood that if the lead Axis power, Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany gained global power it would mean a violent end to their nationalist movements, it was safe to say that the labour movement in Trinidad and Tobago was obedient throughout the time of World War Two.

⁵⁰ Eccles and McCollin, *World War II and the Caribbean*, 197.

⁵¹ Shammi Prakash, “The Caribbean Regiment,” *World War II: In the British West Indies*, WordPress.com, last modified April 15, 2017, <https://ww2bwi.wordpress.com/the-caribbean-regiment/>.

⁵² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Nazism,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, last modified November 12, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Nazism>.

The Second World War came to an end on the 2nd September, 1945, and with it the emergency powers that the colonial government used to violate the civil freedoms of the labour movement were removed. The Allies had won the war but it was clear that two world wars during the first half of the 20th century had taken a toll on the United Kingdom's ability to maintain a stable empire, "Both wars left Britain weakened and less interested in its empire."⁵³ The British may have won both world wars that they had participated in but their economy was devastated from the war effort. The protests demanding self-governance and sovereign independence that existed prior to the outbreak of World War II returned stronger than ever, especially since the colonies had sent so many troops to fight in the war. The call for political change was coming from most territories in the British Empire. In Trinidad and Tobago the metropolitan government finally gave in to the labour movement's demands for adult suffrage in 1945. It removed age, and language restrictions. For the electors, according to Teelucksingh, "elimination of the discriminatory income and property requirements."⁵⁴ This meant that politicians no longer just from the middle class but the lower classes as well could participate. In 1946 and 1950 Trinidad and Tobago held its first two general elections. It was quickly discovered that they had not received self-governance as the colonial government was still in power, Teelucksingh states, "the Legislative Council consisted of 18 members: 9 elected, 6 nominated, 3 officials with the Governor as Chairman. The colony received adult suffrage, not self-government, and both the reformers and the electorate were denied the opportunity to radically change the government of the day."⁵⁵ The governor retained majority

⁵³ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, "Decline of the British Empire," Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://www.britannica.com/summary/Decline-of-the-British-Empire>.

⁵⁴ Teelucksingh, *Ideology, Politics, and Radicalism of the Afro-Caribbean*, 115.

⁵⁵ Teelucksingh, *Ideology, Politics, and Radicalism of the Afro-Caribbean*, 115.

support on the Legislative council. The first two elections represented a challenge for the labour movement as the political landscape became cluttered with rival political parties that divided the vote, Teelucksingh describes the political landscape, “the West Indian National Party (WINP), the Socialist Party of Trinidad and Tobago, the Progressive Democratic Party and the United Front which were all formed in the 1940s.”⁵⁶ The constitutional reform did not grant self-governance, in fact it ensured that even though people were free to exercise their franchise, and political parties were allowed to exercise political influence on the legislative council the governor retained executive control of the colony of Trinidad and Tobago.

The British government resisted granting self-governance and independence for as long as possible, but eventually their most valuable colony in the empire was granted independence. The British Parliament passed the Indian Independence Act in 1947 which not only granted India its independence but created the sovereign nation of Pakistan in the process. This event was of great influence to the colonies of the British Caribbean. It indicated that if the United Kingdom could willingly grant independence to its most economically valuable colony, then the small agrarian Caribbean colonies including oil-rich Trinidad and Tobago were eventually going to be granted independence, “The British Empire developed into the Commonwealth in the 20th century, as former British dependencies obtained sovereignty but retained ties to the United Kingdom.”⁵⁷ While the metropole’s retirement of the empire and the birth of the commonwealth was largely connected to the economic decline of the U.K’s economy, it should be emphasized that the agitation for civil rights contributed drastically to the security costs for the colonies, Teelucksingh

⁵⁶ Teelucksingh, *Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago*, 142.

⁵⁷ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Decline of the British Empire.”

concludes that, “among the scarred warriors for economic, social and political liberation, pre-eminence belongs to Howard-Bishop, Cipriani, Rienzi and Butler and the cadre of labour leaders who with the masses of the African and Indian working class gallantly took the struggle to their colonial masters.”⁵⁸ In Trinidad and Tobago, it was these labour leaders that laid the foundation for Eric Williams’ Party, the People’s National Movement (PNM) founded in 1955 that would lead Trinidad and Tobago towards independence in 1962.

⁵⁸ Teelucksingh, *Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago*, 178.

Conclusion

During the first half of the 20th century global conflicts and movements shaped and energized nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago. The internal factors included centuries of capitalist exploitation that caused deprivation that resulted in generational poverty, societal racism and a lack of working class political representation. These internal conditions provided the right conditions for a labour movement against the colonial institution. There were also external events that occurred during the first three decades of the 20th century like the Russian working class revolution in 1917 and Marcus Garveyism's Pan-Africanist movement that had diffused to Trinidad and Tobago and had a profound effect on the nationalistic culture and its advocates for reformation of the political system. These internal and external influences produced nationalist leaders like: Howard-Bishop, Captain Andrew Cipriani, Uriah Butler, and Adrian Cola Rienzi that all carried the struggle against the exploitation of the colonies natural resources and working class by the colonial establishment and the American neo-imperialist. They also assisted in the decolonisation of the minds of the working class masses. They advocated for constitutional reform for more political representation, the trade ordinance that gave labourers the right to negotiate for better wages and working conditions, and adult suffrage that gave voting franchise to the working class masses. These nationalist leaders paved the road for self-governance and eventually independence.

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