

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Caught between the Union Jack and the Nazi Swastika: African Protests over Ambiguous Status under British Imperialism and Potential Transfer to Nazi Colonialism

Edward Kissi* 

Africana Studies/SIGS, University of South Florida

*Corresponding author: E-mail: ekissi@usf.edu

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Abstract

Resistance to colonial rule is a dominant topic in the historical study of Africa. But resistance to attempted transfer of colonised peoples and territories, to promote peace in Europe, has not gained similar attention in African and colonial historiographies. This article looks at how rumours and reports of Nazi Germany's colonial demands in Africa, and the ambiguous reactions of British officials to them, shaped conversations among colonised peoples about their dignity under British colonialism and in intra-European diplomacy. The article argues that the prospect of Nazi rule and its spectre of slave-labour concentration camps for Africa's Western-educated elites, and other colonial subjects, bound these segments of colonial society closer to British, and French, imperialism than they relished at an uncertain, but critical moment in African and international history. They became the defenders of colonial systems they deplored, and opponents of a ruthless regime they feared.

Keywords: West Africa; rumour; colonialism; Nazism; antisemitism; concentration camps; protests

This article addresses an important but overlooked aspect of African history in the 1930s and early 1940s, namely, reactions in West Africa to rumours and reports of Nazi Germany's interest in reclaiming its former colonies in the region, and how British officials responded. Its starting point is analysis of the concepts of 'colony' and 'protectorate' in Britain's imperial culture in Africa, and the ambiguous identities, fears, and resentments that resulted from those concepts. Of particular interest is how these ambiguous identities shaped African attitudes and anxieties about Nazi colonial demands. The article argues that the prospect of moving from the 'mild autocracy' of British rule, with its ambiguities, to the racial colonialism of the Nazis, with its clear anti-African ideology, caused colonised Africans in West Africa who had conflicting interests to align themselves, momentarily and strategically, with British and French imperialism. This thesis along with its supporting evidence makes three important contributions to African and colonial historiographies. One, how a diverse group of protesters — Western-educated elites, journalists, male and female farmers, traders, teachers, chiefs, sailors, among others — worked outside of the imperial judicial and diplomatic systems to deal with some critical moral and existential issues in the interwar period. Two, how these protesters in West Africa reacted to colonial mindsets that viewed them as subjects of barter in territorial bargains and caused them to engage in discursive quests for their rights and dignity at a crucial period in African history. Three, the role that African protests over ambiguous colonial status, territorial transfers, and their feared repercussions played in inspiring the participation of some colonial subjects in the Second World War.

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Studies of Africa's colonial history have covered the subject of African resistance to colonial policies. Relatedly, some works have focused on how colonised people used Atlantic ideas, and colonial judicial systems, to challenge colonial rule.¹ Bonny Ibhawoh's *Imperial Justice* studies some of the successes colonised people in Africa had in using colonial laws, and imperial courts in London, to resolve land and chieftaincy disputes with colonial governments.² Some colonial historiographies have also examined rumour as a medium for the caricature of colonialism. Luise White's seminal study of rumour and gossip about vampires — blood-sucking firemen and game rangers — in colonial East and Central Africa probed the 'cultural and intellectual life' in colonial Africa that superstitions about 'what Europeans did with African blood' revealed.³ But not all rumours bothered on this type of caricature of colonial rule or served this particular purpose. Those that accompanied reports of a planned transfer of land and people in British and French colonies in West Africa to Nazi Germany occupied a distinctive terrain of rumour-mongering. They also inspired a distinctive protest politics in West Africa, which both connected to and departed from African objections to colonial proposals for territorial reorganisation elsewhere.

Protests over territorial transfers in West Africa differed in their objectives, if not in their participants, from opposition to a proposed territorial union of Uganda, Kenya, and Tanganyika in which Africans would be subject to the control of white British settlers in Kenya.⁴ None of the protests examined in this article reveals any collaboration or coordination between the protesters in West Africa and the opponents of federation in East Africa. Moreover, the fears that a wide range of protesters in West Africa had of being transferred to Nazi colonial rule were not the same as the concerns that African chiefs, Indian immigrants, and some European farmers in Uganda and Tanzania had about the 'predatory designs of the Kenya settlers' in a union of British East and Central Africa.⁵ Nevertheless, these two different African protests of the 1930s had similar intellectual and political motivation in resentment against colonial disregard for African anxieties and aspirations. Conversations about land and people that side-stepped African rights and opinions triggered opposition wherever they occurred in colonial Africa.

African rumour-fueled protests over proposed transfer of colonial territories have also not been adequately studied in the related literature on Hitler's ambitions to reestablish a German colonial empire in Africa. This literature has focused on British and German discussions on restoring former German colonies on the continent as well as transferring portions of Portuguese colonies, and independent Liberia, to the Nazi regime.⁶ However, there is little comparative research on the responses of Africans who faced these constellations and would have been directly affected by such proposals. As Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler observed in *Tensions of Empire*, there is much of 'the dynamics of colonial history' that colonial historiography has missed.⁷ In the West African context

¹A. A. Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Baltimore, 1987); P. S. Zachernuk, *Colonial Subjects: An African Intelligentsia and Atlantic Ideas* (Charlottesville, 2000); B. Ibhawoh, *Imperial Justice: Africans in Empire's Court* (Oxford, 2013).

²Ibhawoh, *Imperial Justice*, 3, 23.

³L. White, *Speaking with Vampires* (Berkeley, 2000), 5–6; G. Mann, 'An Africanist's apostasy: Luise White's "Speaking with Vampires"', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 41:1 (2008), 117–21.

⁴R. Rotberg, 'The federation movement in British East and Central Africa, 1889–1953', *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 2:2 (1963), 143–4, 148.

⁵*Ibid.*, 144, 146–7.

⁶N. C. Fleming, 'Diehard conservatives and the appeasement of Nazi Germany, 1935–1940', *History*, 100:341 (2015); C. J. Korieh, *Nigeria and World War II: Colonialism, Empire, and Global Conflict* (Cambridge, 2020). See also W. W. Schmokel, *Dream of Empire: German Colonialism, 1919–1945* (New Haven, 1964); W. R. Louis, 'Colonial appeasement, 1936–1938', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 49:4 (1971), 1175–91; A. Edho Ekoko, 'The British attitude towards Germany's colonial irredentism in Africa in the inter-war years', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14: 2 (1979), 287–307; A. Crozier, 'Imperial decline and the colonial question in Anglo-German relations, 1919–39', *European Studies Review*, 11 (1981), 218–20, 225.

⁷F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler (eds), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997), 34.

one of these blind spots of colonial historiography is the absence of a comparative study of how those who lived in British and French colonies in West Africa reacted through protests and petitions to the contemplated transfer of their natal and colonial national communities to Nazi colonial rule. Rumours and reports of Nazi Germany's colonial demands also fed into prevailing grievances of some colonised people about the ambiguous lines that the British maintained between 'subject' and 'protected person' in their colonial systems. Not all colonised people loathed Germany or feared life under putative Nazi rule. Pro-German and Nazi sympathies existed in former German colonies in Africa as well as in colonies under British and French control.⁸ Pro-German sentiments, expressed as reactions to the rumours of the colonial return of Germany to Africa, demonstrate the fragmentation of African opinion on the intersection of imperial rivalries and African fates. The reactions were also indicative of the vibrancy and complexity of African discursive interventions in intra-European colonial squabbles, a neglected theme in African colonial historiographies.

