

# Perspective

## BLACK INTER-ACTION IN EUROPE

McKinley Burt

In the past months I have detailed many of the magnificent contributions of African and African-Americans to European and world culture as though they were independent (though important) achievements. Nothing could be further from the truth than to conclude that these intellectual accomplishments were one-time aberrations from an alleged Black norm of mediocrity.

These African accomplishments did not stand alone but were seminal, inspiring and overlapping, sparking fundamental social and cultural movements which brought about radical change. For instance, the death of Black poet Alexander Pushkin (1837) did not mark the end of the African dynasty in Russia fathered by Abraham Hannibal, engineer, general, and Diplomat. Rather, we see that this prolific architect of social change used "The passionate humanity of his prose and poetry" to further part the curtains of a European stage for a succession of Black giants who were allowed to display a genius stifled or prohibited in America.

Ira Frederick Aldridge (1807-1867): This highly acclaimed Shakespearean actor was educated at the African Free School in New York, but his meteoric dramatic career was launched at the Royalty Theatre of London when he appeared in the role of Othello in 1826. His abilities and versatility led to such leading roles as King Lear, Shylock, Oronoko, Mungo, and others, played throughout Europe. But it was in Russia that the dramatic lifelines of two great interpreters of the human existence met and intertwined.

Aldridge, riding the tide of liberation philosophy authored by Pushkin, found extraordinary success in Russia, receiving the highest of

honors and monetary awards. We have it from Clarence L. Holte (p.271-273, Journal of African Civilization, 1985): "In December 1857 Czar Alexander II published a declaration of intent for abolition of serfdom (Sharecroppers). On February 19, 1861 the declaration was implemented and some 22.5 million serfs were Freed. Aldridge arrived in Russia in the midst of this excitement and, since he, as a Blackman, was a symbol of liberation from slavery, the serfs and radical intelligentsia were eager to support him."

The pen, the soul and the artistry of two Blacks had mightily changed the destiny of a continent for centuries to come. Sergei Duryiin tells us, "The appearance of Aldridge was extraordinarily timely; the Russian actors awaited such a one in order to learn from him 'how to master their art, and the Russian spectators in order to delve into the mighty feelings and thoughts of Shakespeare.'"

There is even more of a continuity of African presence than appears at first blush here. When we speak of Shakespeares Othello here we need to remember that the famous Bard almost literally took the theme for his play from the writings and life experience of Leo Africanus, the great African historian and geographers.

The parallels between the lives of Africanus and that of the character Othello go far beyond the fact that each had been an African slave. There is in each an articulated ethos and critique, bitter in nature where it deals with the encounter between the trusting African and his Christian European enslaver.

Readers will remember that I have previously cited the influence of the ancient African playwright and poet Terrance upon all the principal European dramatists. And that his texts were a major element of the curriculum in the schools in Shakespeare's days (as well as Moliere). Those African footsteps echo endlessly, don't they?

Note: "This article is reprinted from the May 1989 issue of the ADL Bulletin, national publication of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith."

## Healing the Wounds

"Whatever divides blacks and Jews pales into insignificance compared to what unites them"

by Donald R. Mintz and Leonard Zakim

Donald R. Mintz of New Orleans is chairman of ADL's national Civil Rights Committee. Leonard Zakim is director of the League's New England regional office. Both participated in the conference about which they write.

Something remarkable occurred at a two-day conference on black-Jewish relations recently at Dillard University in New Orleans.

For as long as most civil rights observers could remember, no major predominantly black institution had initiated and sponsored a conference on the subject. Constructive, sharp and candid dialogue marked the sessions. People listened and learned.

The conference was the brainchild of Dr. Samuel Dubois Cook, Dillard University's president, whose concern for reviving the black-Jewish coalition grew out of a mission for black college presidents to Israel, sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL Bulletin, November 1988: "Black-Jewish Relations--The View From Israel").

Dr. Cook succinctly explained his purpose in organizing the colloquium to some 150 participants who came from Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York and New Orleans.

"Strengthening the black-Jewish alliance," he said, "could serve as an urgent moral antidote to some of the critical social ills of our nation. Whatever divides blacks and Jews

pales into insignificance compared to what unites them."

