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Origins: ‘The Most Completely Political Negro’

‘When once a Negro’s eyes are opened they refuse to shut again’¹
~ George Padmore to comrades in Moscow, 7 March 1933

By the time Britain declared war on Germany in September 1939, George Padmore had witnessed the great post-war strikes in Port of Spain in 1919, experienced life in the United States Jim Crow South, stood with Stalin in Red Square on May Day, survived arrest and interrogation by the newly elected Nazi regime just two weeks after Hitler came to power, been expelled from the Communist Party to which he had committed five years of his young life, raged against the League of Nation’s complacency as Ethiopia was invaded by fascist Italy, and led rallies in Trafalgar Square in solidarity with striking Caribbean workers in 1937 and 1938. The child of a middle-class upbringing from the tropical Caribbean island of Trinidad, by 1940 George Padmore had committed himself to an impoverished life of dogged political organizing, from a foggy rock on the other side of the Atlantic.

These events transformed generations of people across a spectrum of economic, social, and political positions and, in particular, forced a much broader public engagement with contentious questions of race and class in international politics. In George Padmore’s case, these lived experiences were interpreted through the combination of a particular upbringing and a deeply political and committed personality. Indeed his one-time friend, the South African novelist Peter Abrahams, described Padmore thus: ‘As a Negro he is the most completely political I have ever met. … I know George pretty well and yet if I were to try, mentally, to take George out of his political setting and see him as a person
divorced from all political interests, I honestly don’t know what kind of a person he would be.’ This description of Padmore as ‘completely political’ is one of the most pertinent reflections about Padmore’s personality. His commitment to political issues was almost absolute, and the man who is reflected, even in personal communication, is one who was constantly engaged with the issues of the time. To understand why Padmore made the commitments he did, why he responded to world events in the manner that he did, and why he became the kind of teacher for young nationalists that he did, Padmore’s genuine passion for politics is paramount.

This chapter situates George Padmore in the world that birthed his politics. During his lifetime, there was a tendency for colonial authorities to portray Padmore as a doctrinaire figure – a man who held only one position (a position which they rightly understood was in essence always against their own position of power) and who pressed that position upon the susceptible minds of young colonial nationalists. A rigid interpretation of Padmore and his politics has until recently also persisted in the few studies of Padmore that do exist. These have largely been unable to reconcile Padmore’s ‘communist’ and ‘pan-Africanist’ titles, leaving little room for ambiguity, flexibility, or adaptability in his thinking. In these accounts, Padmore either ‘left behind’ his earlier, ‘youthful’ communist flirtation for his true position as a pan-Africanist, or he remained a committed Marxist who for decades ‘continued to think in terms of Comintern categories’.3

More recently, scholars have recognized how both communist and black liberationist ideas were fitted together by Padmore and his colleagues in the 1930s while they were with the Comintern. Both Susan Pennybacker and Brent Edwards have analysed Padmore’s years with the Comintern in two critical ways: as a collaborative moment where networks were built and as the base through which Padmore’s evolution toward Pan-Africanism could take place.4 Finally, there are those who more forcefully argue that the ideas of people like Padmore were not on a dual track but, rather, worked together as one single explanation of a global imperialist system in which black workers could play a central, not a secondary or separate, role in ending.5 Indeed Anthony Bogues argues that Padmore was involved ‘in anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles from the stance of an understanding of the centrality to global revolution of the black struggle’.6

The black and white image of Padmore was of course also fostered by the vehement tone of his writing and the ways in which he chose to promote or omit certain issues at particular times. The seemingly