Writing Anti-imperial Solidarity from London

If the global confrontation with fascism in 1939 and the electoral victory of European labour parties in 1945 shifted Padmore’s political strategy, then it also transformed him professionally. From a truculent and impoverished agitator in the 1930s who spent his days researching Africa in the chilling recesses of the British Museum, his evenings deliberating with C.L.R. James and Jomo Kenyatta, and his weekends organizing protest rallies, hounding Marcus Garvey at Hyde Park Corner, or heckling the well-meaning condescension of liberals assembled for the latest Fabian Colonial Bureau conference, the young and fiery organizer secured a day job – George Padmore became a journalist. This is not to say that Padmore did not continue in his relentless organizing or his passion for debating the latest political events. Nor that he undertook journalism as an end in itself or as a career – journalism was always a medium for Padmore’s political commitments. But it was during the war that this crucial aspect of Padmore’s praxis came to the fore in ways which were only embryonic before, and after the war he enlarged this medium into a major front on which he worked.

James Hooker’s biography of Padmore insists that Padmore’s work as a correspondent ‘never was his forte’. Padmore’s efforts as a journalist, however, have received renewed recognition over the last decade. Indeed, it was his status as foreign correspondent for the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier that granted him entry into the Ministry of Information (MOI) Press room and developed him into a ‘newspaperman’ during the war. Yet these newspapers were neither the beginning nor the end of Padmore’s prolific article writing and support for the black press. His journalism in the United States can actually be rendered as the substructure for a vast print network that criss-crossed...
the Atlantic and even landed, sporadically, in the furthest reaches of Britain’s eastern empire.

The development of newspapers not affiliated to and/or owned by the colonial government in British African and Caribbean colonies in the 1930s and 1940s is significant. In West Africa this new print culture, initiated by the local intelligentsia, grew dramatically in this period. In Jamaica and Trinidad, these newspapers were closely tied to the force of the labour movement in the Caribbean. This chapter will show that Padmore played a decisive role in the development of several of these newspapers. It will analyse Padmore’s rhetorical style and the ways in which he chose to write to different audiences in Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. While Padmore seized the war as an opportunity that also presented a new set of challenges, he expressed this scepticism as a product of his own professional experience during the war as a journalist. At the close of 1944, he confessed to his old friend, Cyril Olivierre, that his apprehension about ‘all this four freedoms talk’ came from his daily efforts in the MOI Press room: ‘all newspaper men are cynical people. Perhaps because we know more than the censors permit us to reveal.’

Journalism thus became a profession not simply as income, but as outlook. The diligent tracking of his despatches and the anticipated (although often unrealized) fees that went with them are just one example of the professionalism of this routine. However, this chapter will argue that his journalism was much more than merely ‘a conduit’ between the colonial press and British papers like the New Leader. It was an essential medium through which he expressed his political ideas and reached outward to as wide an audience as possible, involving a vast dynamic across both sides of the Atlantic, running North/South and East/West. By studying his journalism several themes in his writing sharpen into focus in ways that may be lost if we only examine his books. These include his thoughts on British colonial development policy, the Cold War, and the critical importance of South Africa for racial politics.

Rhetorical traditions: situating Padmore’s journalism

Padmore began his newspaper career almost from the start. Freshly graduated from Pamphylian High School in Port of Spain in 1918, he secured a job reporting the shipping news for the Trinidad Guardian, a daily paper that represented the interests of the island’s white ruling class. Indeed, until he moved to Accra in 1957 to take up employment