

February 1927

Statement of the Delegation of the "Etoile Nord Africaine" ("North African Star") by Hadj-Ahmed Messali

Citation:

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Summary:

The presenter of this address, Ahmed Ben Messali Hadj (1898-1974), is known as the "father" of Algerian nationalism, one of whose foremost biographies is Benjamin Stora's *Messali Hadj, 1898-1974* (2012). Having served in the French army in 1918-1921, Messali Hadj for economic reasons moved to Paris. There, he met his French wife, the leftist Emilie Busquant. In 1925, he was recruited to the French Communist Party's (PCF) colonial commission. In June 1926, he co-founded, and became Secretary General of, the *Etoile Nord Africaine* (ENA), which at first demanded political and legal equality for France's Muslim North Africans. As this text shows, demands shifted by February 1927. That month, ENA functionaries including Messali Hadj travelled to Bruxelles. Together with leftists and delegates from three dozen colonized countries, they participated in the founding conference of the League against Imperialism (LAI), which was initiated by the Moscow-headquartered Comintern and organized by the PCF and the German communist Willi Münzenberg; the experience in Bruxelles of one non-Arab delegation, India, has been analyzed in Michele Louro's *Comrades against Imperialism: Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism* (2020).

It was in Bruxelles that Messali Hadj held the below address, speaking ex catedra as his notes had disappeared. The LAI was soon paralyzed by discord between communists and activists for whom allying with communists was a means to an anticolonial end; in 1936, it dissolved. Even so, it was the first truly international attempt to combat imperialism, as shown by the edited volume *The League against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives* (2020). As for the ENA, it in 1928 cut its ties with the PCF, being too independent-minded and -organized and vexed that the PCF, following the Comintern line, was moving away from ENA's ideas about self-determination. In 1929, the French government outlawed ENA. In the 1930s Messali Hadj became closer inter alia to Shakib Arslan, translated excerpts of whose work *Why Muslims Lagged Behind and Others*

Progressed is included in this collection. Even so, in 1936 to early 1937 a rebranded ENA shortly joined the leftist French Front Populaire, but then again was closed down. Messali Hadj reacted by establishing the clandestine Parti du Peuple Algérien (PPA), which—a shift—demanded absolute Algerian autonomy within the French Republic.

Condemned by the Vichy government to hard labor in 1941, Messali Hadj returned to Algeria in 1945. He continued to play a leading political role, founding in 1946 a PPA successor, the Mouvement pour la triomphe des libertés démocratiques. But from 1954, his star declined. By 1957, the Front de Libération Nationale, the new organization that in November 1954 started the War of Independence, ravaged the Mouvement National Algérien that Messali Hadj had founded that month, too. Politically neutralized, he stayed in France. He was allowed to return to Algeria only after his death, in 1974, for burial in his hometown of Tlemcen.

Original Language:

French

Contents:

Translation - English

Declaration of the Delegation « Etoile Nord Africaine » [North African Star]

In the name of the Etoile Nord-Africain, which joins the natives (*indigènes*) of Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, we thank from the bottom of our heart the organizers of this congress and give a brotherly salute to all organisations and all brave men who, for the first time, have dared to invite all people oppressed by imperialism around the world [*impérialisme mondial*] to come together and unite in order to fight effectively against colonial oppression.

The North-African people is happy to participate in this congress, represented by this organ [i.e., the ENA]. We hope that it will bring about an international organization capable of guiding the oppressed people and to work methodically and tenaciously for their total emancipation. The Algerian people, which has lived under French domination for a century, has given up all expectations that French imperialism will improve its lot. France landed in our country in 1830, settled it violently [*s'est installé par la force*] and, having subdued us, made us fantastic promises [*nous a promis monts et merveilles*]! But what is our situation today? Despite all the promises France made us, especially in World War I, we have found that far from undertaking steps that improve our lot, it has, rather, its has redoubled its bullying and intensified the oppression of which we are the victims.

Colonialism's advocates proclaim all the time that France is not an oppressor, that, on the contrary, in the process of colonization claims to bring civilization and, with it, liberty to colonized people. The principal objection France has against peoples that develop under its domination and that aspire to become independent, is as follows: "We cannot grant the Algerian people independence because, following the expression of Mr. [Maurice] Viol[le]t [1870-1960], the Governor General of Algeria, that people still has the mentality of the 9th century." This demonstrates the official spirit of the French government. It is not only unwilling to make haste and grant us independence, but is indeed determined to refuse us even the smallest improvement of our social circumstances.

We have been reduced to the status of convicts in our own country. We possess neither the freedom of association nor the freedom of press nor the freedom to congregation. No social law protects our native worker as it does with French workers. We do not even have the freedom to travel freely in our country, and are subject to surveillance and all sorts of exceptional measures.

As for education, 600,000 native children run the streets rather than sitting in a class room. State schools systematically eliminate Arabic language education—though this does not really matter because any way, only 3% of native children are scholarized.

Poverty is devastating our country and famine is recurring. Every year, hundreds and hundreds of natives die along the roads from hunger and cold. In 1922/23 and again this year, everybody noted that the natives of the urban agglomerations were going through the trash every morning, looking for morsels to eat. This recurring famine is the result of the almost total expropriation of natives' lands and of assets, and of their eviction to the highlands, where they cannot subsist. The famine is the result, also, of the shameful exploitation of native workers, who are forced to work for 11 and 12 hours for paltry wages which are about half a European's wage.

As for our historical development, Sirs, we do not only belong and are the descendants of an ancient civilization that you all know, but we also are not at all indifferent to civilization and modern progress. As example, let me refer to the fight by the small people of the Rif [in northern Morocco], which organized itself and fought for fifteen years for its independence.

This is why, Sirs, we affirm, standing in front of the entire world, that we are capable to steer our country's destiny and to safeguard its political and economic life ourselves.

Another argument by the colonialists is that once we will have obtained our independence, we are going to indulge in a sort of xenophobia against the European elements. This is absolutely wrong. On the contrary, we ourselves will be the first to call on technicians and workers of all countries, provided that we run our affairs ourselves.

I conclude by loudly and clearly thanking, from this tribune, the French proletariat, workers and peasants, for supporting us with courage and energy and for having

confronted repression by protesting forcefully first against the aggression against the small people of the Rif, and by supporting us in our daily struggle for our independence. We assure the League against Colonial Oppression of our gratitude and of our willingness to collaborate fraternally with all oppressed people for the liberation and independence of all.