

# World History Bulletin

## *Disappearances and Preservations*



## *World History Bulletin*

ISSN: 0886-117X

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## *Editor's Note*

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The genesis of this issue of the *Bulletin* lies in the interplay between the annual conference of the Southeast World History Association (SEWHA)—organized last year by Michael Proulx (UNG) and Eric Oakley (ECU)—and the ongoing collaborative spirit that sustains our scholarly community. Hosted at my home institution, Southeast Missouri State University, the conference's theme, "Disappearances and Preservations," became more than a topic of discussion; it served as a catalyst for dialogue and exchange among scholars that ultimately led to the issue you're about to read. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the work of several conference participants appears in these pages.

The experience of hosting SEWHA's annual conference reminded me of how a shared vision and collaborative spirit can create a rewarding scholarly experience as well as the importance of ongoing, consistent engagement within our community. By connecting academics and scholars at all stages of their careers, we collectively advance our mission to support, uplift, and inspire one another. Nothing better speaks to the mission of the *Bulletin*—and, indeed, the World History Association.

As always, I am indebted to the work of the Editorial Board and my fellow editors, Dr. Guolin Yi and Dr. Katharine Lee, whose professionalism and dedication have made this issue possible.

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# LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR – WORLD HISTORY ASSOCIATION

Dear WHA colleagues,

It seems odd to be writing a message for the *World History Bulletin*, insofar as I am beginning only my fourth week as Executive Director of this impressive organization. A shout out to my predecessor, Morgan Lemmer-Webber, for an exemplary job in this role for the past two years.

How timely is an issue devoted to the theme of “Disappearances and Preservations.” Writing from my perch in Boston, Massachusetts in the USA, it seems that every day brings news of disappearances—most especially here in the United States but also abroad. Much is being “disappeared,” from institutions to fellow humans to traditions. That said, there are ongoing efforts to “preserve”—to maintain a rule of law, to honor the past, to recognize (and not obscure or hide) failings. I imagine that many of you can identify similar “disappearances” and “preservations” in your home on this planet.

It could not be more appropriate that this theme of “Disappearances and Preservations” inspired compelling contributions to this issue. You are in for some important reading. I trust these thought-provoking studies—from Rosemary Akpan, Federica Morelli, Zachary C. Peterson, John M. Romero, and Doug Sofer—will invite discussion. We are grateful to these contributors for their scholarship and their insights.

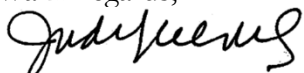
What’s happening at the WHA as we look toward 2026? We are preparing for January’s American Historical Association meetings, with a WHA table, many WHA members in attendance, and quite a few intriguing world history sessions. Upcoming issues of both the *World History Bulletin* and the *Journal of World History* are in the works. Our new board, led by incoming president Ruth Mostern, vice president Cynthia Ross, secretary Sarah Eltabib, treasurer Eric Nelson, and past president Trevor Getz, commences work in January.

Most exciting is our 35<sup>th</sup> annual conference in Incheon, Korea in June 2026. We have been flooded with proposals from scholars across the globe. Our annual conference is *the* place to exchange lesson plans and research about our shared human past. WHA members get to network with fellow teachers and scholars, learn about job and consulting opportunities, and acquire the latest in research methods and teaching practices. Our Program Committee for the conference has been working non-stop to craft sessions that are not to be missed. You absolutely want to be there, to explore Korea’s rich history and interact with fellow WHA members and practitioners from around the world. For more information, visit [the conference website](#) and explore the theme of “Closed Borders and Global Connections: Being Global after Globalization.” Please register for the conference and plan to join us in Korea in June!

An important imperative for the WHA in 2026 will be to explore how we can position WHA members to collaborate and share resources, create a vibrant online repository of materials, and enable members to interact and exchange ideas in new ways, both online and in person. Bottom line: if you have an interest in World History and what it is, how to most effectively teach it, how to be inspired by fellow practitioners with a wide array of experience creating courses on the topic, the WHA *is* your home.

So . . . get ready, turn the page to hear from our outgoing and accomplished President, Trevor Getz, and prepare to be inspired by this issue.

Warm regards,



Judi Freeman  
Executive Director

# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT – WORLD HISTORY ASSOCIATION

## *Disappearances and Preservations*

2025

I observe, with regret, that this is my last President's letter in a *World History Bulletin*. Don't get me wrong, I'm not unhappy to hand this position over to Ruth Mostern, who will be an incredible WHA president. Rather, I find that writing these letters has been one of the joyful aspects of a sometimes-demanding job. Given my love for this journal, I look back on the task of writing introductory words for four issues of the Bulletin in succession quite fondly.