That Africans in multiple places responded in the way that they did to the colonial bargain rumours and reports simultaneously extends and complicates African colonial historiography. The reactions analysed below extend existing work on what rumours about the malicious intentions of Europeans in the colonies revealed about life in colonial Africa. They add to that body of work what rumours and actual reports of potential transfer to a genocidal regime revealed about how Africans viewed their dignity in relation to European colonial diplomacy. Here, we encounter African grievances that had no chance of redress in imperial courts except in organised protests. Examining African protests against potential transfer to German colonial rule contributes to existing work on protests in African history of the interwar period and the war era.⁹ The study of this type of protest shows how Africans inserted themselves in intra-European disputes to challenge issues that directly affected them. It also complicates the traditional historiography on Africans and the Second World War by adding to it the often-overlooked role that the Nazi treatment of European Jews played in stoking African fears of life under a purportedly imminent Nazi rule, and how that fear inspired some Africans to fight in the Second World War alongside their British and French colonisers.¹⁰

Empire and colonial identities

While it lasted, the British Empire rested on four unequal footstools: dominions, protectorates, crown colonies, and mandated trust territories.¹¹ The importance of race in the identity of these footstools and the ambiguous status they conferred on the Africans living in them cannot be

⁸D. E. K. Amenumey, 'German administration in southern Togo', *The Journal of African History*, 10:4 (1969), 623–39; R. A. Joseph, 'The German question in French Cameroun, 1919-1939', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17:1 (1975), 65–90; J. Derrick, 'The "Germanophone" elite of Douala under the French Mandate', *The Journal of African History*, 21:2 (1980), 255–67; V. Bong Amazee, 'The British versus pro-Germanism in the British Southern Cameroons, 1916-1922', *Transafrican Journal of History*, 22 (1993), 55–73; M. Perraudin and J. Zimmerer (eds.), *German Colonialism and National Identity* (London, 2010), and, especially, D. Laumann, 'Narratives of a "model colony": German Togoland in written and oral histories'.

⁹Rotberg, 'The federation movement'; S. K. B. Asante, 'The Italo-Ethiopian conflict: a case study in British West African response to crisis diplomacy in the 1930s', *The Journal of African History*, 15:2 (1974), L. Abedi Asante and I. Helbrecht, 'Seeing through African protest logics: a longitudinal review of continuity and change in protests in Ghana', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 52:2 (2018); C. Korieh, 'May it please Your Honor': letters of petition as historical evidence in an African colonial context', *History in Africa*, 37 (2010).

¹⁰For a look at some of the traditional historiography on Africans and the Second World War, see D. Killingray and R. Rathbone (eds.), *Africa and the Second World War* (New York, 1986); D. Killingray and M. Plaut, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Woodbridge, 2010); J. Byfield, C. Brown, T. Parsons, and A. Sakainga (eds.), *Africa and World War II* (Cambridge, 2015); A. Stewart, *The First Victory: The Second World War and the East Africa Campaign* (New Haven, 2016).

¹¹L. Harcourt, 'The crown colonies and protectorates and the Colonial Office', *Journal of the Society of Comparative Legislation*, 13:1 (1912), 11–14; D. K. Fieldhouse, *Colonialism, 1870-1945: An Introduction* (London, 1981), 12, 16–19.

overlooked. As lands dominated by European settlers, the dominions existed as British possessions with autonomous legislatures. They also enjoyed the privileges of consultation and consent from London. The protectorates, or 'protected states' were predominantly non-European in population, and semiautonomous in political status. Britain enjoyed trading rights to them by specific treaties, but their inhabitants were not 'subjects' of the English Crown because the protectorates were not regarded as British possessions.¹²

The predominantly non-white population of the African crown colonies, like Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Kenya, and Uganda, enjoyed the 'protection' of the British Crown, but they had no clearly defined legal status and rights. As David Kenneth Fieldhouse has noted, the crown colonies were provinces of a distant empire 'held in full sovereignty' by the 'parent state' (Great Britain).¹³ As 'dependents' of empire, the African people of the colonies, like the protectorates, could not have any direct contact with foreign states to negotiate their foreign relations. Neither could they appeal to any international courts to mediate disagreements that emerged in this 'relations between a dominant and a subservient society'.¹⁴ The demands that some Western-educated Africans in these colonies made for clarification of their legal status in the crown colonies and protectorates suggest that they interpreted the ambiguity surrounding their status and rights as an absence of legal assurance that they would not become pawns in intra-European colonial politics.¹⁵ That ambiguous colonial identity influenced the African protests over territorial transfer rumours in the 1930s.

The mandated or trust territories in Africa like Tanganyika, Togoland, and Cameroon were no different. As former German colonies in Africa entrusted to the 'care' of Britain and France by the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations, they existed under the League's 'B' Mandate classification. These were the former German colonies in East and West Africa presumed to be territories that would need European 'guidance' for a longer period because they were perceived as insufficiently developed and lacking the capacity for immediate self-government.¹⁶ France administered two-thirds of Togoland and one-third of it was entrusted to Britain which administered it as part of its neighboring crown colony of the Gold Coast. Similarly, France maintained control over five-sixths of Cameroon, and Britain administered one-sixth of it as part of its crown colony of Nigeria, although not as a contiguous territory. Britain had exclusive mandate over Tanganyika.¹⁷

Theoretically, as territories under the control of individual European nations, but mandated by an international organisation, the mandated territories differed in their legal and political status from the protectorates and crown colonies. Although Tanganyika and Togoland existed under British political control like protectorates, they were, legally, not Britain's colonial possessions. They were held in 'trust'. As trust territories inhabited by non-Europeans who were perceived as incapable of self-government, the future status of the African mandated territories remained vague.¹⁸ As Frederick Madden and John Darwin have noted, 'the distinction in law between a colony and a protectorate which had been fundamental...soon became blurred in practice' and the mandated territories 'virtually [became] indistinguishable from colonies.'¹⁹ Thus, like the colonies,

¹²Fieldhouse, *Colonialism*, 17.

¹³*Ibid.*, 16–17.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 1, 12.

¹⁵'Britain's colonial empire. Secretary of State's assurance', *East Africa and Rhodesia (EAR)*, 20 Feb. 1936. Also 'Permanency of Mandates. Questions in House of Commons', *EAR*, 16 Apr. 1936; 'Mr. Amery assures', *The West African Pilot (WAP)*, 26 Jan. 1939.

¹⁶S. A. Wempe, 'A league to preserve empires: understanding the mandates system and avenues for further scholarly inquiry', *American Historical Review*, 124: 5 (2019), 1724–5. Also Fieldhouse, *Colonialism*, 18.

¹⁷'German claims to colonies—active discussion in British press', *EAR*, 14 Jan. 1937.

¹⁸Ekoko, 'British attitude', 288, and W. R. Louis, 'The United Kingdom and the beginning of the mandates system, 1919–1922', *International Organization*, 23:1 (1969), 77.

¹⁹F. Madden and J. Darwin (eds.), *The Dependent Empire, 1900–1948: Colonies, Protectorates, and Mandates. Select Documents on the Constitutional History of the British Empire and Commonwealth. Volume 7* (Westport, 1994), 4.

and protectorates, the blurred and vague status of Africans in the mandated territories constrained, complicated, and shaped their reactions to the colonial transfer rumours and reports.

Clearly, the nature of colonial systems affected international conversations on which territories and their inhabitants could become subjects of barter between European colonising countries.²⁰ In a culture of rule that the British MP Lewis Harcourt called a ‘mild autocracy’, colonised people, whether in colonies, protectorates, or mandated territories, were not consulted for their opinion on matters affecting them in relations between European nations.²¹ To protect their dignity and rights Africans in these dependencies intruded and insinuated themselves into the high politics of imperial territorial exchanges through protest and petitioning in the newspaper public sphere of their respective territories.²²

Nazi colonial demands and British responses

Adolf Hitler raised his interest in the return of Germany’s former colonies in Africa for the first time in March 1935 in a meeting with the British foreign secretary Sir John Simon and Lord Privy Seal Anthony Eden.²³ Hitler repeated that interest in an address to the Nazi party on 30 January 1936. On 7 March 1936, the day that Germany reoccupied the Rhineland, and signaled its rearmament ambitions, Hitler formally notified Britain and other European nations of Germany’s demand for the restoration of its former colonies. From that time onwards, the colonial issue became ‘a major Nazi objective’ in Germany’s domestic and foreign affairs.²⁴ In various speeches in the 1930s, key Nazi officials also repeated Germany’s demands for the restoration of its African colonies.²⁵

Top British statesmen such as Neville Chamberlain and William Ormsby-Gore were eager to trade colonies in Africa with Nazi Germany to secure peace in Central and Eastern Europe, to bring Germany back into the League of Nations, and curtail the nation’s rearmament ambitions.²⁶ Support for Germany’s colonial demands appears to have been widespread in Britain. Neville Chamberlain had strong support from ‘[s]ections of Liberal and Labor opinion’ as well as ‘prominent peers and clergymen’.²⁷ Their ‘assumption’ was that ‘conflict with Germany, even if Britain emerged victorious, would weaken British power to the advantage of other rivals’.²⁸ Thus, as Roger Louis aptly put it, ‘[a]s before the First World War, British statesmen attempted to resolve Europe’s troubles by an African settlement’.²⁹ They were ‘willing to dispense with parts of West Africa’ while denying Germany access to potential naval and submarine bases in East Africa.³⁰ But as Fleming has also noted divided opinions on the colonial transfer issue among Labor and Conservative MPs, between 1933 and 1938, limited what British prime ministers could do on

²⁰Korieh, *Nigeria*, 42.

