

INTRODUCTION

A SKELETAL RAILROAD crossing at Paint Rock, Alabama, in the mountainous terrain near Scottsboro is the unlikely starting point for a journey into the political culture of imperial Britain in the 1930s—a journey that continues across the English Channel to the plains north of the Bavarian Alps and Munich. The metropolitan British and German rail centers dwarfed the sparse Alabama settlement that was too small to have a courthouse; those picked up in Paint Rock on suspicion of foul play had to be carried in flatbed trucks to the county seat. How did “race” figure in the 1930s? This history of the decade is comprised of unanticipated travel, unjust trials, and tangled and ragged networks of people living in dark times. The nine young defendants in the Scottsboro rape case were arrested in March of 1931, and Munich was the scene of the conference in September 1938, at which representatives of the British and French governments, with fascist Italy’s assistance, attempted to appease Adolf Hitler’s drive for war, sacrificing peoples and lands in the balance. The paths of many of those who responded to these events crossed in Britain, where London served as an unofficial center of colonial and antifascist exile. The imperial capital on its rain-swept islands—between the European continent, the ports of the Caribbean, and the North American seaboard—remained the seat of a parliamentary democracy that continued to allow entry to some people in flight. Britain was the final and first stop for many coming and going across oceans and seas. This story unfolds in the interconnections of activist lives, and is about the ideas and purposes to which those lives were dedicated.

Why was Ada Wright, a domestic worker from Chattanooga, Tennessee, walking so determinedly on Fleet Street in the summer of 1932? How does her story find a connection to the designs for peace that led to war staged in Munich? The answers to these questions foster a reconfigured narrative of the 1930s, whose protagonists formed a diffuse “front” of radicals and liberals, many of them socialists and communists, passionately involved in racial politics, who for the most part knew one another between the wars. The persons at the center of this story visited or worked, in Britain, or exercised influence over a strand of British-based activism, yet each came from somewhere else—Tennessee, Trinidad, Ireland, India, and Germany—and achieved notoriety in one political circle or another in the era.

In the 1930s, the Empire was a central foundation of Britain’s life and through the operations of what some have termed her “gentlemanly capitalism,”

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a source of much of her wealth, covering a quarter of the globe and governing a quarter of the world's population, over 350 million of whom lived on the Indian subcontinent alone.¹ London was not the only theater of imperial control, but from it flowed much of the Empire's power, investment, and governance. The myriad forms of metropolitan racial politics of the 1930s and the very different individuals who voiced them, formed an essential part of the vast interwar imperial order, and inherited various transatlantic connections—from the Atlantic world of merchant and slave vessels, colonization, revolution, and civil wars. These took many observable forms. We turn to the capital of the “other Britain,” land of the Scots, in the year before Munich.

In August of 1937, Bishop William Heard, 35th bishop of the African American AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church, traveled by steamship to Edinburgh with his niece to attend the Second World Conference on Faith and Order of the progressive, international ecumenical movement. He was the conference's oldest delegate and the oldest AME bishop, a former slave who had organized black railroad workers in the American South before entering the ranks of the clergy, winning a major court battle against segregation in 1877 and serving as U.S. consul-general in Liberia in the 1890s. Now ninety, Heard was one of many hundreds of African Americans increasingly visible in Britain and on the European continent. W.E.B. Du Bois attended the University of Heidelberg before 1914, and black troops fought in the Jim Crow U.S. military in France during World War I. When the fighting ceased, those African Americans who could afford to do so came to see the sights of Europe, some famously making their homes in Paris and London.

Even the leading U.S. African American newspapers—the *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Baltimore African-American*—had offices and journalists in London in the thirties. The Heards were in these respects unexceptional visitors. But the bishop and his niece were denied a hotel room on that summer day in Edinburgh, the hotel's owner pleading that white American tourists had pressured him not to let rooms to blacks, asking that the segregationist practices that obtained in the United States prevail in Scotland so that they might feel entirely at home. This prohibition was still common in Britain and Europe, and within the law. The African American actor Paul Robeson had been refused entry to the Savoy Hotel Grill in a celebrated case a few years earlier. Quick to act on behalf of his fellow clergyman, no less a personage than the Archbishop of York William Temple offered his own home to the Heards. Temple was a radical cleric, a professed socialist who had taught in workingmen's educational clubs in the 1920s and whose *Christianity and the Social Order* and other works, championed a fervent antifascist and pro-labor doctrine. He was active in Jewish refugee relief work, was elected Archbishop of Canterbury in 1942, and became a chief architect of the World Council of Churches. Italy, Germany, and now Spain were engulfed by fascism and the kinds of racial policies that Archbishop Temple loathed. Guernica was bombed

in April of that year, and in this month of August, the Vatican recognized Franco. Scotland could little afford the embarrassment of its American eumenical guest, a former slave no less, being spurned accommodation on racial grounds.