In fact, I have many fond memories of my time as President. I hope I never forget this pleasure, as I never forget the joy of seeing friends at our annual meetings or working with dedicated historians on one WHA project or another. I recognize, of course, that forgetting is as important as remembering. Without forgetting, we might never be able to forgive each other. Sometimes we need to forget old trespasses and wars and transgressions. I'm convinced of that. But as a historian, I generally believe that our "collective memory"—the human record—enriches our individual lives as well as our broader society. For this reason, I venerate the work of archivists and librarians who preserve the records of our experiences, including many of the individuals detailed in this volume of the *Bulletin*, while recognizing that the work they do is complex and often contested.

Indeed, I am very worried about the opposite—about the purposeful disappearances of information, data, evidence, archives. I had reason to reflect lately on Operation Legacy—the British Empire's purposeful destruction of archives detailing the last days of colonial rule in Africa, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. Such destruction continues to hamstring the work of those fighting for justice for the victims of colonialism, a story told so well by Audra Diptée and Caroline Elkins, among other historians whom I hold in high regard. And we have reason to believe that today, governments around the world are engaged in similar disappearances of evidence that we might one day need for the causes of justice, reparations, and historical veracity.

The articles in this bulletin show that remembrance and disappearance are not opposites but intertwined processes shaped by power, medium, and intent: Rosemary Akpan demonstrates that in post-civil war Nigeria, disappearance is actively produced through state-sanctioned silence even as suppressed memories persist as forms of resistance; Federica Morelli reveals how Italy's long-minimized involvement in Atlantic slavery illustrates how national innocence is constructed through selective preservation and belated recovery; Zachary C. Peterson shows that activist archives, such as those of the American Committee on Africa, are fragile yet intentional defenses against disappearance, shaped as much by care and commitment as by loss and contingency; Doug Sofer reminds us that in digital and performative history, preservation is inseparable from distortion, as editorial choices simultaneously rescue voices and erase others; and John M. Romero argues that simulations like *Papers, Please* (a game I actually really like) can be used in class to make visible the everyday bureaucratic mechanisms through which disappearance is normalized, while preserving historical complexity.

As always, editor Joe Snyder and the authors in the *Bulletin* have given us a lot to think about. They remind us that history is relevant, today as much as yesterday or tomorrow.





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# Issue Focus: Disappearances and Preservations

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Across continents and centuries, the question of what is remembered and what is lost—who preserves memory, who disappears, and whose stories are told—lies at the heart of how communities, nations, and individuals forge their identities. The readings gathered here traverse the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War, the legacy of Atlantic slavery in Italy and Europe, the preservation and silences of activist archives, and the dilemmas of historical representation in digital media and pedagogy. What unites these disparate contexts is the interplay between disappearance and preservation—how power shapes what remains visible, how communities resist their own erasure, and how the very tools of memory can become instruments of both contestation and reconciliation.

## **Memory, Silence, and Resistance: The Nigerian Civil War**

Reflections on the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War anchor our exploration of disappearance and preservation by foregrounding the contested terrain of historical memory in Nigeria. The war's legacy is not simply one of violence and loss, as Rosemary Akpan observes in “Contested Memories of the Nigerian Civil War: Narratives and the Politics of National Identity,” but of ongoing struggles over who speaks for the past and how that past shapes the present. The Igbo experience—marked by the state-sanctioned silencing of Biafran narratives, the banning of commemorative practices like Biafra Remembrance Day (BRD), and persistent exclusion from postwar political and economic structures—exemplifies how disappearances are engineered not only through violence but through strategic forgetting.

But memory does not vanish easily. As Beiner and others remind us, even deliberate amnesia leaves traces: “forgetful memory” and “collective amnesia” are never total, and the rituals of remembrance—official or clandestine—become acts of resistance. The BRD, for example, is less a destabilizing force in itself than a mirror reflecting the unresolved grievances that haunt the Nigerian state. The attempts to suppress or reframe Igbo memory paradoxically sustain it, fueling cycles of repression and resistance that persistently threaten the fragile unity proclaimed after the war.

As memory here is not a passive inheritance; it is continuously negotiated. The formation of counter-memories among the Igbo, referencing colonial policies, wartime deprivation, and postwar marginalization, becomes a vital resource for identity and activism. These narratives challenge the hegemonic state story of unity and reconciliation—a story that, in seeking to preserve national coherence, Akpan's contribution reminds us, demands the disappearance of dissenting voices and inconvenient histories.

