

# The UNIA Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World (1920)

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The 1920 Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World is one of the most remarkable human rights declarations prepared by an international civil society organisation during the 20th century. Drafted and adopted in New York at the first annual convention of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, it laid out many themes that have continued to shape human rights debates up until today. One would think that this would have sparked interest in the 1920 Declaration, but it is in reality an overlooked and almost forgotten document. The vision behind the Declaration, the historical context and its rich contents makes it a source worthy of attention and a story that deserves to be told to enrich how we approach the history of human rights in the 20th century especially in terms of chronology, substance and agency.

## Genesis

Harlem, August 1, 1920. Liberty Hall is brimming with excitement. Reportedly 12.000 people are in attendance. Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, who originally founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Kingston, Jamaica in 1914 and from 1918 when based in New York mobilized more fully worldwide under its auspices, takes the podium. At this first ever annual convention, he explains that collectively they have spent the last two and a half years spreading "the doctrines of the UNIA to the four corners of the world." Responding to the national and global politics of the post-war moment – and citing a speech by US President Woodrow Wilson - a leading UNIA figure Reverend James W. Eason stated: "We fought, bled and died on the battle plains of France and Flanders that the world might be "made safe for democracy."<sup>[1]</sup> The reality that Blacks face at this moment, however, is a far cry from this aspiration.

The experiences from the First World War and its political aftermath were a major backdrop for the UNIA convention, the rights declaration and the overall ambition to mobilize Black opinion worldwide. As Garvey further elaborated in a speech held on 3 August: "The white race claim freedom, liberty and democracy. For that freedom; for that liberty; for that democracy they drenched Europe in blood for nearly four and a half years. In that bloody war, fought to maintain the standard of civilization and freedom of democracy they called out two million black men from Africa, the West Indies and America to fight that the world might enjoy the benefits of civilization. We fought as men; we fought nobly; we fought gloriously; but after the battle was won we were deprived of our liberties; our democracy, the glorious privileges for which we fought. And as we did not get those things out of the war, we shall organize four hundred million strong to float the banner of democracy on the great continent of Africa."<sup>[2]</sup> To all those gathered Garvey continued by outlining the vision for the coming days: "This convention of the UNIA is called for the purpose of framing a Bill of Rights for the Negro Race. We shall write a constitution within

this month of August that shall guide and govern the destiny of four hundred million Negroes of the world.”<sup>[3]</sup>

On the second day of this month-long convention more than 20.000 gather at Madison Square Garden. A parade fills the streets of Harlem on August 2 where the participants carry banners with inscriptions such as “Down With Lynching”, “Africa Must Be Free”, “The Negro Gave Civilization to the World”, and “United We Stand for African Liberty”. One rather unique banner carries a historically informed reference to the Haitian Revolution putting the colonizer in his place: “Toussaint L’Ouverture Was an Abler Soldier Than Napoleon.”<sup>[4]</sup> The UNIA was feeling the force of a profoundly racist society and these demonstrations stimulated media coverage (not to mention the continued attention of the FBI who had been monitoring Garvey, intent on undermining him and his movement).

After America entered the First World War in 1917, there had been a sharp increase in violence against Blacks. In 1918 alone, there were more than 100 lynchings reported in the United States – in addition to race riots and massacres targeting African-Americans such as the one in East St. Louis in 1917.<sup>[5]</sup> In the aftermath of the First World War, empires were falling in Europe while imperial power was being consolidated elsewhere. In response to US President Wilson’s call for self-determination, independence movements in Ireland, China, Egypt, India and Eastern Europe were coalescing.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Universal Negro Improvement Association were acutely aware of these developments and responded to them by inscribing itself as a movement for African independence challenging both imperial rule abroad and brutality and oppression in the United States. They tried to influence the 1919 Paris Peace Conference that founded the League of Nations by sending a delegation advocating for African independence and for representation for people of African background but did not have any success in shaping the debates over either race or rights at the Peace Conference. It is nevertheless evidence of the global or transnational outlook that defined the movement from the outset and which paved the way for the 1920 Declaration.

