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An Anticolonial Opposition to the Imperial State

The field of transnational history emerged in the last decade of the twentieth century. Led by Ian Tyrrell, and later developed by the likes of Akira Iriye, Pierre-Yves Saunier, Thomas Bender, and Daniel T. Rodgers, the broadly defined area of study challenged nationally focused approaches to the past by exploring the nearly infinite ways that the global has influenced the domestic. Since its inception, countless social and cultural historians have adopted a transnational lens. This method of investigation has enabled these historians to unearth the connections that existed between globally situated, non-state actors as well as how their ideas and beliefs circulated across national borders. Transnational understandings of the past have also expanded into, most notably, the fields of both imperial and diplomatic history, as well as American studies. This proliferation has prompted scholars to de-exceptionalize the monolithic American experience and has brought to light the continued existence of the US empire in its many interconnected, hegemonic forms.

In *The Anticolonial Front: The African American Freedom Struggle and Global Decolonization, 1945–1960,* historian John Munro adopts an intersectional, transnational approach to the study of the African American freedom movements that influenced the postwar era in the United States by connecting them with anticolonial independence efforts that emerged throughout Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. By illustrating the shared struggles for justice that linked African Americans with people of color throughout the colonial world, Munro presents the white supremacist American state as an imperial power on a par with its European counterparts. Against the backdrop of the bipolarity of the early Cold War era, Munro also persuasively argues that anticommunism was used as a powerful tool by the American state and its supporters to counteract Black radicals from the Left. This created a narrative that furthered the “othering” process of African Americans within a race-based capitalist state and advanced the construction of a broad-based, interconnected, global anticolonial front.

Rather than presenting the early Cold War era, global imperialism, decolonization, the Old and New Left, the long civil rights movement, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism as separate movements, periods, or entities, Munro challenges the reader’s preconceived understanding of liberalism and empire during the middle portion of the twen-
tieth century. He does this by “presenting an un-
tidy and uneven picture that includes elements of
capitulation, criticism, and unintended subver-
sion,” and by doing so, successfully positions The
Anticolonial Front at the vanguard of transnation-
al historiographies that examine race in America,
the global civil rights movement, imperialism, and
decolonization (pp. 10-11). Take for example, as
Munro suggests, the National Association for the
Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The or-
ganization was formed in 1909 and one of its early
leaders was W. E. B. Du Bois. By the post-World
War II era, Du Bois had shifted further to the left
on the political spectrum and firmly believed that
racial capitalism caused injustices throughout the
colonial world, including the United States. Within
the framework of the global Cold War, the NAACP
was more than willing to oppose European imper-
ialism, but as Munro contends, the organization
became a “political path that, although not sub-
sumed by the official US position of the day [anti-
communism], loyally adjoined with it” (p. 11). This
submission to the state did not sit well with Du
Bois and in turn, he resigned in 1948. This ex-
ample, as well as many others throughout the
work, illustrates that elements of imperialism, de-
colonization, race, anticommunism, and the
broadly defined popular front influenced percep-
tions, understandings, and decisions in the early
Cold War era.

Made up of eight chapters, as well as an intro-
duction and an epilogue, Munro’s book ushers the
reader from the prewar era in the United States
through the decade and a half following World
War II and concludes with a critique of the cultur-
al legacies associated with the rise of both neoco-
lonialism and neoliberalism. Throughout this jour-
ney, Munro maintains his focus on the role of non-
state actors—more specifically, the activists, intel-
lectuals, artists, writers, and state-viewed crimin-
als who, in various ways, formed an international
network in opposition to the social injustices they
experienced at the hands of an imperial overseer.
Munro explores the connections, feelings, and de-
sires of these non-state actors by examining the offi-
cial records of several organizations that spoke
out against inequalities; personal papers; novels;
magazines; newspapers; and journals of the peri-
od. All of this was done with the intention of
providing agency to these individuals and challeng-
ing the far-too-common trend of the state being
taken to represent the monolithic voice of its
people.