But Archbishop Temple's hospitality was not required; the Heards went to a smaller hotel where they were made welcome, their booking reportedly secured by other "influential whites." Nevertheless, the home secretary Sir John Simon, a Liberal party MP who was now part of Britain's National Government (the rightward-leaning coalition first elected in 1931), felt personally compelled to come and convey his apologies to the black bishop. He was accompanied by his wife, Lady Kathleen Manning Simon. Irish by birth, Lady Simon was a leader of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society, the venerable organization based in London that claimed advocacy of millions of global victims of incarcerated labor. The Simons rushed north from the metropolis to Edinburgh to pay their respects. Bishop Heard died two weeks later after returning home to Philadelphia, his visit and death covered in the *New York Times*. The *Chicago Defender* reported the episode under the headline "British Regret Jim Crow Insult."² His anxious hosts in Britain breathed a sigh of relief that they had not been the cause of his passing and had instead eased his way home. Liberal tolerance had prevailed. Simon wrote to W.E.B. Du Bois.

I do not know if you saw any account of my husband's and my action in Scotland because of the treatment meted out to Bishop Heard and his great-niece Miss Caldwell. My anger was raised to white heat at the refusal of a hotel to accommodate them because of their color. We invited them out and showed them publicly with us and I learned that the poor old man was comforted by our action. Curiously enough several people in Edinburgh whom I did not know, came and thanked me for my action which "took the slur from our city."³

But Bishop Heard may have regarded the episode in another way. He had first visited Britain in 1895, and in the 1920s wrote that "in certain parts of London and Liverpool the prejudice is as great as in New York."⁴ Britain's interwar communities of color numbered 20,000–30,000, comprised largely of maritime workers, domestic servants, and low-paid or migrant laborers. There were small middle-class and professional contingents of blacks, Asians, and those from the Middle East, including two Asian MPs who served before 1914, Parris Dadabhai Naoroji and Mancherjee Bhownagree, and several black London borough officials including John Archer and Henry Sylvester Williams. The sons of some wealthy colonials of color attended Eton and Oxbridge. British Jewry, commonly referred to as members of the "Jewish race," numbered 300,000 or more, both Anglo-Jewry and recent immigrants constituting a community ten times the size of the groups of "nonwhites," even apart from the largely European immigrants and their descendants of non-Jewish backgrounds, and the Irish. Blacks, including African Americans, had long featured on the

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London cultural scene, and Londoners who had not seen them perform in person were accustomed to their depiction on the music hall stage, and in the variety theater and the cinema. The popular minstrel routines of the 1930s served as metaphors for racial assumption, racial attitude, and for “race” as it informed this particular historical conjuncture. The words and performances of black entertainers and their impersonators constituted a familiar, streetwise, transatlantic interwar idiom. Bishop Heard could not escape common presumption and he knew that. Those who spoke on his behalf lived within the cultural moment and terms of their times.

The Heard episode was unsurprising for its era. Racial exclusion was common and lawful in many parts of the United States. American tourism was on the upswing in Europe, the dollar fiercely coveted in the dangerous straits of the later thirties. But the visit of the bishop and his niece, and the apology they received from a Cabinet member whose name would shortly be linked to the attempted appeasement of Hitler by the British government, are not part of the routine histories of the interwar years. The fact of an African American press office in London, the transatlantic travels of an aging black church official, the importance attached to Simon’s apology in his and Lady Simon’s circles and her witnessing of it are details left aside in the dominant stories of the thirties: economic depression, lynching in America, the rise of fascism, democracy’s late mobilization, and the longer story of the eventual pursuit of “Civil Rights,” only when the time came and in America—on the bridge at Selma, Alabama, and after. A fixed image of the decade and what followed, especially in its assumptions about racial politics, acts as a vise on knowledge and on the imagination. This book is committed to the release of that constraint.