Garvey argued that the UNIA convention consisted of “the delegates of the 400.000.000 Negroes of the world”.<sup>[7]</sup> This was political rhetoric and self-aggrandizement although the UNIA would become a movement of remarkable outreach and with many membership chapters spread far and wide. Adam Ewing, one of the most recent Marcus Garvey biographers, has described the UNIA as “the most important black political organization of the 1920s and the largest mass organization in the history of the African diaspora.”<sup>[8]</sup>

The UNIA had by the early 1920s attracted tens of thousands of members as well as millions of admirers. It had membership chapters in many places and “sailors, migrant workers and other mobile black subjects” carried the vision of “Garveyism” to far flung places on the African continent and where the African diaspora was present.<sup>[9]</sup> The UNIA was at the same time involved in local and transnational race politics. The mobilization, the widespread circulation of its ideas and the longer-term legacies of these are the defining aspects of its success. Its internal organisational challenges, the problematic business schemes it operated to raise funds for the movement and the fierce resistance it met from governments and other black political groups are all factors in its downfall. How to assess

the character of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA as an organisation has divided scholars but the recent historiography has made it evidently clear that the historical significance of Garvey and UNIA should not be underestimated despite the complex organisational history one has to factor with.

The agenda for the annual convention had a three-fold purpose which demonstrated the scope of their ambition: to discuss “the great problems that confront the Negro; ... framing a bill of rights for the Negro peoples of the world; ... [and] laying plans for the redemption of the great continent of Africa.”<sup>[10]</sup> The convention was to be a political manifestation that would send a message to the world that Black people were mobilising for their rights and for their freedom.

The convention’s first week was focused on speeches by delegates about the discriminatory and devastating living conditions that Black people faced in the United States, the Caribbean and across Africa. They were enlightening for the participants, but they also served another important purpose: to ground the drafting of the Declaration in lived experiences. As Garvey explained: “We want this convention to clearly understand the universal Negro situation ... We can only understand it when the representative from Georgia tells of the real conditions in Georgia; when the representative from Mississippi tells of the real conditions in Mississippi; when the representative from Basutoland or any other part of Africa tells of the real conditions in Africa. And so with the various islands of the West Indies, and South and Central America.”<sup>[11]</sup> Articulating and drafting these aims began in the second week. The effort to do so was a collective one evidenced in the sizeable number of people who signed the final Declaration (there were 122 signatories out of which 20 were women). The Universal Negro Improvement Association that Garvey had established was a multi-faceted undertaking. While there is a larger debate about Marcus Garvey’s complex character and legacy, there can be little doubt about his and the UNIA’s historical significance.<sup>[12]</sup>

The Declaration was a project of black empowerment through human rights. If we are interested in a fuller appreciation of 20th century global history and politics – especially as it relates to questions of race, imperialism, black internationalism, decolonization and democracy – this particular moment in history may illuminate a major theme that begs further exploration. As Garvey explained to the crowd: “We are here because we are tired of being a suffering people. We are here because we desire our liberty. We believe that all those human rights that are common to the rest of mankind should also be enjoyed by us.”<sup>[13]</sup> The UNIA was explicit in its use of the terminology of human rights. It is a noteworthy feature of their political rhetoric and how they addressed the question and meaning of rights.

## Content

For whatever reason, there have been relatively few references to this moment in history. The Declaration on Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World is ignored in international human rights histories – which has otherwise been a dynamic field of study within the discipline of history over the last decade.<sup>[14]</sup> The 1920 Declaration is also ignored in the relatively comprehensive scholarship on Marcus Garvey. Occasionally, the Declaration has

received a noteworthy assessment in a one-line statement by a scholar only to be overlooked immediately after instead of the actual contents being explored in greater detail.

In 2006 the historian Robert Trent Vinson wrote, “The ‘Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World’ articulated the grievances, aims, objectives and guiding philosophy of the UNIA as an anti-white supremacist movement.”<sup>[15]</sup> In referring to the declaration, one of the world’s leading Garvey scholars Rupert Lewis argued that “Garveyism should be assessed in relation to its adherence to this democratically determined document.”<sup>[16]</sup> Surely such a foundational document deserves more careful attention.

