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## **George Padmore: Pan-African Revolutionary**

Edited by FITZROY BAPTISTE and RUPERT LEWIS

Kingston, Ian Randle Publishers, 2009

xxvi + 209 pp., ISBN: 978-976-637-350-4 (US\$ 24.95 paperback)

The appearance of an edited collection on one of the towering figures of the twentieth-century 'black Atlantic', the Trinidadian intellectual and activist George Padmore (1902-1959), coming as it does on the fiftieth anniversary of his death, is not only timely but also most welcome. As the co-editor Rupert Lewis notes, the volume aims to be 'a contribution to the renewal of scholarship on George Padmore. It is hoped that it will stimulate further research and scholarship as well as discussion of Padmore's political and intellectual legacy' (p. xvii). One can only applaud such sentiments, as aside from an early 1967 biography and a few notable articles since there has been a distinct paucity of scholarly debate on Padmore. Indeed, though it is claimed in this collection by Marika Sherwood – quite justifiably - that Padmore was 'the founding father of the OAU, now known as the African Union' (p. 179), and while many of the new rulers of Africa accordingly conferred a certain prestige on his name for a time after his death, much of what was most essential about the life and work of this fascinating personality has all but been forgotten.

This volume in particular indeed adds much to our knowledge of perhaps the central element of Padmore's political life – his militant Pan-Africanism – which ran from his early reading of W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey while growing up in a tiny Crown colony in the British Caribbean and ended with his appointment as advisor on African Affairs to Kwame Nkrumah in the new black nation of Ghana. Though a whiff of hagiography perhaps unavoidably creeps into the volume in places, overall some of the sheer range, strength and breadth of Padmore's pioneering ideological, agitational and above all organisational service to the cause of liberation struggles across the African diaspora in general and Pan-Africanism in particular is well brought out. In particular, this collection, which originated in a conference on 'The Life and Times of George Padmore' held to mark the centenary of his birth at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad illuminates much of his continuing relationship with the anti-colonial movements in the Caribbean once he left the region in 1924. There are also useful and detailed chapters by a wide range of scholars on such areas as Padmore's International African Service Bureau journal *International African Opinion*, his part in organising the historic Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945, his relationship to Nkrumah and his lifelong friend and compatriot C.L.R. James and so on.

Yet while the collective contribution represented by this volume stands as a long overdue advance for scholarship on Padmore, the Pan-Africanist perspective of many of the contributors serves to somewhat limit the possibility of a really serious investigation of some of the complexities and slightly problematic nature of his political and intellectual evolution. Few contributors face up to the crucial question of the extent to which Padmore's strategy and tactics for achieving 'Pan-African Socialism' while acting as a mentor to Nkrumah after 1945 are at all complicit in the tragic failings of the post-colonial project of state-building which fully manifested themselves after his death. We learn for example of a letter Padmore wrote to Richard Wright in October 1955, in which he describes how James had introduced Nkrumah to Trotskyism while in America but 'I knocked that nonsense out of him before his return [to the Gold Coast]. And put in its place Pan-Africanism (Black Nationalism plus Socialism)' (p. 164). Anthony Bogues claims Padmore for a slightly

abstract tradition of ‘black internationalism’, provocatively suggesting that ‘what the work and ideas of Padmore represented was a radical challenge to Marxist political thought and practice’ (p.199-200). But if Padmore did gradually move further away from the kind of politics associated with his early years working with the increasingly Stalinist Communist International and then subsequently the ‘class struggle Pan-Africanism’ of his years working closely alongside the likes of James, it is less clear whether this move was an altogether healthy political development. One of the editors, the late Fitzroy Baptiste, in a fine contribution on ‘The African Conferences of Governors and Indigenous Collaborators, 1947-1948: A British Strategy to Blunt the 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress’, quotes from a British Foreign Office document from December 1959 entitled ‘Africa: The Next Ten Years’. With what Baptiste notes was the ‘typical smugness’ of those wielding imperial power, this document tellingly concluded ‘Pan-Africanism, in itself, is not necessarily a force that we need regard with suspicion and fear’ (p. 59). Coming only months after Padmore’s death, this statement stands as an epitaph to the limitations of the ‘Pan-African Socialism’ as envisioned by Nkrumah and Padmore (and for that matter also by James).

Overall, this volume serves as a useful reminder that there is still so much more to be explored and discovered with respect to Padmore, whether one considers his theory of imperialism, the range of his contacts, or simply tracking the continuities and complexities at stake in his ever evolving thoughts on the strategy and tactics necessary to overthrow colonialism. Even though there are notorious difficulties concerning tracking down what remains of his papers and correspondence, which are scattered and hidden away in archives and police files around the world, the sheer volume of his published journalism should give scholars some hope here. Indeed, if journalism is the first draft of history, then perhaps a turn to Padmore’s written work itself could play a part in the writing of new imperial histories. There are two areas of his life in particular that deserved more critical examination and attention than it was possible for them to receive in this volume. The first concerns the dramatic years spent educating, agitating and organising while working as a ‘professional revolutionary’ for the Communist International from the late 1920s until his principled resignation from his prestigious position as head of the ‘Negro Bureau’ in the Profintern in 1933. Much of Padmore’s authority as an ‘organic intellectual’ of the anti-colonial movement – to say nothing of his political training - came from this crucial period of intense and courageous activism while editor of the *Negro Worker*, and author of such classic pamphlets as *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* (1931) and so on. The second concerns Padmore’s relationship to imperial Britain, from his early experiences growing up in colonial Trinidad to the twenty years spent working alongside British radicals and socialists in the ‘dark heart’ of the British Empire, the metropolis of London itself. Though there are passing references to Padmore’s longstanding support for the Independent Labour Party, whose theoretical journal *Left* (formerly *Controversy*) he even co-edited for a period during the Second World War, such networks warrant more investigation. That said, this publication can only serve to spur on the process – clearly already underway - by which George Padmore is finally rescued from what E.P. Thompson called ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’ and at last attains the kind of critical appreciation and intellectual respect this great humanist and internationalist deserves.

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