²¹Harcourt, ‘Crown colonies’, 13.

²²‘Alleged plan of transfer of Nigeria to Germany reported’, *WAP*, 8 Nov. 1938; ‘5,000 people protest against alleged transfer of Nigeria’, *WAP*, 11 Nov. 1938.

²³Fleming, ‘Diehard Conservatives’, 420. See also Crozier, ‘Imperial decline’, 227.

²⁴B. W. Patch, ‘Germany’s demand for colonies’, *Editorial Research Reports*, 1 (1937), 4. See also Korieh, *Nigeria*, 79–80.

²⁵Colonies: the German case stated by General von Epp’, *EAR*, 21 Jan. 1937; ‘Hitler’s peace plan’, editorial, *WAP*, 18 Nov. 1938; ‘Germany and colonies—cannot relinquish colonial demands’, *EAR*, 17 Sep. 1936; ‘Germany’s former colonies—Nazi propaganda resumed’, *EAR*, 27 Feb. 1936; S. H. Schacht, ‘Germany’s colonial demands’, *Foreign Affairs*, 15:2 (1937), 223, 233–4; Patch, ‘Germany’s demand’, 3; Ekoko, ‘British attitude’, 293–4; Louis, ‘Colonial appeasement’, 1179.

²⁶Louis, ‘Colonial appeasement’, 1180; L. G. Schworer, ‘Lord Halifax’s visit to Germany: November 1937’, *The Historian*, 32:3 (1970), 353, 356, 367. Also Crozier, ‘Imperial decline’, 208, 234; and Fleming, ‘Diehard Conservatives’, 414–15, 420–1.

²⁷Fleming, ‘Diehard Conservatives’, 425.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 414.

²⁹Louis, ‘Colonial appeasement’, 1175.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 1187; Schworer, ‘Lord Halifax’; and Crozier, ‘Imperial decline’, 229.

this issue.³¹ Yet, it was these divisions that led British officials to equivocate on the colonial transfer issue. Their ambiguous responses bred anxiety among the African protesters and petitioners.

Nazi Germany sought British support for the restoration of former German colonies in Africa. But the Nazi leadership had a different idea about its future African empire.³² From previously unpublished diaries of top Nazi officials, including Hitler's private conversations, it appears that the Nazi regime aimed at a colonial experiment in Africa along the lines of Italy's settler colonial model in Libya and Abyssinia. Patrick Bernhard has observed that the leaders of the Nazi regime admired Italy's colonial model that separated inhabitants of colonies based on race. They saw the Italian Fascists as having 'transcended traditional notions of colonialism' which emphasised 'the rule of a central power over a variety of peoples'.³³

In their colonial experiment in Libya and Abyssinia (Ethiopia), the Italians had demonstrated a desire 'to create a much more homogenous empire in racial terms' with the indigenous people consigned to 'separate enclaves in less fertile hinterlands...to make way for the millions of white colonists the Fascist regime hoped to settle in Italian Africa'. The Nazi regime saw this as a 'highly innovative and modern form of settler colonialism' and one that 'resonated...with their own vision of a racially pure settler society'.³⁴ The Nazi regime also criticised the liberal British approach to colonial rule that did not officially bar interracial sexual interactions in British colonies. Hitler had also been critical of the incorporation of Western-educated Africans into aspects of British colonial rule and detested the French alternative that fully assimilated African colonial subjects into French culture. Thus, the African protesters of colonial transfers faced a constellation of concerns: ambiguous colonial identity, potential transfer of them like disposable pawns from one colonial system to another, and the prospect of life under Nazi racial colonialism.

Contexts and complexities of African reactions

Adolf Hitler had written in his *Mein Kampf* about the Western-educated African as the outcome, intended or not, of British and French colonial educational policies. He had reviled the daily reports in European newspapers, in the 1920s, that somewhere in the British and French colonial empires an African had become 'a lawyer, a teacher, a pastor, even a grand opera tenor'.³⁵ Hitler saw the rise of colonised Africans to such levels of professional accomplishment equal to Europeans as a waste of resources by Christian missionary educators on the African, whom Hitler viewed as 'an anthropoid by birth'.³⁶ There is no evidence of widespread reading of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in colonial Africa in the 1920s and 1930s. But for the few, including Western-educated colonial subjects, who must have read it, the reality of Nazi rule represented an existential threat to them. The editor of the influential *West African Pilot* newspaper, and the future first president of Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe, made that clear in his regular column *Inside Stuff*. He warned 'indigenous Africans who are educated' that 'the Nazi Germans think that the African who believes in British or French Democracy is a Bolshevik, and so that type of African must be annihilated'.³⁷

There is significant historical evidence of the harassment and detention of many people in German society beginning in 1933. Jews bore the brunt of these Nazi harassments especially in

³¹Fleming, 'Diehard Conservatives', 417, 421–4, 435.

³²P. Bernhard, 'Colonial crossovers: Nazi Germany and its entanglements with other empires', *Journal of Global History*, 12/2 (2017).

³³*Ibid.*, 208–9.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 208–9, 216, 220, and 223.

³⁵A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Delhi, 1988 [1925]), 389–90.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 390. Also, 366.

³⁷'Inside stuff: African Bolshevism', *WAP*, 20 Jan. 1939. Also, 'Concentration camp', editorial, *WAP*, 2 Nov. 1939.

detention and concentration camps.³⁸ The African press reported on these persecutions and some Western-educated Africans connected the fate of educated Jews to their own fears that the same, or something similar, might befall them if Hitler triumphed or if their territories were transferred to Germany.³⁹ Of equal concern to educated Africans like Azikiwe were reports of the Nazi regime's burning of books written by Jewish authors. Azikiwe made references to this Nazi attack on educated Jews in his discussion of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Nazism and the fate of Africans in a public lecture in Lagos, on 2 November 1939. In that lecture, Azikiwe reminded his African audience (pointing to specific pages in *Mein Kampf*) of Hitler's objections to the British and French colonial policies of educating Africans, as well as the Nazi regime's view of 'African races as semi-apes whose blood contaminated the Aryans and who should be exterminated from the face of the earth either by sterilization or by oppression'.⁴⁰ Azikiwe added to this indictment, the Nazi regime's immolation of books written by educated Jews such as Erich Remarque, Emil Ludwig, Sigmund Freud, Jacob Wasserman, Albert Einstein, among others, and the Nazi regime's torture and killing of many German Jews 'for the simple reason that they were non-Aryan'.⁴¹ From this Nazi treatment of educated Jews, Azikiwe concluded in that lecture that 'the philosophical basis of Nazism, together with its principles and practice, tended to lead to one conclusion: that Africans are a doomed race under the Nazi regime'.⁴² These sentiments and anxieties underpinned the African protests against the return of Nazi rule to Africa through territorial exchanges.

Azikiwe was not the only educated African in West Africa who viewed the return of Nazi rule to the region through the prism of the Nazi persecution of educated Jews. A writer from the British colony of the Gold Coast added his fears. Writing to Azikiwe's newspaper, the headmaster of Mfantshipim, a prestigious secondary school in the colony, also pointed to 'the organized Jewish persecution in Germany' as the basis of the 'resentment' of Africans to any changes in the status of the colonies.⁴³ Although these two perspectives had been expressed in March and November 1939, the sentiments that underpinned them existed among the African protestors long before this time. In November 1938, Nigerians 'who [were] domiciled in New York' also attributed their protest against the transfer of their native home to Nazi Germany to the Nazi treatment of European Jews. In the view of these diaspora Nigerians 'if Jews who are members of the Caucasoid race as the Germans, are not good enough to be "Aryans" and are expelled from Germany, then there is no telling to what extent the Nazis will go towards humiliating the Africans'.⁴⁴

As early as 1937, Hitler's other racist views had struck another nerve and provided additional justification for African protests of colonial transfer rumours. His claim that 'the first stages of human civilization were not based so much on the use of tame animals as on the employment of human beings who were members of an inferior race' justified slavery as the appropriate condition of 'subjugated races'.⁴⁵ Some subjugated people in Britain's colonies in Africa took notice. The *Gold Coast Spectator*, in Accra, reprinted what Hitler was reported to have announced at a Nazi

³⁸Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra (PRAAD) CSO 26/2/31, 'Papers concerning the treatment of German nationals in Germany, 1938-1939', enclosure to circular, 3 Nov. 1939. See, especially, 9, 17-19, 22, 27. See also S. Friedlaender, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Volume 1: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York, 1998), 41, 51-6; and S. Cohen, 'The British federation of university women: helping academic women refugees in the 1930s and 1940s', *International Psychiatry*, 7:2 (2010), 47-9.