## **The Politics of Preservation: Archives, Activism, and the Atlantic Slave Trade**

The struggle over preservation and disappearance is not unique to Nigeria. Federica Morelli's essay (“Racism, Atlantic Slavery, and Italy: Revisiting a Neglected Past”) on the Italian experience with Atlantic slavery and racism reveals another dimension: how histories are not only silenced but later rediscovered, reframed, and reinserted into national consciousness. For centuries, Italian involvement in the Atlantic slave trade was minimized or treated as exceptional—Mediterranean slavery described as more “humane,” Italian racism attributed solely to the fascist era, and the role of merchants, bankers, and missionaries left in the shadows of European historiography.

Yet the recent surge of translations and research into Atlantic slavery in Italy signals a new phase of memory work: the effort to recover erased pasts and confront their lingering consequences. This process is not linear or unidirectional. As the readings highlight, archival gaps and historiographical myths create their own forms of disappearance, making preservation an ongoing, contested labor. The translation of scholarly works, the creation of

digital archives, and the mapping of urban sites linked to slavery all serve to challenge narratives of innocence and exceptionalism—restoring the presence of those once disappeared from the national story.

This concern with preservation and the risks of disappearance is made palpable in Zachary C. Peterson’s “The Struggle Continues: Preserving the Legacy of the American Committee on Africa,” which looks at the African Liberation Movement Solidarity Organizations (ALMSOs) and their archival records. The American Committee on Africa (ACOA), like many activist organizations, faced both external threats—hostile authorities, limited resources—and the more mundane erosions of time: lost documents, incomplete records, and the vagaries of memory. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot observes, what enters the archive determines what histories can later be written. The process of organizing, preserving, and digitizing these records—by individuals deeply invested in their cause—becomes a conscious intervention against disappearance. But the archive is itself an imperfect bulwark: typographical errors, lost speeches, and editorial decisions all shape which voices endure, and which fade.

### **Genre, Truth, and Digital Disappearance**

The readings turn this question of preservation and disappearance toward newer media with confessions from the world of history podcasting and digital storytelling. Here, the boundaries between preservation, distortion, and disappearance grow increasingly porous. The act of editing—removing silences, adding laughter, reordering conversation—raises urgent questions about authenticity, trust, and the responsibilities of the historian in the digital age. As Doug Sofer suggests in “How I Forced a Room Full of Historians to Laugh at Butt Joke: Genre and Message in a Public History Podcast,” every act of preservation (whether in writing, audio, or performance) is also an act of selection and, inevitably, erasure. The tools that allow us to rescue voices from the past can just as easily be used to remake, distort, or disappear them.

The digital age, with its capacity for instantaneous revision and widespread dissemination, amplifies both the possibilities and the dangers of memory work. The ease with which a podcast can be re-edited, or an archive digitally curated, mirrors the broader concerns of the readings: Who controls the story? Which facts, silences, and voices are preserved? Which are made to disappear? The genre in which we work shapes both what is possible and what is lost.

### **Pedagogy, Empathy, and the Simulation of Disappearance**

In “Understanding the Communist Experience Through Gaming: *Papers, Please* as Pedagogical Tool,” John M. Romero’s reflects on the use of role-playing games like *Papers, Please* in the history classroom and how it offers yet another lens on disappearance and preservation. The game, set in a fictional authoritarian regime, immerses players in the bureaucratic machinery that produces both literal and metaphorical disappearances: denied entries, lost families, lives reduced to paperwork and quotas. Students experience the pressures and moral ambiguities of enforcing rules they may not agree with, mirroring the realities of historical actors operating under systems designed to produce both compliance and erasure.

Through gameplay, students grapple with the banality of power, the atomization of society, and the emotional distance required to survive under totalitarianism. The game becomes a simulation of how structures of disappearance are created, justified, and internalized. At the same time, it cultivates historical empathy—a means of preserving the complexity of past lives against the flattening forces of official narratives or simplistic moralization.

### **Disappearance as a Site of Struggle**

The theme of disappearance—of people, stories, artifacts, and truths—runs through all these readings, but so too does the theme of preservation as an act of resistance. In Nigeria, the politics of memory is a battleground where state and counter-state narratives vie for dominance, each seeking to preserve their version of the past. In Italy and Europe,

the recovery of Atlantic slavery's history disrupts comfortable myths and reopens questions about the roots of racism and the responsibilities of inheritance. In activist archives and digital media, the preservation of voices becomes an ethical imperative, even as the risks of distortion and loss loom large.