The leap from the music hall and variety stage to the lynch mob of the Jim Crow South was assisted by many British travelers’ accounts of life in America, and the British press carried lurid and graphic accounts of many a lynching. The Scottsboro, Alabama, trials began in 1931, when the nine young black defendants were summarily found guilty of raping two white women hobos on a train that was stopped at Paint Rock—a crime that they did not commit. Their supporters used the vernacular of the music-hall stage to portray the defendants as pathetic and unsuspecting racial outcasts pleading for their lives. The print culture emanating from the events of the case promoted the stereotypes of stage and screen. Communists, socialists, and liberals who participated in the Scottsboro campaign that arose internationally in the wake of capital sentences being handed down in Alabama also employed this minstrel vernacular, routinely interwoven with the language of communist appeals to the proletariat.⁵

Each chapter that follows pursues a figure who appeared in the international Scottsboro campaign—Ada Wright, George Padmore, Shapurji Saklatvala, Willi Münzenberg, and Lady Simon, who donated funds to the campaign and committed herself to other racial causes that placed her within its orbit. Padmore, Saklatvala, and Münzenberg knew one another and had seen or met Ada

Wright. They knew of Lady Simon and the antislavery movement; she had knowledge of them and their milieus. Knowledge of the lives and perceptions of these actors contributes to a new understanding of what transatlantic and imperial racial politics looked like to the man and woman of conscience and even to the more casual observer in the thirties. These individuals acted as lightning rods for antiracism in an era whose written history often does not admit them as full players or acknowledge their mutual connections. Their awkward presences upset historical convention and pose some little-asked questions of the decade that spanned the distance between the outbreak of the Scottsboro case and the disruption and sacrifice of lives that lay in the aftermath of the Munich agreements. London sat uncomfortably poised between Jim Crow and the Third Reich. What did it mean to be an antiracist at this time? What did it mean to oppose empire or fascism, or both, on grounds of racial inhumanity and racial injustice, or to articulate a vision of an interracial world culture?

The story begins with the relationship between the American Jim Crow South and the Anglo-European world that was fascinated with Southern ways, and repulsed by them. A mirror of the racial animosities witnessed by Europeans in their own global intrigues, and a prophetic vision of the violence that would come with mounting racial hatreds on the European continent, the South was “read” and perceived as beyond a boundary of white civilization, any trace of which increasingly compelled an apology from the Simons and others of their liberal persuasion. Those who saw the Scottsboro rape trials of the nine African Americans as symbols of the most horrific outcome of that boundary’s crossing—the legal execution of the innocent—were passionately mobilized around the defendants’ release. This is an account of individual lives known to one another through this case and other similar, often related endeavors, from liberal antislavery politics and humanitarian refugee activism, to liberalism, socialism, and communism. How did these persons address the racial episodes of the 1930s and with what common and discordant languages? What were their visions of the future? How did they reconcile the struggle against a growing fascism with their sympathies for the victims of Jim Crow? When war grew nearer, how did “racial politics” change?

Ada Wright, the mother of two of the defendants, Roy and Andy Wright, crossed the Atlantic to Germany in the summer of 1932; the Scottsboro case occasioned her life’s first travels outside of the Jim Crow South. She sat with her companion, International Labor Defense leader and American communist Louis Engdahl, among white passengers on the liner that docked at Hamburg, the center of European communist work among black and Asian seafaring laborers who made up significant numbers of the harborside population of the city. Along with Liverpool, Bristol, Cardiff, London, Marseille, and Paris, Hamburg had one of the most visible communities of color in the European world of the thirties. Wright, a member of a Primitive Baptist congregation in

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Chattanooga whose mother was born in slavery, made her way across Britain and Europe through the offices of what was termed Red Aid, a very large network of mass relief and propaganda organizations with direct affiliation to the Communist International (Comintern)—the international association, directorate, and secretariat of worldwide communist parties headquartered in Moscow. But Wright also saw many other Europeans that summer who were not communists. And when she spoke, the dialect of Tennessee conveyed images of the South, including harsh depictions of slavery that enforced the propaganda cry to free her sons and the other defendants. In 1932 Wright spent ten days in London, the shires, Scotland, and Wales. The photograph from the Russian archives on this book's cover, was taken as she departed a press conference on Fleet Street, the British International Labour Defense leader and trade unionist Bob Lovell by her side. In the wake of Wright's visit, the British writer Nancy Cunard and others worked with many kinds of political organizations and associations across London to mount a spirited defense campaign. One of the anchors of the "Scottsboro front" was the small communist-led League against Imperialism (LAI), the successor to the League against Colonial Oppression, a global association founded in Berlin in 1926, and first convened in Brussels in 1927, by German communist Willi Münzenberg. Among the LAI's early members were the British socialist MP James Maxton of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and a small group of anticolonial activists from across the empire, including the future Kenyan president Jomo Kenyatta.