³⁹Zik [pen name and nickname of N. Azikiwe], 'Inside stuff: "Germanism"', *WAP*, 17 Nov. 1938. See also 'Nazi persecution', editorial, *WAP*, 18 Nov. 1938; 'Concentration camp', *WAP*, 2 Nov. 1939.

⁴⁰'Nazism & fate of Africans', *WAP*, 4 Nov. 1939.

⁴¹*Ibid.* For further information about the Nazi regime's book burning practices, see D. Glowacka, 'A vanished world: cultural genocide of European Jews through the lens of settler colonialism', in M. Gordon and R. O'Sullivan (eds.), *Colonial Paradigms of Violence: Comparative Analysis of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Mass Killings* (Gottingen, 2022), 44-5.

⁴²*WAP*, 'Nazism & fate of Africans'.

⁴³M. F. Dei-Anang, 'Africa and world peace', *WAP*, 16 Mar. 1939.

⁴⁴'Nigeria's alleged transfer causes great apprehension', *WAP*, 9 Nov. 1938.

⁴⁵Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 267.

party meeting in Nuremberg in September 1936, that tied the peace of Europe and Germany's national honour to the return of former German colonies. The African newspaper highlighted Hitler's reported claim that while Germany's interest in colonies was primarily 'commercial', the nation had 'a moral right...to rule over blacks like other great white races' and that '[b]y having colonies and making the blacks work for us we will be able to provide much of the foodstuff we are now lacking'.⁴⁶ These reports about Germany's commercial and racial claims for colonies were not idle rumours for the subjugated peoples of Africa. British diplomatic attitudes gave them little comfort about where British statesmen stood on Germany's colonial demands. Living in a British colonial system without consultation, colonised people needed to do for themselves what they could not rely on British statesmen to do for them. They paid attention to Nazi colonial demands and British appeasement politics and developed their responses. Those responses included mass protests and the writing of petitions. As Chima Korieh, S. K. B. Asante, and Richard Joseph have noted for Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, and the French Cameroon, in their respective works, and as this article corroborates, these petitions came from broad sections of colonial society (rural and urban, elite, and non-elite men and women) often written by the petitioners themselves or on their behalf by others.⁴⁷

The feeling that Africans could be used as pawns in European diplomatic dealings had become clear in West Africa over how Ethiopia had been treated after 1935. From that experience, some colonised people in Africa and their sympathisers outside of the continent suspected that Britain would sacrifice the colonies to promote its interests at home and in Europe. The editors of the *West African Pilot* in Lagos, considered reports, in November 1938, that the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had argued in the House of Commons that it would be 'morally justified' for Britain to recognise Italy's occupation of Ethiopia if that would 'constitute an important step towards the general appeasement in Europe' as 'an eye-opener to the African'.⁴⁸

The uproar over Britain's recognition of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia was not limited to editors of some African newspapers, the usual critics of empire. S. K. B. Asante has noted that this treatment of an independent Black African kingdom, and a symbol of pride for Black people, globally, also 'struck a highly sensitive emotional chord' among 'such little known bodies as market-women's associations, ex-servicemen's organizations, and sailors' unions in West Africa'. Pan-Africanists such as George Padmore, and I. T. A. Wallace Johnson of the West African Youth League, also added their voices. In London, Padmore and the West African Students Union organised a protest. In Sierra Leone, Johnson declined the British colonial administration's invitation to participate in a wreath-laying ceremony to mark Armistice Day on 11 November 1938.⁴⁹ As Asante has argued, 'the Ethiopian question' changed the attitudes of some colonised people in West Africa to the 'international diplomacy of the great powers'. That diplomacy, they concluded, had been based on white racial solidarity to promote the interests of Britain, France, and Italy.⁵⁰ Eventually, Britain made amends on its Italo-Ethiopian diplomacy by mobilising colonial troops from West and East Africa and other dominions to defeat the Italians, in 1941, and reverse the nascent Italian empire in East Africa. Andrew Stewart has characterised this as the 'first significant wartime victory' for the British Empire in the Second World War.⁵¹

Prior to the outbreak of the war, and during the war, African protesters reacted to three old and new intersecting anxieties. First, the old and lingering rumours and reports of a Nazi take-over of

⁴⁶'White Europe squabbles over Blacks in Africa—contends Germans like other white Powers have a moral right to rule over Blacks as inferiors', *The Gold Coast Spectator*, 16 Oct. 1937. See also *EAR*, 'Colonies: the German case'.

⁴⁷Korieh, Nigeria, 27, 31, 72; Asante 'The Italo-Ethiopian conflict' 292–5, 297; Joseph, 'The German question', 65–90.

⁴⁸'Et tu, Great Britain?', editorial, *WAP*, 7 Nov. 1938.

⁴⁹Asante, 'The Italo-Ethiopian Conflict', 292, 295, 297. See also H. Adi, 'West African students in Britain, 1900–60: the politics of exile', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 12:3 (1982), 117–18.

⁵⁰Asante, 'The Italo-Ethiopian conflict', 291–2, 298, 300.

⁵¹Stewart, *The First Victory*, xi and, especially, xvi.

them and their lands. Second, a new feeling of betrayal by Britain and France over Ethiopia. Third, and new, the use of African-directed scaremongering by Britain in its anti-German propaganda. The dehumanising portrayal of Africans in British prewar and wartime anti-German propaganda leaflets fueled these triple anxieties, especially the first. These leaflets depicted Africans as would-be slaves in a Nazi-controlled world.⁵² They inflamed existing grievances in Africa and the Diaspora over ambiguous colonial status and Germany's colonial demands. In one classic example of the consequent discursive quests for African rights and dignity at this period, a writer to a Gold Coast newspaper deplored the European colonial practice that put people under trusteeships without consultation and consent. As the writer protested, '[t]o place a person under the tutelage of another without the knowledge and consent of the person... is slavery pure and simple'.⁵³ In a similar protest note 'on behalf of Africa and the African peoples of the world', and published in the pro-African newspaper in London *New Times and Ethiopia News*, 'members of the Left Book Club, Sierra Leone Branch', denounced the 'proposal to return to Germany any colonial territories which belonged to her during the pre-war days but now under the mandatory system of the League of Nations'. The protesters argued that '[i]t is contrary to human right, international justice and civilization to barter...people who claim equal right to live'.⁵⁴ African students in Dublin passed a resolution expressing their loyalty to Great Britain but also condemning the alleged transfer of 'British Protected Persons' in Nigeria to Nazi Germany.⁵⁵ African and African American residents of Harlem, New York, added their voices through the Ethiopian World Federation, a pan-African group.⁵⁶

The slavery-laden anti-German propaganda posters aimed at Africans, ambiguous colonial status, and continuing reports about potential colonial transfers intensified the pan-African conversation over the identity, rights, and dignity of colonised peoples in Africa. They also raised some critical existential questions. Were colonised people 'British subjects' with legal and human rights, or 'protected persons' who had associated themselves with a colonial power, by treaty or fealty, and deserved to be consulted on matters affecting them, or objects of imperial munificence with no rights, who could be exchanged like chattel slaves in relations between Britain and Nazi Germany? In their discourses on African rights and dignity, the African protesters and petitioners were caught, metaphorically, between the Union Jack and the Nazi Swastika.