The vision of the 1920 Declaration shows that well before the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the linking of the broad categories of rights (civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights) was vital for political projects concerned with liberty, justice, equality, dignity and non-discrimination. In that sense, it reads as a template for the much more heralded 1948 UN Declaration. The 1920 Declaration may not be as polished - the UN did also take two years to draft the Universal Declaration whereas the UNIA spent two weeks - but it can help us re-imagine how we think about the history of human rights as an international project in the 20th century.

As a political and intellectual achievement, the 1920 Declaration is noteworthy both for its content and for the way it straddles black nationalism and internationalism. It is universalist in outlook while at the same time containing mottos such as “Africa for the Africans” and proclaiming self-determination as a right.

The document itself contains a Preamble and 54 articles. The Preamble calls out racial discrimination, the lack of public trials and equality before the law for Black people, lynchings, racial violence against women, colonialism, taxation without representation and a lack of voice in making and administering laws in the American South. The Preamble also addressed a range of social and economic rights through a focus on discrimination in health, education, employment and wages. The Preamble’s paragraph 6 reads: “[We complain] The physicians of our race are denied the right to attend their patients while in the public hospitals of the cities and States where they reside in certain parts of the United States. Our children are forced to attend inferior separate schools for shorter terms than white children, and the public school funds are unequally divided between the white and colored schools.” Discrimination in education would become an issue of great significance to the US Civil Rights Movement in the post-1945 era.

The Preamble also highlights conditions in the colonies e.g. in the Caribbean: “[We complain] That the many acts of injustices against members of our race before the courts of law in the respective islands and colonies are of such nature as to create disgust and disrespect for the white man’s sense of justice.” The 1920 Declaration reflected a global outlook on race conditions - what W.E.B DuBois earlier in the 20th century had labelled “the colour line.”

Following on from the Preamble, the 54 articles of the Declaration elaborate on the inhuman treatment that Black people were facing around the world. Several articles show

that the Declaration was vehemently anti-slavery and anti-torture. With Article 17, the drafters of the Declaration made a powerful indictment which implicitly was directed against the United States: “Whereas the lynching, by burning, hanging, or any other means, of human beings is a barbarous practice and a shame and disgrace to civilization, we therefore declare any country guilty of such atrocities outside the pale of civilization.” The combined focus on anti-slavery and anti-torture appeared also in the following article: “We protest against the atrocious crime of whipping, flogging and overworking of the native tribes of Africa and Negroes everywhere. These are methods that should be abolished and all means should be taken to prevent a continuance of such brutal practices.”

The Declaration also declares that Black people should have the right to elect their own representatives in legislatures and courts of law and to receive “even-handed justice before all courts of law” as well as they “like any other race, should be governed by the ethics of civilization, and ... not be deprived of any of those rights or privileges common to other human beings.” (Art. 3) Articles 3, 4 and 5 show an emphasis on equality and the rule of law. Article 44 highlighted another enduring issue related to criminal justice, youth and human rights that adds further depth to the Declaration. The article reads: “We deplore and protest against the practice of confining juvenile prisoners in prisons with adults, and we recommend that such youthful prisoners be taught gainful trades under humane supervision.”

The Declaration calls for “freedom of the press” and “freedom of religious worship” and demanded “free speech universally for all men” (Articles 24, 25 and 28). There was a rigour that was put into crafting such a well-structured and comprehensive document where not only civil and political rights were represented but also social and economic rights. It also reflected a legal structure recognizable from constitutional documents.

As regards social and economic rights, there are four articles focused on the right to education and non-discrimination in access, including Article 30 stating “We demand the right of an unlimited and unprejudiced education for ourselves and our posterity forever.” Two articles focused on the right to work and non-discrimination in employment, by declaring it “inhuman and unfair to boycott Negroes from industries and labor in any part of the world.” (Art. 23) They were fighting for their livelihoods and for their children’s future.

An article focused on health was also included, representing a community and health care practitioner perspective by declaring it was “a serious impediment to the health of the race to deny to competent licensed Negro physicians the right to practice in the public hospitals of the communities in which they reside for no other reason than their race and colour.” (Art. 42) The articles varied between broad principles and concrete provisions – all reflecting lived experiences by Black people around the world. Article 32 on non-discrimination in employment was an example of the latter concrete type of provision: “Where Negroes form a part of the citizenry of any country, and pass the civil society examination of such country, we declare them entitled to the same consideration as other citizens as to appointments in such civil service.” Many of the articles addressed issues of non-discrimination, equal treatment and freedoms that we recognize as well-known features of human rights declarations and conventions from later in the 20th century.