Nancy Cunard's involvement in Scottsboro brought many notables on board as signatories, from London's chief rabbi to Cunard's literary and artistic cronies. They included poet Ezra Pound, artist Augustus John, Charlie Chaplin, and Albert Einstein. Many public figures from arts, literary, and political circles embraced a campaign featuring dances, fêtes, and concert fund-raisers in which expatriate African Americans also participated. Wright's intrepid journey, her "translated" speech and interactions with her supporters, introduce the chapters that follow—a visit uncharted in most accounts of the interwar British and European left.

Among Nancy Cunard's close associates was the Trinidadian intellectual George Padmore (the adopted name of Malcom Nurse), who headed the Comintern's Negro Committee in Hamburg. Padmore met Ada Wright when she arrived in Europe in 1932. The grandson of a slave and son of a schoolmaster, Padmore completed a medical board certificate in Trinidad in 1916. In 1924 he left Port of Spain for New York and joined the American communist party. He journeyed on to the Soviet Union and lived among an international circle of exiled activists in Moscow, including figures like the young Ho Chi Minh. Padmore was sent to Germany from Russia. His fellow European organizer of Comintern relief and defense campaigns was the sensational communist impresario and publishing magnate Willi Münzenberg, a former German youth leader who participated in the German revolution of 1918–19. Münzenberg

and Padmore worked in Europe alongside other activists in and around the communist movement in the early thirties, including African American James Ford, a veteran of the First World War in France, and the Soudanese former schoolteacher Garan Kouyate.

Padmore became the editor of the *Negro Worker*, a shipboard publication that was sold in bookstores and smuggled in Bibles and other literature across the globe from New York to Port of Spain, Cape Town, Nairobi, and Paris. Padmore's writing focused on the exploitation of labor in the British and European empires. He was a wry and visionary critic of imperialism in all its guises, who adopted Lenin's purported querulous description of the League of Nations as the "thieves' kitchen." Padmore is a central figure in this portrait of the 1930s whose pen, voice, and trenchant analytical ability, constituted the decisive intervention of a brilliant intellectual of color in his time in British and European political culture; he was recognized by and known as such to many who appear in this story. Padmore's presence in London over the next twenty years defied the minstrel vernacular in all its versions, including the communist rendition. His perceptions of racial attitudes and interactions in the communist movement appear in his correspondence. The Soviet claim that the Soviet Union was a racially harmonious entity that transcended ethnic differences was a powerful one for fellow travelers of the thirties, and especially for visitors and activists of color, and the insistence upon the celebration of multiracial assimilation and racial progress a mainstay of Soviet doctrine—this depiction of the Soviet Union was often wielded against portraits of the racist American South. Padmore made this claim as a propagandist while privately insisting upon the hypocrisies of comradely practice.

In February of 1933, weeks after Hitler came to power, Padmore was arrested in Hamburg, imprisoned for several months, and then deported to the United Kingdom where he was entitled to the rights of an imperial British subject. The irony of this guarantee of safe refuge did not escape the Home Office, and no sooner had he disembarked than British security agents began to trail him. It took him weeks to find anyone in London prepared to rent to a black man. The last issue of the *Negro Worker* under his editorship led with a piece on German fascism, and discussed the Nazi opposition to Wright's 1932 visit to Germany. Padmore soon severed his ties with the Comintern authorities and they with him, inaugurating a new era of his own independence as a writer and organizer in which he extended his connections to the fragile movements for independence and social justice in Britain's colonies and especially in Africa and the Caribbean, condemning Stalinist neglect of anticolonial work and challenging fascist consolidation.

Padmore traveled between London and Paris, working closely with Garan Kouyate and others around the black publications *Étoile nord-africaine* and *Le Cri des nègres*. In London, his roommates, peers, and companions included the activist Dorothy Pizer, who became Dorothy Pizer Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta,

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and Padmore's former Howard University professor and the future United Nations diplomat Ralph Bunche, who passed through en route to Africa. These and others, including Lady Simon's colleague, the Anti-Slavery Society leader John Harris, came to form the International Friends of Ethiopia and the African Friends Service Bureau. They collaborated with the former suffrage leader Sylvia Pankhurst, whose publication, the *Ethiopian Times and Orient Review* was a central organ of the opposition to Mussolini's October 1935 invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Addis Ababa fell in May of 1936, and this group welcomed Haile Selassie in his London exile. Padmore struggled to redefine his political project in the light of the Soviet Union's decision to enter the League of Nations and Soviet oil deals with Mussolini, spending the period just before the war as a crack journalist writing for the African American press and serving as an editor of the ILP newspaper the *New Leader*. Padmore remained an important advocate for anticolonial oppositionists throughout the empire.

