

“Colonial and Coloured Unity”: The Manchester Pan-African Congress and the links between African American Freedom Struggle and Decolonization

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Within months of World War II's end, veterans of the struggle against white supremacy gathered in Manchester, England to analyze global racial conditions and put forward an egalitarian agenda. W.E.B. Du Bois, the elder statesman of the African American community, met at this fifth Pan-African Congress with trade unionists and independence activists such as Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah. In the United States, a newly ascendant Cold War liberalism that was hard on communism and soft on existing empires endeavored to sever the connections that Du Bois and other African Americans were making between conditions in the US and those elsewhere.

Yet the movement in the United States retained its transnational imagination. The 1945 Congress helped keep that imagination alive, since the meeting set in motion the unalterable march to decolonization. The Manchester Congress is important to the African American freedom movement because it was a reminder that the struggle against white supremacy was fought within national contexts, but was always international in character. The setbacks brought about by anticommunism in the United States, then, must be contextualized and drawn to scale against the achievements of decolonization. By the late 1960s, when anticapitalism and anticolonialism regained legitimacy in the discourse of black American liberation, the weakened state of European empire in Africa made possible new examples of independent postcolonies that acted as important sources of pride and potential in the American movement. The transatlantic links forged in Manchester were never completely broken, and that meeting's legacy was one of maintaining the internationalist imagination of the struggle against segregation in the United States.