## Impact

Upon the reading of the full text on August 15 at the convention, the Declaration was met with “uproarious applause ... cheering and shouting ... [and] frantic joy” for what was also described as the “Magna Charta of the Negroes of the world”. In an editorial published in *Negro World* on August 17, Marcus Garvey explained the significance in the following manner: “we have breathed into the Declaration the spirit of the New Negro who is more than ever determined to exercise every right and privilege set forth in this our Declaration of Rights. ... this Declaration is the property of every Negro in every corner of the world.”<sup>[17]</sup> This statement reflected the aspirations that often accompany human rights documents. Today, the question presents itself: What is the legacy of the Declaration? The fact that it has become a widely forgotten document is one factor to contend with. The larger history of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Association is another factor.

As regards the latter, the gradual collapse of several of Garvey’s various schemes, including ill-considered business ventures, and the associated decline of the UNIA has shaped historical interpretation in a negative direction. However, there is a wider historiographical dimension to consider. In 2018, Adam Ewing wrote the following: “Garvey scholar Tony Martin’s nearly thirty-five-year-old observation in his opus, *Race First* – that “no one could have organized and built up the largest black mass movement in Afro-American history, in the face of continuous onslaughts from communists on the left, black reactionaries on all sides, and the most powerful governments in the world, and yet be a buffoon or a clown, or even an overwhelmingly impractical visionary” – has rarely been heeded.”<sup>[18]</sup>

It is worth salvaging the 1920 Declaration from these analytical shortcomings while at the same time placing it in the context of 20th century human rights history to which it definitely belongs. Sarah C. Dunstan has convincingly shown the continuities between the interwar and post-war periods when it comes to black thought and evocations of human rights despite the temporal separation here that pervades the human rights history literature.<sup>[19]</sup> There is a larger argument to be developed here but on the issue of the Declaration’s impact and legacy it is worth pointing to three historical developments – two in the immediate aftermath and one with a longer-term perspective.

The first development relates to UNIA’s relation to the League of Nations. The 1920 Declaration contained a less than flattering article about the new Post-WWI international organisation that was: “45. Be it further, resolved, that we as a race of people declare the League of Nations null and void as far as the Negro is concerned, in that it seeks to deprive Negroes of their liberty.”<sup>[20]</sup> The outcome of the Versailles Conference had not been encouraging for groups of African descent or for the independence claims of various national groups around the world that UNIA drew inspiration from.

Two years later, however in 1922 a delegation from UNIA travelled to Geneva seeking representation before an Assembly meeting of the League of Nations “for the purpose of laying before you the desires of the Negro peoples of the world who happen to be subjects and citizens under the various Governments that form your League.”<sup>[21]</sup> In a letter from September 1922, written during the UNIA delegation’s extended stay in Geneva, they requested “that a negro might be appointed to the Permanent Mandates Commission of the

League of Nations.”<sup>[22]</sup> This was the political body managing the former German colonial territories and UNIA had a particular concern with the territories in Africa.

The 1920 Declaration was not directly referenced in the correspondence between the UNIA delegation and the Secretariat of the League of Nations. The delegation instead based its approach on a recent Petition of the UNIA to the League of Nations adopted at their third annual convention held in July 1922. The 1922 Petition drew on the values of the 1920 Declaration, including the human rights vision. One section of the Petition read: “Your Petitioners desire to impress upon the fact that the four hundred million Negroes of the world are no longer disposed to hold themselves as serfs, peons and slaves, but that it is their intention to look forward to the higher benefits of human liberty, human rights and true democracy.”<sup>[23]</sup>