The recent election of former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke to a seat in the Louisiana State Legislature cast a shadow over the conference. (An account of Duke's campaign appears elsewhere in this issue.) The alarming growth of violence among ever-increasing neo-Nazi Skinhead groups added to the conviction that positive action was needed. No one put it better than John E. Jacob, national president of the National Urban League, who said, "Energies need to be devoted to a new era of cooperation."

Two recurrent themes ran through the sessions. One emphasized a more realistic view of the black-Jewish alliance, rather than nostalgia for the "good old days" of the civil rights era. The other was a repeated call for a new mature approach that tolerates neither black anti-Semitism nor Jewish racism, that recognizes key differences in the agenda of each group and searches for practical ways to improve future relations.

It was plain that this meeting was not an attempt to pass over long-existing differences nor did it attempt to ignore such thorny issues as "Hymietown," the battle over quotas and the anti-Semitism of Louis Farrakhan. What it did do was provide a balanced program highlighting the issues that unite blacks and Jews as well as those that threaten to rupture the coalition.

There was open and frank discussion on both sides. Jews questioned why black leaders had failed to quickly respond to the Cokely controversy in Chicago when mayoral aide Steve Cokely was fired after his record of hard-core paranoid anti-Semitism became public. The conflict threatened to polarize already strained black-Jewish relations in the city (ADL Bulletin, October 1988: "The Cokely Affair and Its Aftermath"). Blacks voiced their frustration over Jewish objections to quotas, charging that opposition placed unnecessary obstacles in the way of black progress.

The presence of prominent leaders from the black community such as Dr. Kenneth B. Clark, New York psychologist and educator, the Rev. Joseph E. Lowery, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Mr. Jacob testified to the fact that the faltering coalition is not a concern only of Jews, as it is often portrayed.

In his address, Rev. Lowery heralded the relationship between the two communities in the past. He strongly rejected the anti-Semitism of Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, stating clearly: "He doesn't speak for me."

Interestingly, that comment provoked no mention in the extensive media coverage given the conference.

Critical statements--which received the major headlines in the press--came from Dr. Clark, who attempted to dismiss any black responsibility for fighting anti-Semitism. His words, "Blacks are powerless to act on their anti-Semitism--if, in fact, it exists," were widely quoted in the media. He went on to criticize the conference for being "one-sided and putting blacks on the defensive."

Although his remarks did not find resonance among the other black speakers, some participants cautioned that the issue lies at the root of the black community's failure to comprehend Jewish concerns about anti-Semitism. Compounding the misunderstanding is the mistaken belief of some blacks that Jews--as whites--are immune to persecution and that economic affluence somehow shields Jews from discrimination and bigotry.

The Jewish participants pointed out that "Jews need allies, too." One speaker declared that accepting responsibility for dealing with anti-Semitism is critical if the alliance is to thrive.

"Why," another asked, "do blacks persistently cast Israel as a supporter of South Africa while maintaining silence about Arab oil support of the same country?"

Calls were also voiced for col-

laboration on affirmative action, which has long had the support of ADL and other Jewish groups who remain opposed to quotas. There was discussion about the recent Supreme Court decision in City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co., which ruled that the Virginia city's 30 percent minority set-aside program violated the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause.

Proposals for new models of black-Jewish cooperation offered opportunities for rhetoric to be replaced by action. One example was support of "parcel to parcel" linkage programs in which real estate development is tied to improving housing and job opportunities in minority and low income neighborhoods. Other suggestions included increased course offerings on subjects of black and Jewish concerns at colleges where both groups are heavily represented and joint action against Japan's boycott of Israel and its trade relationship with Africa.

The media coverage of the conference illustrated another factor straining the relationship between blacks and Jews. Most reporters chose to highlight the tensions that did arise but, in actuality, failed to dominate the meetings.

As the conference concluded, many in the frequently applauding audience felt a sense of renewal. There were few illusions that the road ahead would be easy but realistic criteria for reenergizing the coalition were articulated.

Participants recognized that to successfully accomplish these goals requires two-way cooperation. This conference--held on the campus of one of America's oldest and most respected predominantly black institutions of learning--was surely a step in the right direction.



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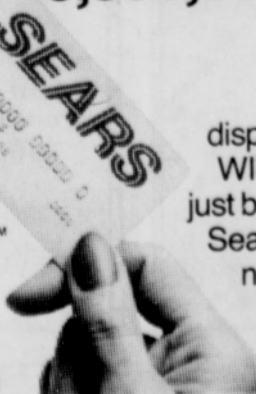


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