While the contexts of the African protesters' dilemmas were clear, some of their reactions were ironic and complex. That irony is evident in the fact that all the protesters expressed their fears of being traded by Great Britain, and their astonishment at the failure of British statesmen to clarify their status in the British empire and give them the assurance of protection against potential transfer to Nazi rule. Yet, in all their protests and petitions, they affirmed unwavering loyalty to Great Britain and the British empire. They went further. They became staunch advocates for African participation in the war against Nazi Germany alongside Britain and France, the colonial powers that refused them any definitive assurances in the interwar period that they would not be transferred to Nazi colonialism.

The dilemma over ambiguous colonial status lingered and fueled the colonial transfer protests and their inherent irony. On 8 November 1938, the *West African Pilot* wrote an editorial on the resolution passed by 'African students at Dublin University' condemning the colonial transfer rumours and reports. The paper captured the dilemma facing people in the crown colony of Nigeria over Nazi Germany's colonial demands in an evocative statement: 'we shall not welcome the idea of renouncing the Union Jack for the Nazi Swastika'.⁵⁷ Yet, this declared solidarity with

⁵²Korieh, *Nigeria*, 87, 102.

⁵³'Former German colonies', editorial, *WAP*, 1 Nov. 1938.

⁵⁴Protest: return of African colonies to Germany', *New Times and Ethiopia News*, 28 May 1938, 8.

⁵⁵'The Dublin Resolution', *WAP*, 8 Nov. 1938.

⁵⁶Korieh, *Nigeria*, 101–2.

⁵⁷*WAP*, 'The Dublin Resolution'.

British rule was not without its notable irony. The editorial acknowledged that although the British governor of Nigeria Sir Bernard Bourdillon had given the people of Nigeria ‘personal assurance’ that the transfer rumours were mere fantasy, the editors who had been a critical part of the African protests still wanted to remain ‘apprehensive’ despite the ‘assurance’.⁵⁸ Even more ironic were the editors’ professions of loyalty to Britain and admiration of ‘British ideals of life and liberty’. They made it clear that they ‘appreciate [their] British connection and...have learned to love British traditions and political ideology’.⁵⁹ Four days after, the editors justified their publication of ‘news regarding the alleged proposed transfer of Nigeria to Germany’. They argued that they have been ‘motivated by love of country and loyalty to the Imperial Throne’.⁶⁰ In August 1939, as the Nazi regime intensified its anti-British propaganda in Europe and violated one collective security treaty after another with impunity, the *West African Pilot* used another editorial to urge ‘support’ for the British empire. As the paper noted ‘[i]n this time of need, we as a solid part of that Empire must bury our indifferences with our rulers and support the Mother Country to a man. Our loyalty which should be indicated by our willingness to assist the local Government must be steady and indomitable with a tenacity characteristic of African stamina’.⁶¹

Expressing loyalty to Great Britain while protesting and petitioning ambiguous British positions on territorial transfers was not an elite and urban phenomenon. A diverse pro-British but aggrieved group of Nigerians took part in protesting the territorial transfer allegations. Rural chiefs, young people, farmers, school children, market women, and village teachers wrote petitions or sought people to write petitions for them and joined mass protests to profess loyalty to Britain or express their dissent to any dealings with Nazi Germany on colonial territories.⁶² On 10 November 1938, ‘five thousand loyal subjects and protected persons’ consisting of journalists, traditional chiefs, and Christian and Islamic clergy assembled at Glover Memorial Hall, in Lagos, to ‘demonstrate their loyalty to the British Commonwealth of Nations’ and ‘to register their resentment against the tendency of European statesmen and diplomats to bargain the transfer of Africans as chattels’. The protesters affirmed that they did ‘not wish to be transferred to Germany’.⁶³ They passed a nine-point ‘Resolution’ embodying that wish and sent it to Governor Bourdillon for ‘transmission to His Majesty’s Government’. The fourth point expressed opposition to ‘the ideology of Nazism’ because it ‘promulgate[d] the doctrine of the inferiority of the African as a member of the human race’ and claimed that Africans are ‘destined to racial extinction in order to make the abundance of the earth more secure for the so-called “Aryan” races’.⁶⁴ The protesters demanded from Great Britain ‘unequivocal’ confirmation or denial of the transfer allegations and a categorical promise that ‘His Britannic Majesty’s Government will never entertain such an idea in the future’.⁶⁵ Five days after the Glover Hall protest, the ‘Nigerian Youth Movement’ held a meeting at the ‘Africa Club’ in Lagos, and passed a related resolution. In it the group asked that ‘if Great Britain feels that she can no longer protect us, she must allow us the right to invite any other nation for our protection’.⁶⁶

In all these protests, and the editorials the *West African Pilot* wrote about them, the emphasis was on the symbolism and implications of the transfer of people to another colonial power.⁶⁷

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹See ‘For an honest world—reward for loyalty?’, *WAP*, 12 Nov. 1938.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹‘Support the empire’, editorial, *WAP*, 30 Aug. 1939. Also Zik, ‘Inside stuff: “Anti-British propaganda”’, *WAP*, 11 Jan. 1939.

⁶²Korieh, *Nigeria*, 27, 87, 95–8.

⁶³‘Monster mass meeting is held on alleged barter of Nigeria’, *WAP*, 14 Nov. 1938. See also *WAP*, ‘5,000 people protest’.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵‘The next move’, editorial, *WAP*, 14 Nov. 1938.

⁶⁶‘1,000 youths resent Nazi rule in Nigeria’, *WAP*, 19 Nov. 1938.

⁶⁷*WAP*, ‘The next move’.

But expressions of loyalty to Great Britain interlaced these protests and editorials. In November 1938, Azikiwe's newspaper reported the receipt of a protest 'letter' about the transfer rumours from 'a group of University students from Nigeria...studying in the United Kingdom'. In that letter, the students expressed their astonishment and disappointment that 'an exchange of proprietorship should be the...compensation [for] Nigeria's loyalty to the British Empire'. The students concluded that 'if the allegation [was] true in substance' then it constitute[d] 'plain treachery' and 'a grave injustice'. The editors of the *West African Pilot* used this student protest letter to propose a method of ascertaining the truth behind the rumours from British authorities in London. They suggested that 'a delegation of twelve including the Emir of Sokoto, the Emir of Katsina, the Alake of Abeokuta and the Oba of Benin and other men and women whose training should enable them to present the case for Nigeria intelligently and clearly before any person or tribunal should be selected and sent to England'.⁶⁸

As already noted, it was not solely the slavery symbolism of the transfer of people from a British colonial system to a Nazi alternative that aggravated some colonised Africans. They also feared the potential outcome of that transaction: detaining and even killing of the educated in Nazi concentration camps, as the Nazi regime was doing to educated European Jews. For its part, the *West African Pilot* published a detailed account of the accomplishments of educated Jews and their contributions to human civilisation at the time when the Nazi regime showed its determination to persecute and annihilate European Jewry.⁶⁹ On the day that his newspaper published these accomplishments of Jews, Azikiwe devoted his regular *Inside Stuff* column to 'Anti-Semitism'. He highlighted the contradictions between the Nazi persecution of Jews and the 'brilliant individuals' among Jews 'who have made lasting contributions to our present day civilization'. Azikiwe saw the Nazi persecution of Jews including their educated as 'clearly illogical and irrational and inhuman and unethical'.⁷⁰

Undoubtedly, the emerging information about the Nazi treatment of German Jews, including the educated, fueled the fears of some Western-educated Africans about the fate that could befall them in their potential transfer to Nazi colonialism. Azikiwe echoed this fear when he answered in his popular column, in November 1938, a question that he claimed 'a friend' had written to ask him: 'Why are you afraid of Germany taking over Nigeria if this is possible?' He responded that 'I and those who think alike on this subject are afraid of German rule, because, despite the fact that some Imperialistic States have been guilty of mis-rule, in one form or another, Nazi Germany is a more dangerous customer to the African'. He concluded that he was publishing his views 'without prejudice, of course, although I know the Concentration Camp awaits us, as soon as the soil of Nigeria becomes German territory'.⁷¹ Azikiwe's well-documented pronouncements on Nazism and the fate of Africans, and Hitler's well-known contempt for Africans in general and those educated by the British and French in particular, form the backdrop to Azikiwe's fears of African life in a Nazi concentration camp. On the opposite side of the continent, in Uganda and Kenya, the behaviour of the Nazi regime had stirred up similar sentiments. The *Uganda Herald* reported in February 1941 that the Nazi regime had thrown hundreds of Jews into concentration camps and driven out of Germany many educated people of 'such distinction as [Albert] Einstein'.⁷² Like the *Uganda Herald*, the *East African Standard*, published in Kenya, continued to report in 1941 about the Nazi regime's massacre of Jews in southern Poland.⁷³

⁶⁸'It is now or never', WAP, 11 Nov. 1938.

