

BOOK REVIEWS

Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial and Racial Question. Ed. Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay. Montreal: McGill-

Queens University Press, 2019. xii, 436 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$79.58 hard bound; \$37.95 paper.

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Over the decades, Comintern scholarship has evolved into a respectable subfield within the history of the USSR and/or of the left. The opening of its archives in the 1990s in particular has vastly increased our knowledge of the organization, its activities and activists, in Moscow and abroad. In the absence of a new body of material since then, it has become very difficult to make a major contribution to the field. The trajectory of the organization has been more or less delineated, from explosive and promising beginnings, through its gradual incorporation within Soviet foreign policy over the course of the 1920s and its vertiginous zigzags, to the destruction of many of its Soviet-based activists and the excommunication of foreign-based ones during the Great Terror and its eventual closure in 1943. Certainly, there are many more Comintern structures that still wait for their historian; many more projects—realized or not—that need better accounts; many more lives touched by its force field that need their biographer. Yet all of this work—like much of the recent scholarship—seems somewhat additive.

Remarkably, *Left Transnationalism* succeeds in breaking new ground and opening conversations that will last long after this volume has been read. The key to its success is the editors' choice of perspective: Comintern's engagement with nationalism, race, and colonialism, especially in the colonial world, but not only. Furthermore, if there is no consensus evaluation of the Comintern's main line of activities in the west, which is very much contingent on the individual researcher's position on interwar Soviet communism, the organization's support for anti-colonial, anti-racist, and national liberation movements in the interwar era, for all the contradictions and inconsistencies, is hard to dismiss or denigrate. At a time when "the international community" found Woodrow Wilson's principles of self-determination inapplicable to the colonial world and the newly founded United Nations could not accept the 1919 "Racial Equality Proposal" owing to the opposition of powerful western members that saw it as a threat to their own racial and colonial regimes, the Comintern was not only verbally denouncing colonialism and racism but also putting significant resources where its mouth was. To evoke a term applied to the Spanish Republicans fighting fascist-supported Francisco Franco, its activists in colonial or settler-colonial regimes were premature anti-colonialists and anti-racists, long before it was fashionable to be one. Moreover, in the process of re-examining the Comintern from this new lens, the authors of this volume bring its history in conversation with—if not at the center of—another new and vibrant body of scholarship: Global South Studies.

Thus, simply by the choice of this optic, *Left Transnationalism* was bound to be a success. But the execution of the project is equal to the task. Editors Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay have authored a magisterial introduction that offers a true state-of-the-field of Comintern studies, establishes the consensus where it has been achieved, and presents the range of debate in areas where it has not. The rest of the volume is divided into four parts. The first contextualizes the Comintern's anti-colonialism in its first years. Focusing on the figure of Karl Kautsky, Lars Lih's contribution establishes the continuity between Second and Third International thinking on the colonial question. Stephen A. Smith explores the resonance of the Bolshevik Revolution in the colonial

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world, where it was interpreted as an anti-imperialist rather than an anti-capitalist uprising. John Riddell focuses on the origins of the united anti-imperialist front with the colonial bourgeoisie, a policy communists in the three continents continued to embrace or oppose, and certainly debate, for many more decades. Rounding up this section, Alistair Kocho-Williams's chapter examines the early Soviet challenge of British rule in India, which predated the inauguration of the Comintern but grew in magnitude when the Indian revolutionary M.N. Roy arrived in Moscow and joined its Presidium.

Part Two concerns transnational radical networks and the personal trajectories of communists or fellow travelers moving along them. Sandra Pujals's "*Los poputchiki*" offers three portraits of major cultural figures (the Japanese Seki Sano, the "Father" of modern Mexican theater; the Moscow-born film director of Mexico's Golden Era, Arcady Boytler; and the doyen of North American Hispanic Studies, Angel del Rio), none of whom quite became card-carrying communists but whose early encounters with Marxism shaped their illustrious careers. Finally, while Andrée Lévesque's chapter examines the institutions shaping interwar Canadian communists (leftist magazines and clubs, trips to the USSR, the Lenin School, and the Spanish Civil War), Xiaofei Tu maps the Japanese Communist Nosaka Sanzō's triangulation among the Comintern and the Chinese and Japanese Communist Parties.

