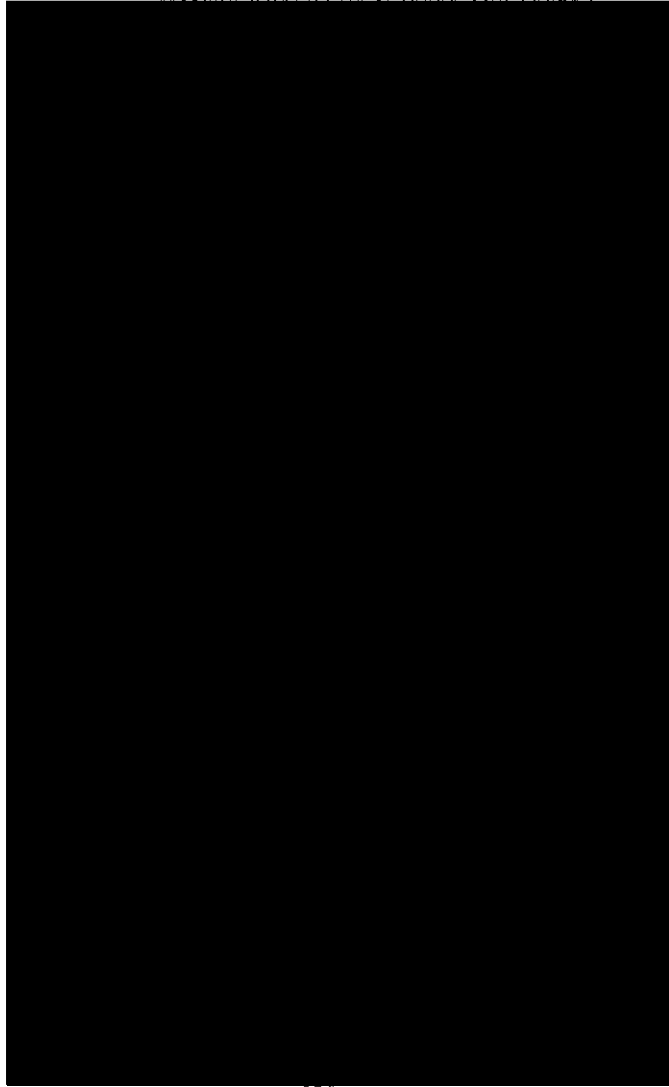


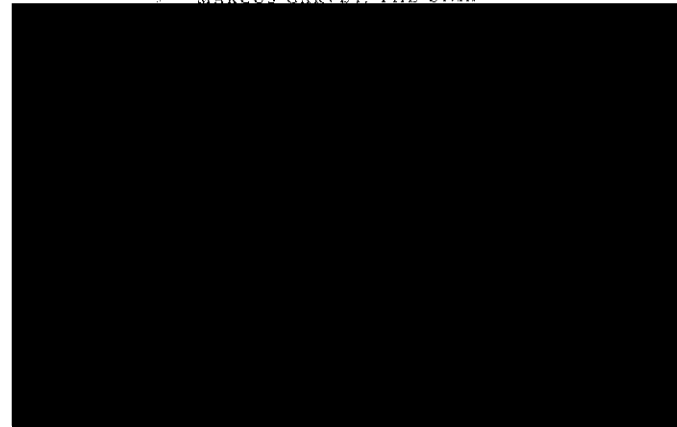


Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*

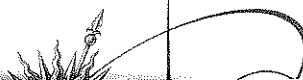
THE POLITICAL WORLDS OF SLAVERY AND FREEDOM



MARCUS GARVEY, THE UNIA



During the years of the UNIA's most rapid growth—1918–1922—Marcus Garvey presented an argument and a set of projects that simultaneously took sobering account of African American prospects in the depths of the Jim Crow era and offered a breathtaking vision of political struggle and redemption. He seemed to be especially inspired by the World War I moment, not only because it brought a ferocious racist outburst in the United States but also because of the political transformations it appeared to be unleashing internationally. Irish nationalism, Zionism, the Russian Revolution, the Versailles Peace Conference, and Pan-Africanism heralded both a dramatic shake-up of the old order and the possibility of creat-



was drawn, Garvey's vision was nationalist and anti-colonial. He called not so much for African repatriation as for a movement to oust the European colonizers and to establish a basis for black self-governance, a movement that would link "every member of the race in every part of the world" who, wherever their residence, were "citizens" of Africa. "We of the UNIA," he proclaimed, "are not endeavoring to repatriate at the present moment . . . twelve million Negroes of America, or twelve or fifteen million from the West Indies, . . . [or] twenty-five millions in South and Central America. . . . We are first trying to organize these [millions] . . . with the one object of a free and redeemed Africa." Garvey acknowledged that such an undertaking would require time, that "we have years before us," perhaps "a hundred years," until "Africa finds a Napoleon" and "we will march from this Western Hemisphere sixty million strong." Nonetheless, he was "preaching preparedness." As a Garveyite in Los Angeles later recalled, "Mr. Garvey never did advocate for all Negroes to go back to Africa. [No] he never did that. He was teaching the people that as long as you're in somebody else's house you can't rule . . . [and] Africa was the only continent in which they could have a government of their own."¹⁹