The UNIA’s delegation’s quest was unsuccessful. They did meet with the Secretariat but were otherwise kept at a distance from the Assembly meetings or other political structures. The UNIA were petitioning the League of Nations with human rights claims in the early 1920s as well as making calls for “racial political liberty” and changing the colonial order. The 1920 Declaration had provided them a platform for making these claims in the international forum of the League of Nations. It should be noted that the 1922 UNIA Convention was also a time when the internal tensions and conflicts that became part of the weakening of the organisation had clearly surfaced.<sup>[24]</sup> UNIA also faced resistance from several governments (US, UK, France and South Africa). Pressures were fierce and organisational resources scarce with the latter aggravated by several of the UNIA business and funding ventures collapsing in the early 1920s.<sup>[25]</sup>

The second development in the aftermath of the 1920 Declaration brings us to South Africa. William Jackson, President of the UNIA in Cape Town was among the speakers at the ANC Conference in May 1923, where the ANC drafted its so-called African Bill of Rights – a short “Bill” consisting of 5 articles.<sup>[26]</sup> This 1923 Bill of Rights is seen as a starting point for the ANC’s continued engagement with human rights during the 20th century that would then be elaborated in the 1943 African Claims document with its expanded Bill of Rights and the 1955 ANC Freedom Charter.<sup>[27]</sup>

The clear thematic overlap between the 1920 Declaration and the 1923 Bill of Rights is worth noting. Both documents covered the right to land, right to liberty, justice and equality “in the eyes of the law”, equality of treatment, equality of citizenship, the right to political representation in the legislative bodies and to participate in the management of administrative affairs and they both declared that there could be no “taxation without representation.”

Of course, beyond these commonalities, the ANC had its own rights tradition as Tembeka Ngcukaitobi has captured so well in his 2018 book *The Land is Ours. South Africa’s First Black Lawyers and the Birth of Constitutionalism*. But the substance and the overlap in the human rights thinking, the transnational linkages between movements fighting for the rights of Black people and their challenge to global politics across the 20th century all point to seeing the documents in a larger and related context.<sup>[28]</sup>

The third development connects with modern human rights advocacy and activism. In 1986, Amnesty International organized the “Conspiracy of Hope” world concert tour with a range of artists assembled to raise global awareness and funds for its human rights work. It was one of the largest human rights advocacy events during the 1980s. From the stage Bob Geldof and Steven van Zandt performed Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song”: “Emancipate yourself from mental slavery / None but ourselves can free our minds.” Marley had lifted those words directly from a Marcus Garvey speech and via him they had made their way to Amnesty International’s human rights concerts. However, Garvey’s aims extended far beyond escaping mental slavery. Indeed, those who gathered in Harlem and drafted the Declaration in 1920 sought so much more. Their efforts merit a legitimate place in the much wider scholarship on international human rights as an intellectual achievement in its own right and as an expression of early 20th century global civil society human rights activism that speaks to some of the most profound political issues that the international community has had to face over the last century – issues that remain pervasive and persistent in their call for resolution today.

## Annotated Bibliography

Dunstan, Sarah C.: *Race, Rights and Reform. Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from World War I to the Cold War*. Cambridge 2021.

In Dunstan’s book, Marcus Garvey is by no means the major character. However, Garvey and UNIA is still historically significant especially in the early parts of the book. Dunstan places him and the movement he inspired in a much larger and richly textured historical context in which black activism – promoting both internationalism and nationalism – is presented with an illuminating framework and depth of analysis. Dunstan expands on Robin G. Kelley’s idea that black activism and internationalism operated not separate from Western “civilization” but in a “shared if asymmetrical modernity” alongside European culture and thought.

Ewing, Adam: *The Age of Garvey. How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics*. Princeton 2014.

Ewing, Adam: *The Challenge of Garveyism Studies*, in: *Modern American History* 1:3 (2018), 399-418.

Ewing, Adam: *Garvey or Garveyism?*, in *Transition* 105 (2011), 130-145.

In his biography and several articles dealing with historiography in the field of Garvey studies, Adam Ewing offers invaluable insights into the global outreach and legacies of Garveyism as well as refined and in-depth state-of-the-art analysis of the research tradition, its strength and pitfalls and a strong case for a renewed interest in Marcus Garvey and his movement’s role in 20th century transnational history. Ewing’s writings are a great starting point also for those with a more passing interest in Marcus Garvey or those working on other historical topics but where a thematic connection make it relevant to explore the topic and its historiography.