Padmore's 1950s memoir *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* acknowledges Lady Simon's earlier work on behalf of black people, dodging the Simons's views on Africa and British diplomacy.⁶ John Simon was a key player in the negotiations with Mussolini that preceded Munich, and an architect of the final summit. He and Lady Simon were both antislavery advocates, and she enjoyed an avid correspondence with Du Bois and visits from American NAACP leaders. For years, the Italian antislavery society had also corresponded with Simon and her colleagues. The British antislavery forces, critics of Abyssinian involvement in slavery, monitored Italy's desire to occupy Ethiopia, some vesting hopes in Mussolini as a reformer in Africa. Though Emperor Haile Selassie had vowed to curb the warlords' traffic in human life, Mussolini's army sought to enforce a more resolute ban on slavery, simultaneously exploiting other forms of coerced labor after their victory in 1935. During the fascist subjugation of the only independent state in Africa apart from Liberia, the cause of "antislavery" continued to serve as a pretext for British support of Mussolini, allowing the Simons's mutual interests to converge.

In the months before Munich, some in the British political community proposed that land in the empire could be swapped for peace. This activated Padmore and many other commentators including Willi Münzenberg's friend Jawaharlal Nehru. Former British Foreign and Colonial Office appointees Reginald Bridgeman and Leonard Barnes also protested against this notion, and the Independent MP Eleanor Rathbone spoke out against "colonial transfers." Indian activists decried the implied compromise of their fight for independence against the backdrop of a decade of British attempts at co-option, prosecutions, imprisonment, and the harsh treatment of strikes in India, occurring during the years of the Civil Disobedience movement and the proliferation of other forms of Indian political activity. In the late 1920s Sir John Simon had led the all-white Simon Commission to India, encountering repeated protests; Nehru was struck by the police while he demonstrated against Simon. The

Commission's attempt to promulgate an agenda of imperially governed "home rule" was followed in 1932 by the Round Table discussions in London attended by Gandhi and other dignitaries.

In this context, the British conducted a major trial for treason in India, rounding up thirty-one activists of diverse political backgrounds and imprisoning them at Meerut, a garrison town northeast of Delhi. The militants, organizers, and trade union leaders, including three white British communist agents, were seized in raids at their homes just after the fledgling Indian communist party was implicated in a large textile strike in Bombay and other cities. The Meerut Trial and its appeals, lasting from 1929 to 1932, constituted the largest and costliest treason prosecution in British imperial history. Meerut became a western cause célèbre, with Münzenberg, Padmore, and hundreds of others organizing Scottsboro protests that linked the Alabama case with the Meerut case, and demanding freedom for all on a global scale.

A leading metropolitan spokesman for the Meerut cause in Britain was the former MP for the South London borough of Battersea, Shapurji Saklatvala. Born in 1874 to the wealthy Parsi elite, his mother a member of the powerful family of Tata, Saklatvala abandoned his family's chosen career in order to become a socialist, after experiencing racism in India and seeing London's poverty firsthand. Before World War I he worked with Sylvia Pankhurst in the suffrage movement, eventually joining the British communist party. He was an unabashed parliamentary critic of British India and an orthodox communist who idealized the Transcaucasian republics of the Soviet Union. An anticolonialist who took exception to many forms of nationalism, Saklatvala voiced commitments that were common among Indians of the communist left. In the era of the First World War a variety of Indian activists with Comintern affiliations operated out of Berlin, among them Virendranath "Chatto" Chattopadhyaya and his American companion, the writer Agnes Smedley. The Ghadr Party of exiled Indian revolutionaries was based in San Francisco.

Saklatvala was among those who greeted Ada Wright when she came to London in 1932, and he saw her again at the international Amsterdam Anti-War Congress that August. He harbored private views of British communism's failures with persons and communities of color that lay unremarked in archival documents in Moscow for more than half a century after his death in 1936, though his last public writings hinted at his frustrations with internal party racial attitudes. Three years before, he had rallied Londoners to the cause of the staged "Reichstag Fire Trial" that challenged the Nazi persecution of three defendants on trial in Leipzig for setting fire to the German parliament building in 1933. In this "mock" trial, he and others represented a vital link between opposition to empire and opposition to fascism.