Yet the UNIA was to be more than the vehicle of

organization and preparedness; it was also imagined as an embryonic form of the new African nation itself, a government in exile. "We are endeavoring to perform the function of the government of our race," Garvey announced, "just as the Government of America performs the function of government for ninety million white people." To that end, the UNIA drew up a constitution and a "declaration of rights," created an African Legion and a Black Cross Nursing Corps, recognized organizational units by the military term "divisions," invested in factories, laundries, and restaurants, discussed the wisdom of a "civil service" to avoid corruption and train a political class, established the Black Star Shipping Line to move people and goods in what was seen as a global political economy, looked to ally itself with the government of Liberia, paraded in large processions, sang an anthem and waved a national flag (red, black, and green), and made Marcus Garvey provisional president. "If we are to rise as a great people to become a great national force," Garvey declared, "we must start business enterprises of our own; we must build ships and start trading with ourselves between America, the West Indies, and Africa. We must put up factories in all the great manufacturing centers of the country . . . and in these factories we must manufacture . . . all



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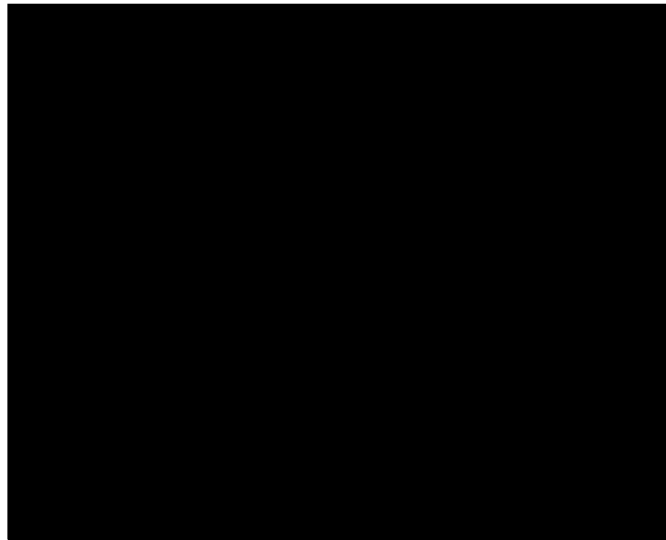
the necessities of life, those things that people need, not only our people . . . but the people of China, of India, of South and Central America, and even the white man." Eventually, "we must have an African Army second to none and a Navy second to none," so that "if they should lynch and burn you the Ambassador of the African Republic in Africa will send home the news to Africa and we will send our battle-ships." If some said or sneered that "this is a dream," Garvey responded: "it wasn't a dream for George Washington."²⁰

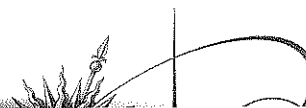
Nothing attracted more popular enthusiasm or brought more financial support from the UNIA faithful than did the Black Star Line. Even with three rickety, problem-plagued ships, it served as a symbol of power, pride, and destiny in a world of commerce and migration, and thousands of blacks turned out at ports from New York to Havana to Colón, Panama, to greet the Black Star vessels when they steamed in. "It must be understood," a federal agent could report in the fall of 1920, "that the foundation and strength of Garvey's anti-white movement rests solely on his retaining ownership of these ships . . . [whose] commercial value . . . is by far a secondary consideration against their moral and racial value."²¹

The popular appeal of the Black Star Line is wor-

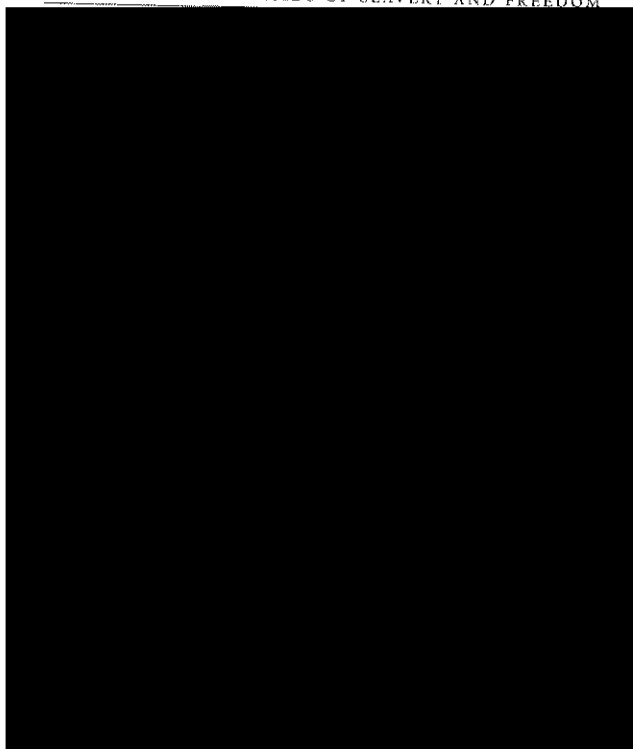
MARCUS GARVEY, THE UNIA

thy of attention not because it identifies an entrepreneurial and capitalistic impulse among Garvey's followers or because it suggests the fundamentally bourgeois orientation of the movement (though, of course, these arguments can and have been made, especially when Garveyism is viewed from the top down);²² it is worthy of attention because it draws us to deeper currents of sensibility and practice, of aspiration and belief among many thousands of African Americans and thereby helps us understand how Garvey was able to build a mass movement so quickly, and one that would endure in many incarnations.





THE POLITICAL WORLDS OF SLAVERY AND FREEDOM



Amid the violent white supremacist campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which sought to enforce black submission through lynching, disfranchisement, and legal segregation, distance, numbers, and arms offered the best protections—as they always had. Under these precarious circumstances, who could deny Garvey's claim that

MARCUS GARVEY, THE UNIA

America was a white man's country, that white racism was intractable, that white allies were few and ineffective, and that blacks had to organize for self-defense? And as black soldiers returned from a war to make the "world safe for democracy" only to find a hardened and more vicious Jim Crow at home, as thousands of black southerners made their way into the cities of the North, and as black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* and then the *Negro World* began to circulate North and South, apprising African Americans of a wide and complex world, who could not be energized by Garvey's vision of 400 million black allies over the globe?