Hill, Robert A. (ed.): *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 2. Berkeley 1983.

The 13-volume collection of Marcus Garvey's and the UNIAs papers from 1983 is a remarkable documentary record and scholarly achievement that remains the natural go to resource for conducting research also 40 years after publication. Volume 2 has a varied and comprehensive collection of sources related to the first annual convention of the Universal Negro Improvement Association held in Harlem, New York and – despite not being entirely clear regarding the drafting process itself - is also the major resource for understanding how the 1920 Declaration on Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World came into being. It contains the list of names for the approximately 120 persons who signed the Declaration in August 1920.

Vinson, Robert Trent: "Sea Kaffirs", "American Negroes" and the Gospel of Garveyism in Early Twentieth-Century Cape Town, in: *Journal of African History* 47 (2006), 281-303.

A good example of the journal article literature that has provided several detailed studies – adding to the biographical works - of specific aspects of Garveyism's reach and influence in different parts of the world. Vinson's article focuses on black British West Indians and black South Africans in post-First World War Cape Town. Vinson argues that Garveyites in South Africa and elsewhere viewed the UNIA as a government-in-exile until they could achieve the objective of an independent Africa. Vinson captures both overarching concepts of homeland and diaspora as well as concrete on-the-ground dynamics initiated by Garveyist inspiration, mobilization and organization.

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Slate, Nico: From Colored Cosmopolitanism to Human Rights: A Historical Overview of the Transnational Black Freedom Struggle, in: *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 1:1 (2015), 3-24.

Remmington, Janet: Sol Plaatje's Decade of Creative Mobility, 1912-1922. The Politics of Travel and Writing in and beyond South Africa, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2013), p. 425-446.

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Ward, Jason Morgan: *Hanging Bridge. Racial Violence and America's Civil Rights Century*. Oxford 2016.

## Fußnoten

1. Hill: Marcus Garvey, 504.
2. Ibid., 500.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 493.
5. Ward: Hanging Bridge, 55 f.
6. Manela: The Wilsonian Moment.
7. Hill: Marcus Garvey, 477.
8. Ewing: The Challenge of Garveyism Studies, 400.
9. Ewing: The Age of Garvey, 1.
10. Hill: Marcus Garvey, 477.
11. Ibid., 510.
12. Ewing: The Age of Garvey, 1-13.
13. Hill: Marcus Garvey, 481.
14. For one brief exception, see Slate: From Colored Cosmopolitanism to Human Rights, 7 f.
15. Vinson: "Sea Kaffirs", 290.
16. Lewis: Marcus Garvey, 84.
17. Lewis: Marcus Garvey, 600.
18. Ewing: The Challenge of Garveyism Studies, 410.
19. Dunstan: Race, Rights and Reform, 8 f.
20. Hill: Marcus Garvey, 577.
21. Letter from Universal Negro Improvement Association to the Secretary-General, League of Nations, 23 May 1922, in: League of Nations Archive: R60-1-21159-21159.
22. See Letter from Director of the Mandates Section to G. O. Marke, Chairman of the Delegation of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, 16 September 1922, in: League of Nations Archive: R60-1-21159-21159.
23. Petition of the Universal Negro Improvement Association – African Communities League to the League of Nations, Geneva, Switzerland, 26 July 1922, para. 12, in: League of Nations Archive.

24. Hill: Marcus Garvey, vol. 4.
25. Ewing: The Age of Garvey.
26. Vinson: "Sea Kaffirs," 292 and 295.
27. Asmal: Legacy of Freedom, 1-4.
28. See e.g. Remmington: Sol Plaatje's Decade.

## Zitation

Steven L. B. Jensen: The UNIA Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World (1920), in: Quellen zur Geschichte der Menschenrechte, herausgegeben vom Arbeitskreis Menschenrechte im 20. Jahrhundert, Februar 2023, URL: [www.geschichte-menschenrechte.de/schluesseltexte/the-unia-declaration-of-rights-of-the-negro-peoples-of-the-world-1920](http://www.geschichte-menschenrechte.de/schluesseltexte/the-unia-declaration-of-rights-of-the-negro-peoples-of-the-world-1920).