The deep repression aimed explicitly at the broad left in Germany, and then in much greater and overwhelming numbers at the Jews of Europe, took on new force with Hitler's assumption of power in 1933. Willi Münzenberg, still

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an important German communist leader and propagandist extraordinaire at the time of the Nazi coup, fled Germany with his wife Babette Gross and made his way to Paris, like many others on the left. Some chose the Saarbrücken as their first destination, which was then a supervised mandate under Versailles, and still others chose Prague. As the next years passed, the three safe havens for members of the German left, many among them Jewish, all proved to be danger zones of surveillance and assassination, and eventual pickup points for the journey to the camps of the Reich. Münzenberg and Gross sought the company of other exiled communists and socialists including their fast friend the Hungarian journalist Arthur Koestler, writer Manès Sperber, and communist organizer Otto Katz. Münzenberg made two trips to Moscow from Paris and continued to report to Comintern authorities while remaining close to many former Bolshevik leaders, his oldest comrades, in the Soviet Union. On a visit made from Paris, he and Gross visited a labor camp near Moscow whose conditions Gross recalled as shocking. The Germans, like many other exiles from India, China, and across Europe, believed that Moscow was another safe haven. Gross's brother-in-law and the exiled Indian Chattopadhyaya, were among those who died in the Gulag.

As the repression intensified in Germany, thousands of Germans and Austrians also fled to London. The numbers of those in Britain grew from a few thousand in the earlier years, to 80,000 at the War's outset. Ninety percent of refugees who fled Nazi Germany for Britain were German-Jewish in background. Their numbers swelled after the British authorities lifted tight emigration restrictions in the wake of *Kristallnacht*.⁷ In the mock "Reichstag Fire Trial," those whom the Nazis had accused of setting fire to the Reichstag were "tried" in a mock legal proceeding held in the Law Society offices off the Strand, despite Sir John Simon's efforts as foreign secretary to thwart its opening. None other than Münzenberg, Koestler, and their followers in Paris planned the events in cooperation with their British contacts and supporters, prominent among them the former British naval commander and radical Lord Marley, the communist film maker Ivor Montagu, and the Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson. Among the "judges" serving was the attorney Arthur Garfield Hays, an American who had worked with Clarence Darrow in the Scopes trial in Tennessee and who had attended one of a series of European Pan-African Congresses. The mock trial was the occasion for Münzenberg to publish, with British assistance, *The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror*, despite all its factual errors the most important early exposé of Nazi policy, including the brutal racial policies of the Reich.⁸ After the publication of *The Brown Book*, the irrepressible Münzenberg continued to pursue various alliances in Paris that raised suspicions in Moscow, and to lead the World Committee of the Victims of German Fascism, which had an American affiliate. Much larger Jewish relief organizations sprang up almost immediately in Britain, and as more and more Jews and other central Europeans streamed into London, refugee work overwhelmed the organizations

drawn from the religious and cultural communities as well as those allied to secular activist organizations in the political community. Münzenberg led a small fraction of this work from afar, and in 1934, the Comintern took action to undermine him during an absence from Paris; this last effort led to his resignation and expulsion from the Comintern, though he departed in a less-assured and principled way than Padmore. His most trusted confidants in Moscow were executed over the next few years. He had no defender left, and his doubts about Stalinism increased accordingly and persuasively.

Münzenberg and his intimates briefly published an independent German language paper *Die Zukunft* in Paris, which developed wide-ranging contacts, its pursuit of readers extending to Churchill's inner circle and the liberal personnel of the Roosevelt administration in Washington. The paper's galaxy of contributors from the three major British political parties bore testament to Münzenberg's zeal just before the outbreak of war. Across the channel in London, those who had started out organizing around Scottsboro, with the American racial divide at the heart of their complaint, now spent endless and anxious days finding shelter and work permits for Europeans streaming across the waters caught in the conundra of the murderous racial politics of the Nazi regime. After 1934, Scottsboro all but disappeared from the scene in the face of the enormity of fascism's imposition; for many, there were simply not enough hours in the day, nor enough will to connect all the issues resolutely. Global conditions overwhelmed the transatlantic sensibility. When Nehru came to London in 1938 he spoke at a rally of the Left Book Club to a room of three thousand. "No true anti-Fascist could ignore imperialism, as some of them tried to do."⁹ Munich lay just ahead.