The work begins in the decade preceding the
outbreak of World War II as the popular front in-
tersected with the anticolonial Black freedom
struggle in the United States. In this chapter, Mun-
ro appropriately adds nuance to the preexisting
narrative by arguing that the popular front “sub-
ordinated anticapitalism, antiracism, and antico-
nialism to secure greater unity against fascist
danger,” in much the same way that the NAACP
and other leftward-learning groups would accept
colonialism at home but oppose it abroad during
the Cold War era (p. 16). By challenging this nar-
rative, Munro is informing the reader that even
the Old Left in the United States was not a united
group and in reality, often held diverging opinions
on both domestic and global events, as well as on
race and their understanding of the US imperial
state.

The book then shifts to the postwar era and
the international networks that were renewed
between colonial peoples throughout what would
be later referred to as the Third and Fourth
Worlds, as well as the United States. These net-
works were strengthened by the Manchester Pan-
African Congress of 1945 (chapter 2) and the
Southern Negro Youth Congress (chapter 3), which
was held in Columbia, South Carolina, during the
following year. At these events, the ideas and be-
iefs of Du Bois, George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta,
Kwame Nkrumah, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Esther
Cooper, and Paul Robeson furthered transnational
linkages that challenged imperial manifestations
that were based on white supremacy and gender
inequality, all of which were predicated and pro-
moted by the capitalist system. The anticolonial rhetoric that came out of these conferences was spread by several publications throughout the 1940s and 1950s. These publications make up the focus of chapter 4. Although these outlets varied in their views toward anticolonialism, they undeniably disseminated valuable information and enabled a dispersed group of individuals to remain connected.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 position the proponents of anticolonialism within the context of the early Cold War era in both the United States and abroad. Chapter 5 details events in the United States, where the Smith Act, McCarthyism, and the Red Scare combined to strengthen the power of the capitalist state under the umbrella of anticommunism. This demonized various individuals and groups on the left, such as the Communists, fellow travelers, and independent leftists, and in doing so, weakened their calls for justice and equality. Chapters 6 and 7 once again shift the focus of the work to the international theater. In chapter 6, Munro maintains that the anticolonial unity that was established in Manchester and Columbia continued to be on display at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 and the First World Congress of Black Writers and Artists, which was held in Paris in 1956. At these conferences, the supporters of anticolonialism attempted to navigate the bipolarity of the early Cold War era and their own desires for independence by attempting to present a level of solidarity. Chapter 7 explores Ghana’s independence in 1957. Here, Munro reinforces the importance of the anticolonial transnational networks that existed throughout the postwar era but also astutely points out that the independence that was established by Kwame Nkrumah and his followers did not mean freedom from the “bonds of empire” or “racial capitalism” (p. 247), arguing that decolonization was occurring but that the neocolonial reality was also setting in throughout the once colonized world (p. 270).

The book comes to a close with an examination of the transnationally linked freedom movements that emerged in the 1960s; how neocolonialism undermined many of the goals of these movements for equality; and finally, the rise of an even “deadlier weapon,” neoliberalism (p. 311). In chapter 8, Munro reinforces the importance of the often overlooked anticolonial front during the early Cold War era by arguing that a “new wave of antiracist and anticolonial struggle[s]” emerged out of the “anticolonial thought and action of the 1945–1960 period” (p. 280). The work concludes with the epilogue, which not only addresses both the development of neocolonialism and neoliberalism but also how these hegemonic imperial structures continue to reinforce the power of the state in the present. Here, Munro accentuates the importance of the work by drawing connections between the Black radicals of the postwar era and the present-day Black Lives Matter movement, specifically, their opposition to the power of the gendered, racial capitalism of the state.

*The Anticolonial Front* presents the complex transnational connections that existed between often marginalized non-state actors in the early Cold War era as they found both commonalities and differences in their drives for justice throughout the colonized world, including the United States. The work is at its best when addressing the shared commonalities that existed between African Americans and people of color throughout the colonial world, illustrating the power of the US imperial state and its European counterparts in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. The work would be a worthwhile addition to an upper-year undergraduate or graduate seminar course that explores US imperial history, race and colonialism, or the global civil rights movement from an intersectional approach. Additionally, the book serves as an important reminder of how settler-colonial states and various international organizations continue to “conceal colonialism” in the present (p. 313).
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