

## PhD Abstract

### **‘What we put in black and white’: George Padmore and the practice of anti-imperial politics**

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My thesis offers a new interpretation of the life and importance of George Padmore (1903-1959) by tracing Padmore’s political trajectory across his numerous theatres of activity and influence in the Caribbean, the United States, the USSR, Germany, France the United Kingdom, and West Africa. A seminal political figure of the twentieth century whose biographical record has remained incomplete, this thesis employs an impressive range of archival sources from public and private collections in Trinidad, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Ghana, in order to resurrect and enlarge the record on Padmore in unprecedented ways. Through an analysis of his writing and his networks the thesis argues that Padmore engaged in a permanent state of political activity, guided by a practice of ‘pragmatic anti-imperialism.’ Because of Padmore’s unique life experience, one of the distinctive contributions of this thesis is its position at the intersection of several fields of history which are often examined separately: the history of the ‘black diaspora’, the British Empire, the Cold War, and decolonization.

Padmore rose to prominence as the leader of the Communist International’s (Comintern) ‘Negro bureau’ in 1929, becoming one of the most well-known ‘black communists’ in the 1930s. After leaving the Comintern in 1934 he became a major nexus for anti-colonial resistance in London between 1935-1957 and one of the foremost political thinkers behind the pan-African movement. Despite his departure from the Communist Party, Padmore’s continued ideological orientation toward Marxism fundamentally shaped his ideas about imperialism, racism, and the strategy of anti-imperialism. It is the primary contention of this thesis that George Padmore’s persistent ideological stand against imperialism and for black unity was, nevertheless, not dogmatic but pragmatic in expression. Padmore was a life long strategic activist, a tactician; he could be flexible in his alliances and in how he represented issues to particular audiences, while never compromising the overall goal of ending imperial exploitation. This strategic focus is central to understanding why both his writing and his activism played such a wide and critical role in African and Caribbean anti-colonialism. By tracing his journalism in West African and West Indian colonies, it shows that Padmore’s influence was far more extensive than previously imagined.

By emphasizing Padmore’s ‘pragmatic anti-imperialism’ the thesis shows that the rising tide of anticolonialism and anti-racism in the 1930s and 1940s should be considered as a turning point not just in harnessing a new *mood* or *feeling* of unity, but primarily as one that viewed Empire, racism, and economic degradation as part of a *system* which fundamentally required the application of *strategy* to their destruction. Padmore’s emphasis upon strategy was rooted in an acute awareness of the social, political and historical context within which he moved. His political practice was based upon his repeated insistence that race played a critical role in international history. It was also instinctively concerned with the dynamics of ‘East-West’ tensions and their impact upon European imperialism, as well as the negotiations for independence by colonial peoples. George Padmore’s life brings together the politics of the ‘left,’ theories of imperialism and strategies of anti-imperialism in dynamic ways. Overall, this study of the life of George Padmore provides a fresh analysis of the contradictions and complexities of black intellectual thinkers, and of their contribution to the major political events of the twentieth century.