The reader new to the thirties may wonder whether historians have attacked these questions before. Wide and separate if not equally known histories, hail one another from across many divides. This narrative leaps across barriers, asking that the approaches of each academic literature shed new light on the thirties *in ensemble*, irreverently asserting the connections among "independent" lines of historical inquiry. In order to answer the questions it asks, these disparate kinds of histories must come together, give up ground, and accept facts in order to reconsider the shape of the era. Conventional explorations of politics and diplomacy, and the biographies and memoirs of statesmen are essential to its substance, yet each genre is inattentive to racial politics, treating these politics as foreign and secondary to the central events. Prime Minister Gordon Brown's biography of the ILP leader James Maxton never mentions Maxton's colleague Padmore, to cite one instance among many.¹⁰ The history of anti-imperialism, including venerable studies of opposition to imperial rule in the colonial settings and territories,¹¹ overlaps with a fluid "Black British" canon that encompasses many postcolonial, diaspora, and subaltern studies works that are related to movements in disciplines other than history, especially in the social sciences and literature.¹² African American studies and new

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kinds of Southern American history have contributed to the pioneering work on the Scottsboro case and its subsequent interpretations.¹³

This book also engages the discordant new histories of communism.¹⁴ Its archival base includes Comintern sources recently investigated by non-Russian scholars. Studies of communist practices and beliefs emphasize the specificity of local and national experience and seek to define “Stalinism” in a variety of complex ways, some judging the development of popular communist activism without assuming either absolute top-down control from Moscow, or the possibility of complete autonomy for external communist parties, while others examine domestic events through a new lens.¹⁵ Three of the five central figures of this book were elite communist cadre; they were not rank and file activists, but leaders. They made conscious choices about how to respond to the practices and culture of the Comintern and the national parties and international organizations in which they participated, and possessed broad and detailed knowledge of these practices, both internal and external.

Those new communist histories that revolve around the “revelations” that national and local parties had funds from Moscow simply restate the problem without addressing it, alighting on a plain already occupied in the 1930s. Playwright George Bernard Shaw, in some respects a Soviet sympathizer, wrote to ILP leader Fenner Brockway in 1933. “The Communist Party made the grave tactical mistake of affirming the international character of the Socialist principle by accepting money from a foreign Government and placing itself under its direction.”¹⁶ The question of whether external communist parties allied themselves with and were directed and funded by Moscow begs the more pressing question of what the parties did or did not do as a consequence. At a time when the quantity and detail of Stalinist practices in the Soviet Union and externally are matters of new historical reconstruction, historians are also gathering testimony from those who were teenagers and young adults in the thirties; their recollections can be juxtaposed with a fuller documentary historical record.¹⁷

As the history of the Scottsboro case bears out, there was significant doubt surrounding the Communist call to aid the cause of racial justice in the 1930s. The skeptics included the critic George Schuyler, whose column in the African American *Pittsburgh Courier*, saluted Padmore, proclaiming in 1934: “The Negro seems to be the Communist Jonah. Whenever carrying him along proves burdensome or embarrassing, the Reds can always be depended upon to throw him overboard to the sharks.” A month later, Schuyler wrote candidly of the “few hundred thousand political prisoners in Siberia.”¹⁸ In the context of a Soviet foreign policy that sought Western allies, the profound NKVD repression, and the forced collectivization of Russian agriculture, the Comintern increasingly failed to sustain an antiracist and anti-imperialist stance on a global scale. Paradoxically, those ideas passé in Moscow attracted many individuals to communist banners and membership in the West, at least for a few months or years

of the thirties, serving as deterrents to criticism of the Soviet Union on other grounds, as if to contend that one could exonerate the Kremlin's domestic policy in the light of Soviet and Comintern posturing about the injustices of the British Empire and the abuses of Jim Crow.

The hierarchical, meritocratic post-Bolshevik Soviet elite could appeal to mandarin British sensibilities like those of Fabian Society founders and Labour party strategists Beatrice and Sidney Webb, or liberals like Eleanor Rathbone, who intermittently contributed to popular-front and coalition endeavors under communist sponsorship, including the early Scottsboro campaign.¹⁹ From African American writer Langston Hughes to Scots writer Naomi Mitchison, dozens of well-disposed fellow travelers and the curious were wined and hosted in the USSR. Even when returning visitors and political opponents voiced complaints about observed and documented Soviet conditions and policies, many found the West so wanting that they pushed aside the realities of the Comintern and Kremlin practices, otherwise engaged. Padmore and Nehru were not alone in condemning imperialism and fascism in the same breath. While some saw this language as propping up Stalin or Hitler by refusing to rank the evils, others saw it as the appropriate mode in which to discuss Roosevelt, Churchill, Neville Chamberlain, or Édouard Daladier—as handmaidens to fascism in their roles as perpetrators of imperialism. The coming war's deepest challenges and most profound atrocities knew few clairvoyants, though Padmore arrestingly described the fascists in 1937 as "planning to make a holocaust of humanity."²⁰ The portrayal of the multiplicity of political voices of the thirties is consigned to Caribbean, Indian, African, and African American specialists; Holocaust studies brilliantly marks out its own terrain. "Never the twain shall meet," yet one hopes for better as the new archival openings that inform this book are more deeply plumbed and as older collections are newly interrogated. A conceptual leap is also required. This is not compensatory history, but instead a drive for a deeper understanding of the origins of the global dilemmas of twenty-first-century life.

