In the summer of 1946, as the First Session of the United Nations General Assembly prepared to convene meetings of the Trusteeship Committee to discuss the governance of former League of Nations mandates, George Padmore wrote a letter of encouragement to W.E.B. Du Bois, reminding him that ‘the points of view which we seek to present in a hostile white world have to be put forward at psychological moments.’ This was the ultimate marker of Padmore’s strategy; his assessment of the urgency of the historical moment and of the racial constituent contained within that moment. The next four years proved the scene of decisive historical events and a particularly intense ‘psychological moment’ for colonialism, communism, and capitalism. This chapter explores the anxieties of the psychological moment of the late 1940s, electrically charged by the onslaught of both European decolonization and the Cold War, from two perspectives: that of Padmore, former Communist and notorious anti-colonial dissident, and that of the halls of power, of the colonizer in the metropole and in distant colonial capitals.

Adolf Hitler’s audacious decision to invade the Soviet Union in June 1941 irrevocably and totally transformed the character and, arguably, the outcome of World War II. Yet what cannot be overstated is that the entry of Stalinist Russia into the war on the side of the Allies had implications not only for the military battle in Europe and for the post-war ‘cold peace’, it also deeply affected debates about empire. Indeed, it was precisely through Soviet criticism of British rule in its colonies and trust territories, articulated through the forum of the United Nations, that some of the earliest signs of tension between Britain and the Soviet Union became manifest. It was in this context that Padmore publicly praised Soviet nationality policy, and British officials worked to suppress
what it deemed ‘Soviet propaganda’ – with Padmore’s work as a crucial focal point – in its colonies.

The Soviet Union posed a problem for the British Empire. Namely, by 1945 the Bolsheviks had achieved considerable success propagating the idea that it had ‘solved’ its colonial problem. Thus, on 17 May 1946, just two months after Churchill delivered his famous address in Fulton, Missouri, that intimated a grave discord between communist ‘East’ and capitalist ‘West’, and two years before the ‘Cold War’ fully kicked into gear with the Berlin Blockade, the British Colonial Office sent a telegram to all colonies requesting quarterly reports on Soviet propaganda in the press of their respective colonies. The telegram was sent at the request of the Foreign Office, ‘in view of [the] Soviet Government’s present policy of representing itself as champion of colonial peoples and in view of [the] many criticisms of this country and British Empire now being made in Soviet press and foreign language broadcasts from [the] USSR’. Padmore’s history with the Soviet Union and his interest in the emerging Cold War made him a particularly prominent fixture in these colonial reports.

But the Soviet Union also posed a problem for Padmore. How should he relate to a state in the hands of a dictatorial and destructive leader that had selfishly betrayed anti-colonial movements on numerous occasions, but that now also vocally challenged his ultimate enemy, European imperialism? His ambivalent relationship to the Soviet Union has never been seriously examined. In order to elucidate this relationship, this chapter explores not only Padmore’s public representation of the Soviet Union but also the response of colonial governors, administrators, and metropolitan politicians who opposed Padmore’s work. By emphasizing the voices of British officials and politicians, this chapter takes its cue from Robin Kelley’s argument that ‘knowing how those in power interpret, redefine, and respond to the thoughts and actions of the oppressed is just as important as identifying and analyzing resistance.’

The problem of the Soviet Union, for both imperial power and anti-colonial dissident, was a particularly acute conundrum that ultimately embodied the most fundamental questions about imperial rule and resistance. That is, it conjured up questions about nationalism, freedom of speech, and the racism publicly denied but undeniably practised in colonial rule. Its efficacy as a model and a rallying point continued to permeate debates among leftist anti-imperialists. Finally, the ways in which colonial rulers attempted to suppress the image of the Soviet Union (as well as the fundamental questions this image posed)