

Oleksa Drachewych, Ian McKay, eds. *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. 448 pp. \$37.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7735-5873-1.



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In 2017, centennial reevaluations of the October Revolution often emphasized the event's lasting global impacts.[1] *Left Transnationalism*, published in 2019, coincides with the centennial of a related event with global revolutionary ambitions: the founding of the Communist (or Third) International, the Comintern for short. Like recent work on 1917, *Left Transnationalism* is, as Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay note in the introduction, a “post-post-Cold War project” (p. 35). The collection eschews the Cold War-inflected “hyper-politicization” of the Comintern, while pushing back against post-Cold War neoliberal triumphalism in order to salvage “certain revolutionary legacies” from the dustbin of history (p. 35). The volume offers an engaging and carefully argued collection of essays that suggests the possible lessons to be learned from the Comintern's efforts to understand and resolve inequalities structured by imperialism, nationalism, and race. As they note at the end of the introduction, “there is a lot at stake” (p. 36).

The collection's most significant intervention in the history of the Comintern is foregrounding the responses of Black and Indigenous people of color to its ideas and campaigns. At the outset, Drachewych and McKay acknowledge the importance of understanding Moscow's intentions. They grant that the organization's Soviet leadership may have cared about the colonial world only to the extent that meddling in colonial affairs served its Eurocentric agenda. But as many of the essays in the collection demonstrate, such attitudes did not necessarily shape the reception of Comintern texts, ideas, organizations, and emissaries; local actors often understood and implemented central directives in ways that Moscow did not anticipate and could not control.

The essays cover the Comintern's life from its foundation in 1919 to its dissolution in 1943, with a few exploring its afterlife as late as the 1990s. The collection's geographical scope is equally expansive. South Africa, Australia, India, China, Southeast Asia, and Latin America all receive substantial coverage. As is perhaps to be expected from a

book in the Rethinking Canada in the World Series, Canada receives the most attention. Five of the fifteen chapters explore Canadian communists' understandings of race, ethnicity, and the national question.

The editors have grouped the essays into four sections that address, respectively, the origins and development through the 1920s of the Comintern's interest in the national, colonial, and racial questions; the transnational personal networks that to some extent operated beyond Moscow's control; local parties' and activists' varied understandings of the relationship between anticolonialism and antiracism; and the question of national self-determination, particularly as it played out in Canada.

The four chapters in part 1, "Orientations," often take a traditional, top-down approach to the Comintern, focusing on its ideological and institutional foundations. Lars Lih traces the origins of Vladimir Lenin's theoretical statements on the relationship between proletarian revolution and anti-imperialism to make the counterintuitive argument that the Third International constituted not a rejection of the Second, but an attempt to fulfill its promise. John Riddell similarly focuses on high-level political discussions to illuminate the clash of "ideological and pragmatic interests" that became particularly pronounced after Lenin's death (p. 110).

Yet even the Moscow-centric essays also highlight the importance of local factors and transnational networks that could bypass Moscow. In the most diplomatically focused of the collection's essays, Alastair Kocho-Williams tracks the transnational contacts essential to Soviet efforts to at once establish normal relations with Great Britain and challenge British power in India. In his wide-ranging essay, "The Russian Revolution, National Self-Determination, and Anti-Imperialism," Stephen A. Smith proposes that "in hindsight" the Russian Revolution's "larger significance" was less promoting revolution against capitalism than in

encouraging "peoples in the colonial and semi-colonial world seeking national liberation from imperialism" (p. 73). His discussion of the "transnational circulation of activists, texts, ideas, and imaginings via steamships, telegraph, and print" offers a model for scholars seeking to uncover the "horizontal processes" that produced enthusiasm for—and often unintended understandings of—the Comintern's struggle against imperialism and colonialism (p. 74).

The three chapters in part 2, "Transnational Personal Relationships," focus squarely on the "horizontal processes" Smith emphasizes. In a fascinating look at "*los poputchiki*" (fellow travelers, p. 155), Sandra Pujals unearths the legacies of Comintern-affiliated cultural productions among Latin American and Caribbean fellow travelers. Her subjects, for example Seki Sano, the Japanese communist who brought modern theater to Mexico via Berlin, Moscow, and New York, personify the complex and unexpected cross-fertilizations generated by Comintern networks.

Chapters by Andrée Lévesque and Xiaofe Tu offer contrasting characterizations of the culture of Comintern networks. Lévesque draws on Canadian communists' personal accounts to explore how they developed a sense of belonging to a large and transnational "communist family" (p. 182). He emphasizes that travel and study in the Soviet Union and participation in the International Brigades in Spain generated positive "feelings of solidarity" (p. 188). Tu explores the darker side of Comintern networks, telling the story of how in the 1990s, revelations of revered Japanese communist Nosaka Sanzo's denunciation of a Japanese comrade in Moscow in the 1930s prompted the party to disown one of its founding members. In Sanzo's case, Tu discerns a fundamental tension between "the complicated logic of internationalism and national identity in communist movements" (p. 219).

Four essays grouped together under the heading "Race and Colonialism" explore the interplay of Moscow's directives and local conditions. Both

Evan Smith and Drachewych focus on how parties in British Dominions—South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada—adapted to the changing Comintern line around questions of race and anti-imperialism. Evan Smith analyzes the horizontal flows of people and ideas between London, Sydney, and Johannesburg to illustrate how a variety of communist networks shaped local anti-imperial activism. Drachewych outlines the evolution and inconsistency of the Comintern’s and national parties’ commitment to racial equality. Starkly different local approaches emerge in Marc Becker’s comparison of distinctive communist understandings of race and nation in Ecuador and Peru and Kankan Xie’s comparison of the role of Chinese communism and overseas Chinese in the development of communist parties in Indochina, Thailand, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies.

Three of the final four essays, grouped under the rubric “National Questions,” focus on Canada. All chart local debates on issues of ethnicity and national self-determination that were largely ignored by or independent of the Comintern. Daria Dyakonova highlights the sometimes antagonistic relations between the Canadian party and the Canadian Young Communist League. Michel S. Beaulieu charts the local political roots of a regional Canadian party organization’s struggle to incorporate immigrant workers. Anna Belogurova examines networks that connected Chinese immigrants in the Americas. McKay focuses on the “contested legacy of the Comintern,” analyzing why, in 1947, the Canadian party destroyed its francophone section in Montreal (p. 360). The central character in his account, the Montreal organizer Henri Gagnon, emerges as a man, who unlike Pujal’s *poputchiki*, remained firmly “grounded in his place” (p. 363). Yet he, too, McKay argues, participated in a story that was at once “local, national, and global” (p. 380).

The volume’s focus on antiracism and anti-imperialism meets a vital need in teaching and research about international communism and the

Russian Revolution. Instructors looking to incorporate the perspectives of Black and Indigenous people of color into their classes will find much though-provoking material, despite the fact that, as Drachewych notes in the conclusion, the collection largely ignores the critical intersections of race and gender. The essays themselves are pitched above the level of even relatively advanced undergraduate students, as they assume a robust knowledge of general Comintern history and provide sparse cross referencing of key concepts, actors, and events. Scholars and graduate students will appreciate the editors’ cogent summary of shifting approaches to the history of the Comintern and the essays’ wide range of topics and methods.

Lisa A. Kirschenbaum is professor of history at West Chester University. Her most recent book, International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion, was published by Cambridge University Press (2015).

Note

[1]. See the special issues *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, no. 4 (2017); *Slavic Review* 76, no. 3 (2017); *Slavic and East European Journal* 61, no. 3 (2017); *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 17, no. 3 (2017); and *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 4 (2017).

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