⁶⁹'Jews have helped modern civilization', WAP, 10 Jan. 1939.

⁷⁰Zik, 'Inside stuff: "Anti-Semitism"', WAP, 10 Jan. 1939.

⁷¹Zik, 'Inside stuff: "Germanism"'. See also WAP, 'Concentration camp'; and E. Kissi, *Africans and the Holocaust: Perceptions and Responses of Colonized and Sovereign Peoples* (London, 2021), 63–4.

⁷²'The Nazis and religion: Hitler as a messiah of evil', *The Uganda Herald*, 12 Feb. 1941, and also 'The sufferings of Poland—German crimes against children', *The Uganda Herald*, 3 Oct. 1943, 3.

⁷³'How the Nazis' "new order" is being applied', *East African Standard*, 31 Oct. 1941.

The Nazi treatment of European Jews and its implications for African life under Nazi rule, combined with mistrust of European diplomacy served to rally African opposition to the territorial transfer rumours. Azikiwe's newspaper had highlighted this when it announced 'a monster mass meeting', at the frontpage of its 19 November 1938 issue, for the afternoon of that day, at the Lagos Race Course, organized by the 'Nigerian Youth Movement'. The paper proclaimed that '[t]he inhuman treatment being meted out to the Jews by the German people to whom the meaningless doctrine of race purity has become an obsession, the ruthless attacks by the Germans on the colored Nations of the earth and their open avowal of their intention to exterminate or keep in perpetual slavery the Black race make every Nigerian to shudder at the proposal of the transfer or partition of Nigeria to the rule of Nazi Germany'. The paper added '[t]oday in the open arena of the Lagos Race Course, thousands of people would gather to register their protest against the transfer or partition of Nigeria to... German rule, as a sort of scape-goat for the sins of omission and commission of European politicians'.⁷⁴

Besides the role that the Nazi persecution of European Jews and distrust of European politicians played, African reactions to rumours and reports about the potential transfer of them to Nazi colonialism were complex. Underneath those reactions were conflicting political, social, and economic interests. The *Ashanti Pioneer* newspaper in the Gold Coast reported on the presence of Nazi sympathisers in the colony. Some of these pro-German colonial subjects resented the restrictions British colonial administrators placed on the sale of alcohol and guns in the 1930s and during the war, and expected Nazi rule to offer better prospects for trade in these commodities. Some rural farmers in the Gold Coast considered life under Adolf Hitler to be potentially more conducive to cocoa farmers than under the British.⁷⁵ D. E. K. Amenumey and Dennis Laumann have also shown in their research on the former German colony of Togoland, closer to the Gold Coast, that similar pro-German sentiments existed there too. They were prominent among older Africans who remained nostalgic about the economic prosperity they claimed German colonial rule had brought them, and which British mandated authority had failed to restore.⁷⁶ These types of economically motivated pro-German feelings in the Gold Coast, and in the former German Togoland, also existed in colonial Nigeria. There, some traders in local food items wanted free and fair trade with German merchants which the British colonial administration had restricted in the 1930s.⁷⁷ There is little evidence, however, that these individual and group economic interests of rural African farmers and urban traders in Nigeria, and the Gold Coast, embraced Nazi anti-African racism or accepted colonial subjects as legitimate pawns in imperial territorial bargains. Instead, they seemed to have tempered their disapproval of the rumoured Nazi colonial takeover with a hope that, if it happened, German colonial control would produce some positive outcomes for them. These Africans' ambivalence reflected the tension between their fear of German colonial racist oppression and their personal economic aspirations.

The situation in other mandated territories in West Africa was equally complex. As Richard Joseph, Jonathan Derrick, and Victor Bong Amazee have discussed in their respective works, pro-German (and not necessarily pro-Nazi) attitudes were evident among certain categories of colonised Africans in the French and British Cameroon in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s. Apparently, it did not take long for the majority Duala people in the French mandated territory to see 'unpalatable' similarities between their former German rulers and the new French trustees, especially over the expropriation of land.⁷⁸ The Duala elite criticised their new French rulers for the limited economic development infrastructure they brought and the harsh taxes and forced

⁷⁴'Monster mass meeting will be held at race course today', *WAP*, 19 Nov. 1938.

⁷⁵PRAAD CSO 23/1/75. Secret 1939-41, 'German propaganda', editorial, *The Ashanti Pioneer*, 25 May 1940.

⁷⁶Amenumey, 'German Administration', 634-5; D. Laumann, 'A historiography of German Togoland, or the rise and fall of a "model colony"', *History in Africa*, 30 (2003), 206. See also Laumann, 'Narratives', 280, 284, 287.

⁷⁷Korieh, *Nigeria*, 53, 180-1, 203-4.

⁷⁸Joseph, 'German question', 69.

labour they imposed.⁷⁹ The Duala also used ‘petitions’ to protest French rule. The fact that some Duala chiefs wrote their petitions or had others write them in the German language aggravated the French colonial administrators and raised their suspicion of German influence over the Duala elite and their chiefs.⁸⁰ That suspicion was deepened when a local musical group in the mandated territory wore German-made caps, with the inscription ‘Vive Hindenburg’, at one of its public performances, and a local Cameroonian, Mukuri Dikongue, founded a clandestine group with a German name, and with members who swore an oath dedicating themselves to the return of French Cameroon to Germany.⁸¹

In the view of Richard Joseph, it is hard to distinguish pro-German feelings from real anti-French sentiments or proto-nationalist aspirations in the French mandate. However, genuine pro-German feelings existed among a small minority of elite and non-elite people in French Cameroon, but those feelings did not reflect a fondness for the Nazi regime. Joseph notes that ‘as the Nazi regime increased its demand for the return of Germany’s former colonies, even Cameroonians who had been critical of French rule now rallied to support their current colonial rulers.’⁸² They did so for two reasons. One, Germany had a mixed colonial record of ‘good works and harsh treatment’. Thus, when Cameroonians challenged French rule, they pointed to the good works of the Germans — roads, buildings, and railroads. Second, the ‘racist ideology of the Nazi regime’. Memories of the harshness of German rule often led to ‘effusive praise’ of the French. It was this second reason that undermined any pro-German goodwill that existed in French Cameroon. Even the most ardent Germanophile saw no good reason to empathise with ‘a [Nazi] regime which professed such hatred for the Negro race and whose leader referred to them as “half-apes”’.⁸³ This is evidence that some of the African protesters had knowledge of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, and the anti-African ideology of the Nazi regime deepened their fears of the territorial transfer reports. Other colonised Africans had other interests despite their fears of being bartered.

Jonathan Derrick has argued that former veterans and Duala employees of the German colonial government never reconciled themselves to the departure of the Germans.⁸⁴ But these feelings were associated with the reluctance of the French mandate administration to return lands the former German administration had seized from the majority Duala population and their chiefs. Beside the Dualas, the Akwa, Batanga, and Malimba people were equally anti-French over the same self-interested issues about lost employment and lost lands.⁸⁵ Anti-French attitudes (often mistaken for pro-Germanism) cut across genders and generations too. Derrick has pointed to the ‘women’s anti-tax protest’ in July 1931 as ‘a notable demonstration of opposition’ to French rule in the mandated territory.⁸⁶ However, not all Dualas and Akwas opposed the French. As Derrick notes, ‘Duala attitudes at the beginning of French rule [in northern Cameroon] were certainly affected by the fact that the Germans had been evicted’. However, sentimental pro-Germanism merely served as a mobilising force against French rule. It reflected a desire for ‘self-government rather than a German restoration.’⁸⁷ Like some colonial subjects in the Gold Coast and Nigeria, ‘Dualas [of French Cameroon] resented being simply passed like goods from one European country’s rule to another’s’.⁸⁸ This is further evidence that opposition to territorial barter was widespread in West Africa.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 73, 76.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 70.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 81, 84.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 87.

⁸³*Ibid.*

⁸⁴Derrick, “Germanophone” elite’, 263.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 261, 264, 266.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 265.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 267.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 264.