Part Three is probably the most intriguing as it most squarely focused on the Comintern's engagement with the racial and colonial questions. Marc Becker's comparative study of how two communist leaders—the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui and Ricardo Paredes of Ecuador—theorized the relationship between class and race in light of the Comintern's resolution, allows him to speculate about the diverging long-term political trajectories of leftist and Indigenous movements in those countries. In their chapters, Evan Smith and Oleksa Drachewych are similarly concerned with the significant interpretative leeway and inconsistencies of the Comintern's positions on race and colonialism, especially the 1928 Native Republic/indigenous nation thesis, in the British Dominions (South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada), which could at times prove highly productive for local communists. Finally, Kankan Xie explores the multiple valences of Chinese communism carried for the communist movements of South East Asia, serving in some contexts as a model, in others, as a trigger of nationalist resistance, and in all cases highlighting the specific role of the Chinese diaspora.

Rounding out the volume, Part Four is devoted to a whole host of American communists' engagements with ethnic issues, whether to do with the Canadian Communist Party's large ethnic membership (Daria Dyakonova), Finnish communists in Canada's Lakehead region (Michel Beaulieu), French-Canadian nationhood (Ian McKay), or the Chinese diaspora in North and Central America (Anna Belogurova). The volume concludes with Oleksa Drachewych's humble reflections on issues it could not tackle but future research should.

One of the remarkable aspects about this volume is that except for Lars T. Lih, Stephen A. Smith, John Riddell, and Sandra Pujals, few of the contributors are established historians of communism. Indeed, this choice of the editors may have had to do with the volume's focus not so much on the Executive Committee of the Communist International's (ECCI) instructions on national, racial, and colonial questions but rather on how its unclear, conflicting, and sometimes impossible instructions were re-interpreted "away from Moscow," what kind of networks and subjects they ended up producing, and ultimately, what long-term and usually unforeseen effects they had on the ground. In a volume like this, it is hard to avoid quibbles about some omissions, especially of non-Anglophone scholarship, the absence of some geographies (the Middle East's is particularly notable here) and the

over-representation of Canada. As a whole, however, *Left Transnationalism* has set the agenda for Comintern studies for years to come.

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Polish Republican Discourse in the Sixteenth Century. By Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves. Trans. by Teresa Bałuk-Ulewiczowa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. vii, 268 pp. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$99.99, hard bound. doi: 10.1017/slr.2021.167

Republican discourse in Renaissance Europe was one of the most important implications of the revival of ancient political ideas and their creative applications for a new reality. Polish political discourse in the early modern age is a beloved subject of research for many Polish scholars (lately by Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Dyskurs polityczny Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów*, Toruń, 2018). Though this subject was presented also in English, the book under review presents practically for the first time a meticulous and penetrating analysis of the sixteenth century Polish political discourse in the English language. The importance of presenting this subject in English lays not only in showing that the republican discourse also penetrated Poland, but also in the confrontation of this imported discourse with the unique early modern Polish political system and its socio-economic reality, which developed in the sixteenth century completely differently from west Europe outlines.

The leading force of republican discourse in western Europe, the urban burgher estates, were in decline in sixteenth century Poland. Transformation of Poland into “the granary” of western Europe in the sixteenth century caused a general ruralization of Polish society, enserfment of the peasants, and served as a fertile ground for the rise of the power of the Polish nobility, which gradually gained the upper hand over royal authority. This process coincided with the Renaissance revival of classical Greek and Roman political discourse. As a result, Polish political institutions came to be described in highly inadequate terms. The Polish elective monarchy became the *res publica* (*Rzecz pospolita* in Polish); the privileges of the Polish nobility called “golden liberty” (*złota wolność*) became Roman *libertas*; and the assemblies of local nobles (*sejmiki*) became an expression of direct democracy, Athenian style, and the whole Polish political system was treated as a “mixed constitution” of Polybius combining monarchical (the King), aristocratic (the Senate consisted of secular and ecclesiastic magnates), and democratic (the Chamber of Envoys delegated by local *sejmiki*) components.

Some of the contemporary authors participating in this discourse, such as Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, Wawrzyniec Goślicki, Jakub Przyłucki, Andrzej Wolan, and Sebastian Petrycy were well aware of the inadequacies of the ancient republican model for Polish realities. Others, like Stanisław Orzechowski, solved the problem by claiming that the King, clergy, and knights constitute the “people”—citizen body of the “republic”—while burghers and peasants are destined to serve their needs. All participant of this republican discourse also widely used comparisons with the contemporary Italian merchants’ city-states (especially Venice), hardly relevant for the Polish “republic of nobles.”

It is not entirely clear to what extent Polish scholars, including Pietrzyk-Reeves, are aware of this contradiction between the medieval political system and republican rhetoric. Statements such as: “In comparison with the rest of Europe, Poland-Lithuania was the polity in which the greatest number of citizens had a say in the running of their