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In *Red Internationalism*, Salar Mohandesi reviews the rise of the anti-imperial movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, France, and Vietnam, which coalesced against American intervention in the Vietnam War, and its later disintegration and evolution to focusing more on human rights. Using a variety of written materials, Mohandesi argues that a transnational movement formed in response to the Vietnam War. It developed into an international solidarity movement that took inspiration from interwar Leninist ideas of anti-imperialism. This movement grew to be larger than the Left, also highlighting some of the theoretical and ideological limitations of existing communist or socialist parties. Over time, responding to major events in Vietnam, and welcoming interaction with Vietnamese communists who used this movement to spread their word to a global community, the anti-imperial internationalism, formed around Leninist ideas of self-determination and oppressor/oppressed states, became a prominent feature of the antiwar movement. It came to take the approach of internationalizing protests of American imperialism and the war in Vietnam as a global movement, but one that needed to be brought home to the United States and France. Fighting against imperialism, and especially American imperialism, became the way many radicals hoped to bring about a new world.

But, Mohandesi argues, by the 1970s, with increasing repression of radicalism and following the Paris Peace Accords and later conflicts in Southeast Asia human rights became the primary method of agitation, with not only activists and the Left using this language but also political actors, including the US government. When Vietnam, Cambodia, and China engaged in a series of conflicts, each claiming the fight against imperialism as their own, approaching the conflicts through an anti-imperial lens became fraught with challenges. Human rights discourse soon became more palatable to a broader segment of the radical movement, which led to a growing focus on individual rights. Human rights became a way to avoid needing to deal with the moral problems of whom to champion, allowing proponents to focus on the individual rights of the people in Southeast Asia. Here, Mohandesi highlights the importance of the development of nongovernmental organizations like Amnesty International, which helped pioneer this emphasis on human rights and whose ideas were used by other like-minded organizations. No longer did these radicals envision revolutionary global change, as world events made it unlikely. Instead, focusing on individual human
rights took precedence and human rights discourse became dominant; anti-imperial discourse receded as the primary form of organization by the end of 1970s.

Beyond this general narrative, covered across six main chapters, Mohandesi nicely places his book within broader discussions. He explicitly frames the topic of his story in the context of the “Global Sixties” and focuses on how individuals and groups in the movement navigated their own ideas of anti-imperialism. A common theme is the fluidity of the ideas that governed the broader movement. In many cases, they all agreed on anti-imperialism and drew their inspiration from Soviet founder V. I. Lenin or those inspired by interwar communism, even if those in the movement were not communists themselves. Activists promoted an anti-imperialism that defined the United States (and France) as global powers that needed to be checked. It was transnational in that American activists inspired French activists, and vice versa, and American, French, and Vietnamese anti-imperialists traveled and supported each nation’s movements.

The book largely succeeds in its goals. It is at its best when it details the transnational and global connections. The various discussions, trends, and evolutions are laid out clearly. The book’s six main chapters are based on themes that show the evolution of the movement but also allow for an accessible chronological narrative, framed by Mohandesi’s broader argument. The focus is often on the key figures or groups of the movement, many of whom will be familiar to even casual readers (Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, but also figures like the folk singer Joan Baez). Necessary context is astutely mentioned, whether it is the changing nature of radicalism in the United States, the broader geopolitical climate in Southeast Asia, or the shifting outlook (or lack thereof) of the notable communist powers regarding Vietnam. The book sticks with its focus on the United States, France, and Vietnam as its transnational triangle, and this approach allows a strong analysis of the anti-imperial movement and the evolution or shift from anti-imperial internationalism to human rights.[1]

At the core of Mohandesi’s argument is that the international anti-imperial movement formed around the “Leninist problematic.” This problematic highlights a series of assumptions, based on Leninist and Comintern thinking, that were prominent in the interwar period. This premise makes sense as the ideas of Lenin and the Comintern took hold in the 1920s and 1930s and influenced national movements and leaders around the world. Mohandesi outlines the “Leninist problematic” through a contextual chapter before his main analysis. Here he includes a discussion of Leninist ideas of self-determination, imperial competition, and oppressor and oppressed states. He also highlights that the Bolsheviks and communist movements, despite desiring to develop a system beyond the nation, instead made the nation-state its core defining feature. Mohandesi also highlights the limitations of the Leninist problematic, and a close reading highlights the many tensions at work in Bolshevik theory, practice, and intent. All of this is laudable.