Genuine pro-German feelings were much stronger in the Anglophone section of Cameroon throughout the 1930s than in the French section. As Amazee has noted pro-German sentiments ‘grew in response to the realities of...British rule’.⁸⁹ The Germans had supported local chiefs with generous monetary and materials gifts. They had also granted local chiefs significant ‘judicial powers’.⁹⁰ The British did not continue this reward system of colonial rule and the local chiefs did not hide their displeasure. The chiefs and people of Buea who resented the lack of employment, ‘unfair prices’ of goods, and suspension of public infrastructure works in the territory by the British expressed their discontent through overt pro-German activism.⁹¹ Colonised Africans in the British mandate complained about ‘higher prices for goods which were sold cheaply to Europeans’.⁹² Thus, whereas the Nazi regime’s anti-African racism eroded sympathy for Nazi Germany and its colonial demands in the neighbouring French Cameroon, and elsewhere in West Africa, it did not in the nearby British Cameroon. Despite this key exception, the transfer reports continued to occupy the pages of the African newspapers and the attention of many colonised people in West Africa.

By January 1939, the ‘transfer scare’ had reached a tipping point. As the new year progressed, events in Europe gained renewed attention in West Africa. In July of that year, the *West African Pilot* published a news report written by its correspondent Chatwood Hall from Moscow.⁹³ In it, the writer reported that ‘[a]ll indications...in Europe point unmistakably to the fact that as soon as Germany has settled the question of Central Europe, a vast colony of the Third Reich, Africa will be...next’.⁹⁴ The report claimed that Hitler’s ‘expansionist plan’ for Africa ‘envisage[d] a Colonial Empire extending from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and embracing the Gold Coast, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Angolo [*sic*], the Congo, Mozambique, Uganda, Gambia, Rhodesia and South-West Africa’. The article contained reports of a ‘reign of oppression’ in German-occupied Czechoslovakia, and ‘a concentration camp for 80,000 persons...set up near Prague’. From ‘this situation in one of Germany’s Central European colonies’, the writer concluded, ‘one need hardly ask what would be the situation in a Fascist German African colony of black people?’⁹⁵ The writer reminded his African readers about the racist remarks that Hitler had made in his autobiography about them. To demonstrate that the editors of the *West African Pilot* took this report seriously, they carried on the front page of the paper’s 15 July 1939 issue an advertisement of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and urged readers to get the book. Arguably, an African newspaper advertising Hitler’s racist book for public reading was ironic. Nevertheless, it highlighted the sentiments that made African protesters of colonial territorial bargains adamant about any British rhetorical professions of goodwill towards them on this moral and existential issue of the interwar period.

African skepticism of British assurances

Perhaps from the colonised Africans’ point of view a clearer and unambiguous colonial status recognising their membership as legitimate ‘British subjects’ was the assurance and the insurance they needed that they would not be transferred to another imperial authority. That was evident in one of the many editorials the *West African Pilot* wrote about colonial status and the territorial transfer rumours. The paper’s editors did not think that ambiguous colonial status and continuous apprehension over its larger implications were the reward colonised Africans deserved for their

⁸⁹ Amazee, ‘British versus pro-Germanism’, 57. See also G. N. Njung, ‘The British Cameroons Mandate regime: the roots of the twenty-first-century political crisis in Cameroon’, *American Historical Review*, 124:5 (2019), 1715, 1719.

⁹⁰ Amazee, ‘British versus pro-Germanism’, 59–60.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ C. Hall, ‘Expert says herr Hitler’s next move is towards Africa’, *WAP*, 14 July 1939.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* See also Ekoko, ‘British attitude’, 290.

loyalty to Britain. They thought the ‘alarm’ that their ambiguous status in the British empire continued to cause them at a period when rumours and reports suggested that ‘possibly Nigeria and her twenty-one million inhabitants may have to welcome the Nazi Swastika’ deserved ‘a passionate examination’.⁹⁶ In the minds of the paper’s editors, ‘Nigeria [was] a Colony and Protectorate under the British Commonwealth of Nations and it enjoy[ed] the protection of His Britannic Majesty’s Government in return for [the] loyalty’ of the people of Nigeria. Yet, the ambiguous legal status and rights of the colonised people under British rule amid rumours and reports that they could be put under a Nazi colonial system made all Nigerians ‘reasonably apprehensive’.⁹⁷ Only a forthright clarification of their status and rights and definitive assurances of their security from British officials could assuage that apprehension. But the ‘assurances’ they received were not as forthright and definitive as they wanted.

Some British officials and statesmen had tried to assure the African protesters that Britain did not intend to hand them over to Nazi colonial authority. One of the assurances came from Lord Lugard, a former British Governor of Nigeria, and a member of the League of Nations’ Mandates Commission. Lugard had argued that any British acceptance of Germany’s colonial demands would be a ‘reversal of the pledges repeated by successive Secretaries of State that the mandates would never be surrendered’. To violate those pledges would be equal to transferring to ‘a foreign flag...the loyal British subjects in our own crown colonies, or the inhabitants of our protectorates who for all practical purposes enjoy a similar status’.⁹⁸ Lugard’s view of Africans in Britain’s crown colonies and protectorates as legitimate ‘British subjects’ was inconsistent with the ambiguous descriptions of the same Africans as ‘wards’, ‘dependents’, or ‘protected persons’ by other British statesmen.⁹⁹ It was these ambiguities that Britain maintained over the legal status of the inhabitants of its dependencies in Africa that deepened the fears of the African protesters of the territorial transfer issue.

The continuing reports about Germany’s colonial demand, and the intense protests and petitions in Nigeria over the ‘transfer scare’, prompted another unsatisfactory assurance from L. S. Amery, a conservative politician, former Secretary of State for the Colonies (1924–9), and a noted opponent of appeasement diplomacy. His was a response, in January 1939, to the Nigerian Youth Movement’s petition to London in November 1938. Amery’s letter was particularly noteworthy in its ambiguity. He could only assure the Youth Movement that a ‘Colonial Defense Committee’ would be set up in London to keep ‘the British public educated on...misleading German propaganda’. For the editors of the *West African Pilot*, this was a non-response to the lingering colonial status ambiguities. Their exasperation was evident in their reaction to Amery’s ‘assurance’:

‘We wonder whether the time has not come when responsible British statesmen would define what they mean by “British Subjects” in view of the fact that most of them seem to think that Colonial peoples are “British Subjects” whilst the British Judiciary and the local Colonial Government, in practice, draw a sharp distinction between a British Subject and a British Protected Person’.¹⁰⁰

Transfer rumours, the Anschluss, and a world war

Official British pronouncements did not address the African protesters’ request for clarification of their colonial status or offer the insurance against barter that they expected. Instead, on 30

⁹⁶‘Reward for loyalty’, editorial, *WAP*, 12 Nov. 1938.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

⁹⁸Patch, ‘Germany’s demand’, 6.

⁹⁹*EAR*, ‘Britain’s colonial empire’. See also: *EAR*, ‘Permanency of mandates’ and ‘The British reply: by Mr. Amery [to ‘Colonies: the German case stated by General von Epp’], 21 Jan. 1937; Ekoko, ‘British attitude’, 301–2; and Louis, ‘Colonial appeasement’, 1187.

¹⁰⁰*WAP*, ‘Mr Amery assures’.

September 1938 Britain's new Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared to the world his now infamous 'peace for our time' agreement with Adolf Hitler. It was a peace deal reported to have been reached in Munich to appease the Nazi regime to curb its invasions of independent European nations and, hopefully, avoid another 'World War'. While colonised people in Africa were kept in the dark about what Hitler and Chamberlain had actually discussed in Munich, U.S. officials hinted to the Liberian Ambassador to Washington, C. L. Simpson, that 'colonial questions had been discussed,' although no information was available 'as to whether any decision had been taken and...whether Liberia would be affected'.¹⁰¹ This revelation caused Ambassador Simpson to advise the Liberian Legislature, in Monrovia, that the doctrine of collective security in international affairs had 'utterly failed'. European nations that held dominion over Africans had failed to safeguard the independence of Austria, guaranteed under the Treaty of Versailles, and now breached by Nazi Germany. And the independence of Czechoslovakia, guaranteed under the same treaty, was seriously under threat by the Nazi regime. Ambassador Simpson saw these unrestrained breaches of the sovereignty of Austria and Czechoslovakia as sufficient reasons for Liberia to 'reflect on its position' as 'the only independent state in West Africa'. The Ambassador concluded that these events should teach Africans to be skeptical of European assurances of 'collective security'.¹⁰² His skepticism and recommendation to his country can be understood in three ways. One, like Austria and Czechoslovakia, many German immigrant doctors and traders lived in Liberia. Two, there were rumours that Germany was interested in the transfer of Liberia to the Third Reich, or to Poland.¹⁰³ Three, fear of Nazism and Hitler's contempt for Black Africans made this independent West African nation of 'freed slaves' just as anxious as some colonised Africans about Germany's colonial ambitions.