Death followed quickly for many portrayed here in their last vital years of unceasing energy. Their ambitions are most often associated with a later period, if with Britain and Europe at all. Mention of the civil rights movement and the era of national independence and Third World liberation—years of the "decline of Empire" and "decolonization"—connote the postwar era, the starting gate for the great sea change in racial politics that marked the ensuing decades.²¹ These postwar histories should not be disentangled from the interwar era. Racial politics as a category of inquiry allows for new understandings of the bedrock history of Britain and its global relationships in the years before the war that in turn inform and broaden understandings of what came next.

The monstrous global economic crisis of the 1930s, like the cinematic terror King Kong, seemed determined to thrust humankind into oblivion. Nothing but a global solution could stop the monster and yet, no single solution arose.²²

Instead, individuals and groups, nations and “races” competed to lead different kinds of battles. Some leaped toward fascism or entered the blind alleys of Stalinism. Others were lost on side roads to peace, socialism, and world unity that defied *realpolitik*. This tale of contest can be told as a story of the triumph of democratic will over racial hatred. In that version, when the Allied armies landed at Normandy and the bombs dropped over Japan, a new era of freedom began. In 1989 this freedom was extended to most of the world as the statues of Lenin tumbled. Yet injustices persisted. Did they not constitute an inheritance of the years before the war?

A different story, the one told here, pauses instead to lighten the pathways traveled in the 1930s, searching for elusive figures and lost words. The fears and predicaments of the world after the second global war were visible in the years immediately before it. Clues have been overlooked. One can begin in the metropolitan center that ruled an empire, in whose streets walked the characters of this book, even as Samuel Pepys and Dr. Johnson had: *London before the Blitz*, before the *Luftwaffe*. Another starting point is the very poor African American community at the foot of Lookout Mountain in the verdant, towering reaches of the Tennessee Smokies, in a city whose textile mills and train yards cluttered landscapes and townscapes whose names came from their first inhabitants, the city’s own name the Native American word for the towering mountain above—*Chattanooga seventy years after slavery*.

The misunderstood origins of these southern American “Indians” suggest a third starting point in a second city of textile mills, a harbor of merchant vessels, and a port of departure for young aspirants who as subjects of the Crown made their way to London at the start of the new twentieth century, some hoping to change the world and others their fortunes to seek: *Bombay before Independence and Partition*. Another harbor appeared—one could gaze from it upon the splendor of the Chrysler building and find Armstrong and Ellington in midtown and uptown. Union Square witnessed red flags flying: *New York City before the civil rights movement*. One could take a ship along the coast to the Antilles, striking southeast to Port of Spain: *Trinidad one hundred years after Emancipation*. Ships from here headed back to the imperial metropolis across the Atlantic—to the “Mother Country.”

From London, still more ships sailed back down the ocean crossings to Cape Town, and from there, trains ran haphazardly north. Some reached Lake Victoria, and still others, Addis: *Africa after Versailles*. From the northern coast of the continent one could cross the sea, departing from one region of “metropolitan France” for Paris. From here, tracks stretched west to Freidrichstrasse: *Berlin during Weimar, after the failed German revolution and before the Nuremberg Laws*. Still more trains traveled farther east to redbrick towers and Byzantine domes that adorned buildings that had been converted to washrooms and dining halls: *Moscow in the age of the Comintern*. Back across tracks that lay very far west were the Pyrenees and on the other side, the Republic: *Spain before*

the battle of Madrid. Beyond the plains was the Atlantic again, and across it North America. More train lines stretched from Chicago to New Orleans; trains traveled across northern Alabama and on to Memphis in April of 1931. Here in the tiny mountain town of Paint Rock—just a railroad crossing in what was once a “slave state”—begins *this* story of the 1930s.