Unfortunately, at times, the book appears to conflate Leninism, Stalinism, and the Comintern and its ideas, when in fact, the ideas Mohandesi describe underwent notable fluctuations and evolutions following Lenin’s death, sometimes from external influence, sometimes from the whims of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin himself, and sometimes through individual variance that figures such as North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh or Chinese leader Mao Zedong would later champion. This reviewer’s critique is more based on what the chapter could have been. There is a wealth of new research on the Comintern and anti-imperialism, or the national question (including on the Soviet Union and the nationalities question), that would have allowed Mohandesi to craft a stronger contextual section.[2] By working in this newer liter-
ature, this chapter could have even more effect-
ively presaged one of the notable strengths of Moh-
andesi’s analysis later in the book—“Leninism”
became an amorphous concept, one that could be
applied or conceived in different ways based on
what someone emphasized. This was also the case
following Lenin’s death. Stalin and the Soviet Uni-
on defined Leninism in specific ways, just as radic-
als and revolutionaries appropriated Leninist
ideas for their own contexts. Mohandesi does note
some of these disagreements in the movement
when reviewing Vietnamese approaches to Lenin-
ism, but this reader felt the broader discussion
could have been stronger.

The book ends with a coda looking to high-
light some lessons from the 1960s and 1970s and
advancing some potential ways to reassert anti-
imperialist internationalism from the perspective
of the Left today. Although the book is based on
the author’s dissertation, completed in 2017, and
likely submitted to publishers before Russia’s es-
calation in Ukraine in February 2022, this reviewer
found himself often reflecting on similarities
and differences between the period under evalu-
ation and now.[3] There may be some lessons to be
had by reviewing the analysis in this book, espe-
cially as the Left today has found itself splintered,
with some justifying Russian aggression and im-
perialism and instead emphasizing American im-
perialism as a cause, while others declare their
solidarity in fighting against imperialism and sup-
port Ukraine and Ukrainian independence.

This book is a wonderful addition to the study
of the Global 1960s, solidarity movements of the
Cold War, human rights history, and the history of
radicalism. As a transnational history, it highlights
the strengths of that methodology and is a wel-
come addition to my bookshelf.

Oleksa Drachewych is an assistant professor
of history at Western University. He is the author
of The Communist International, Anti-Imperialism
and Racial Equality in British Dominions (Rout-
ledge, 2018) and co-editor of Left Transnational-
ism: The Communist International and the Nation-
al, Colonial and Racial Questions (McGill-Queen’s
University Press, 2020). He is currently completing
a book on the global impact of the Bolshevik Re-
volution on civil and human rights movements
and a book comparing and contrasting Soviet at-
rocities during and after the Second World War
with Russian atrocities in Ukraine today.

Notes

[1]. The book builds on work by other scholars
including Kristin Ross, May ’68 and Its Afterlives
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Cynthia A. Young, Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism,
and the Making of a US Third World Left (Durham,
NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Samuel Moyn,
The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History (Cam-
bridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University
Press, 2010); Martin Klimke, The Other Alliance:
Student Protest in West Germany and the United
States in the Global Sixties (Princeton, NJ: Prin-
ceton University Press, 2010); and Mark Philip
Bradley, The World Reimagined: Americans and
Human Rights in the Twentieth Century (Cam-

[2]. To name a few of the newer works which
discuss the Comintern and anti-imperialism:
Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay, eds., Left
Transnationalism: The Communist International
and the National, Colonial and Racial Questions
(Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020);
Tim Harper, Underground Asia: Global Revolu-
tionaries and the Assault on Empire (Cambridge,
MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); and Michele
Louro, Carolien Stolte, Heather Streets-Salter, and
Sana Tannoury-Karam, eds., The League Against
Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives (Leiden: Leiden
University Press, 2020). The latter book is cited in
Red Internationalism, but this reviewer suggests
insights from this book could have been more
widely implemented.

[3]. Salar Mohandesi, “From Anti-Imperialism
to Human Rights: The Vietnam War and Radical

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo


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