The Nazi regime's annexation of Austria, in March 1938, and open intentions to annex Czechoslovakia, ostensibly to 'reunite' German-speaking peoples there to the Third Reich, deepened anxieties in Togoland, the Gold Coast, the Cameroons, and Nigeria about the intentions of the Nazi regime about Africa, and Britain's willingness to protect African interests. The fact that German-speaking people lived in Togoland, closer to the Gold Coast, and British and French Cameroon, closer to Nigeria, made these Nazi victories in Central Europe ominous for colonised Africans.¹⁰⁴

By the late 1930s, and early 1940s, some colonised Africans had lost confidence in British good intentions. A sense of British diplomatic weakness and even duplicity informed their perceptions. The *West African Pilot*, the *Ashanti Pioneer*, and *Gold Coast Independent* followed developments in Europe closely. They also reported on the treatment of European Jews by the Nazi regime. In August 1938, the *West African Pilot* opined that the world was 'drifting towards warfare'. This grim assessment was based on the paper's analyses of 'the desecration of the Versailles Treaty' by the Nazi regime, 'the Austrian Anschluss, and the [Nazi] preparations for the absorption of Czechoslovakia' besides Great Britain and other nations arming themselves. The paper asked: 'How do these preparations for war affect those of us...in the Colonies?'¹⁰⁵ The prospect of becoming subject to Nazi colonialism and its possible racism and rumoured enslavement in a possible postwar world controlled by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime was enough for many colonised people in Africa, including the protesters and petitioners, to align themselves closely with their British and French colonisers. Arguably, the Nazi annexations of Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938, and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, settled the choice between the Union Jack and the Nazi Swastika as two symbols of empire among some African protesters of colonial territorial

¹⁰¹C. L. Simpson, *The Memoirs of C. L. Simpson, former Liberian Ambassador to Washington and to the Court of St. James's: The Symbol of Liberia* (London, 1961), 209.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 207–8.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 198–9. Also 'Poland wants Liberia', *WAP*, 12 May 1938.

¹⁰⁴'What next! Colonies?', *WAP*, 25 Apr. 1939.

¹⁰⁵'Are we drifting to war?', *WAP*, 23 Aug. 1938, 4.

transfers. Even famous African critics of the ambiguous status of British colonial rule in Nigeria and the Gold Coast buried their ‘differences’ with Britain and supported the ‘Mother Country’.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, strong grievances in French Cameroon against Nazi behaviour kept the most sentimentally pro-German Africans, who were also protesters of French imperialism in that mandated territory, closer to France. Eventually, more than one million Black African soldiers fought in the Second World War, in various theatres in Africa, Asia, and Europe, and on behalf of Britain, France, Belgium, and Italy.¹⁰⁷ More than half a million African soldiers from Britain’s colonies fought under the Union Jack, against the Nazi Swastika, from 1939 to 1945.¹⁰⁸

Once the Empire was at war the *Ashanti Pioneer* devoted its pages to helping British colonial administrators root out ‘Nazi sympathizers’ in the Gold Coast colony. The paper had very harsh words for people who ‘clamour[ed] for Nazi Germany’s rule’ out of self-interest.¹⁰⁹ The publishers of the newspaper now felt that their ‘grievances against the colonial government’ were less important than the danger of living under German rule.¹¹⁰ Influential traditional leaders who typically supported the British colonial administration had similarly unfavourable views of the Nazi regime. Nana Ofori Atta, a paramount chief in the Gold Coast crown colony, reminded his fellow colonised Africans that ‘Africa and Africans were among the aims which Hitler had in waging this war’. Before the war, Ofori Atta continued, ‘Hitler claimed that the former German colonies should be returned to Germany... If this had been agreed to and a place like Togoland had been given to him, what would have happened to us in the Gold Coast? We all know that at one time his only claim was Danzig but what happened? He simply walked into Czechoslovakia and took the Czechs who bear no relation to German[s] as slaves...’¹¹¹ It was this type of Nazi behaviour in Europe, and the belief among Africans that their transfer to Nazi colonialism — as it was rumoured and reported in the 1930s — could result in their enslavement, that inspired Ofori Atta and many in West Africa to ‘strongly feel’ that they ‘must do everything’ they could ‘to support the war effort’ against Nazi Germany.¹¹² Western-educated Africans had expressed similar feelings in the face of anxieties about their ambiguous colonial status, and the implications for them of their transfer to Nazi colonialism given the Nazi persecution of Jews, including the educated, and left-leaning political opponents. This realignment of African interests happened even though the war was led by Britain and France, the main European colonisers in West Africa.

Conclusion

What distinguished African protests and petitions in West Africa in the 1930s and early 1940s from earlier versions were the moral and existential issues that inspired them, and the emotions and international events that sustained them. What was at stake was not the appropriation of native lands for colonial infrastructure projects, or the destoolment of a chief for disloyalty to the colonial state. Rather, it was the reported transfer of colonised people to a different colonial system without consultation. This issue struck at the core of the rights, status, dignity, and survival of the colonised. Thus, the West African reaction to Germany’s colonial demands were significant in four ways. First, it was a rights-based response to the indignity of being transferred like movable property from one

¹⁰⁶WAP, ‘Support the empire’; ‘Empire’s defence’, WAP, 2 Sep. 1939; ‘Playing our part’, WAP, 6 Sep. 1939.

¹⁰⁷‘The Africans who fought in WW II’, BBC, 9 Nov. 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Africa/8344170.stm>.

¹⁰⁸Killingray and Plaut, *Fighting for Britain*, 1, 8, 36, 58, 228, 236. See also PRAAD ADM 1/1/523, letter from H. Cooper to Colonial Office, 6 Feb. 1940; CSO 23/5/32, letter from Gold Coast Governor A. Hodson to Lord Lloyd of Dolobran, ‘Public opinion in the Gold Coast towards the war’; ‘Inside stuff: trust us’, WAP, 28 Jan. 1939.

¹⁰⁹PRAAD CSO 23/1/75. No. S.0066, Secret, 1939–41., ‘German propaganda’, editorial. *Ashanti Pioneer*, 25 May 1940.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹¹PRAAD ADM 14/2/36, speech by Nana Sir Ofori Atta, Legislative Council, *Proceedings of the Meeting of the Legislative Council*, 27 Feb. 1941.

¹¹²*Ibid.*

colonial system to another without consent. Second, it was an anti-racist protest because the protesters opposed the possibility of living under a Nazi regime that had a well-known anti-African ideology. Third, it was a quest for legal clarity on colonial status and affirmation of knowledge of global developments in the 1930s. Africans in the crown colonies sought clarity on the transfer rumours to register their opposition to the lingering ambiguities over their status in the colonial relationship, and any view of them as dispensable pawns in European politics. Their anxieties were fueled by their opposition to Nazi racism and its reported manifestations in the persecution of European Jews. Fourth, protest in this instance was a projection of moral equality in the relationship between colonised and coloniser. By protesting the transfer reports, Africans advanced themselves as the moral equals to their colonisers in their common, if disparate, oppositions to Nazism.

The outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 shifted the attention of the African protesters of ambiguous colonial status and potential barter in territorial exchanges to joining their colonisers in an allied effort to defeat the Nazi regime. Colonial administrators now saw African opposition to Nazi racism and rumoured enslavement as their powerful military recruitment arguments. Paradoxically, it took a global war of intersecting interests to resolve that ambiguous status of the colonised in the British empire, and for the colonised to escape potential Nazi slavery and feared persecution. African protests over ambiguous colonial status and fear of Nazi racism and its possible manifestations played an integral role in the eventual African participation in the Second World War.

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