Ultimately, these essays remind us that disappearances—whether enforced by power, resulting from neglect, or produced by the limitations of genre and medium—are not final. Every act of remembrance, every effort to preserve, is also an act of reconstitution, a refusal to let silences stand uncontested. The politics of memory is not only about the past; it shapes the possibilities of the present and the legacies we bequeath to the future. The tension between disappearance and preservation is, in the end, the space where meaning, justice, and identity are negotiated.

As readers and historians, we are called not only to bear witness to what has been lost, but also to participate in the ongoing work of preservation: to recover voices, to challenge silences, to interrogate the forms through which memory survives or vanishes. In doing so, we honor not just the past, but the possibility of a more inclusive and honest collective future.



### **Suggested Further Reading on Disappearances and Preservations:**

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

Guy Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance: Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103-28.

Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24.

Antoinette Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).



# Contested Memories of the Nigerian Civil War: Narratives and the Politics of National Identity

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Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) extend understanding of historical memory into themes of oppression, resilience, and resistance to marginalization. The parallels between the past and the present in Nigeria are evident, particularly in calls for acknowledgment of historical grievances to address ongoing national conflicts. Beyond recounting the grievances of the Igbo of Nigeria after the Civil War, it is crucial to comprehend how these experiences shaped a social memory of systemic oppression during and after the war. We can equate the marginalization of Biafran voices and the exclusion of the Igbo from postwar policies with broader issues of ethnic imbalance in resource allocation, governance, and national unity. This shows how history becomes a contested space in Nigeria's national identity, where narratives of survival and victimization clash with narratives of unity and reconstruction.

This article delves into how the collective memory of past events shapes an identity based on survival and resistance against perceived oppression. The Igbo counter-memory of exclusion and injustice challenges the Nigerian state's dominant narrative of unity and progress, emphasizing the concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Unauthorized remembrance gatherings such as the Biafra Remembrance Day (BRD) amplify this counter-memory, connecting historical narratives to contemporary challenges in governance and equality. Ultimately, the article emphasizes memory and oblivion in history as impermanent aspects of Nigeria's current circumstances. Materials and narratives shape memory preservation according to their intended functions and consumers. Interacting with such things elucidates our values and priorities. Choices about commemorating achievements and heroes, as well as confronting moments of humiliation, are collective determinations about identity and justice. Responding to these inquiries not only impacts the present but also molds the teachings and legacies we bequeath to future generations.

## Collective Memory and the Construction of Identity

The silence of Biafran narratives and the systemic disregard for the Igbo people warrant critique. The lack of representation and justice continues to linger, leaving the scars of conflict. This silence sustains a cycle of misunderstanding within the federation. Drawing further parallels, Awefeso correlated the civil war with other instances of systematic oppression, especially during the colonial period.<sup>1</sup> He articulated how colonial economic policies established the foundation for postcolonial disparities, contending that the principles represented by Biafra—self-determination and dignity—remain unresolved issues for Nigeria. This recurring narrative highlights the persistent challenges for equity in postwar and postcolonial settings.

Collective memory is crucial for understanding how a people, such as the Igbo, forge their identity through tales that link the past to the present. The Civil War's legacy endures as a mnemonic conflict between Nigeria's unity narrative and Biafra's resistance to marginalization. This dispute underscores the impact of collective memory on national and regional identities, enabling political and social change. The complex interplay between hegemony and counter-hegemony mirrors Nigeria's history and current politics of memory, which, in part, intentionally seeks to forget some aspects of the war. Beiner suggests the potential for intentional forgetfulness, asserting that it does not lead to the total obliteration of memory.<sup>2</sup> Instead, “forgetful memory,” a diminished or altered form of memory, emerges—“collective amnesia,” which refers to the ability to completely erase specific or entire historical episodes from collective memory at will, from social forgetting, a complex process where communities attempt to forget uncomfortable or disquieting past events, yet some muted memories still linger beneath the surface.

The commemoration of events like the BRD signifies a distinct collective memory that frequently conflicts with Nigeria's national narrative. These recollections emphasize the tenacity of Biafrans amidst institutional neglect and their struggle for fairness inside the Nigerian federation. However, the official Nigerian narrative minimizes the war's divisiveness, advocating a shared memory of national reconciliation and harmony. The view of Nigeria as the

realization of “The dreams of our founding fathers.” Therefore, allowing the celebration of BRD impedes such a triumphant realization. This situation demonstrates conflicts over the war's legacy and its threat to national unity. A typical example scenario is what Graff-McRae noted about politics frequently playing a role in events such as the 1916 Easter Rising. This is how commemorations mirror socio-political power dynamics. The current political reasons dictate a singular interpretation of the past and its implications for the future.<sup>3</sup>

The historical memory of the war roots the ongoing friction between the Nigerian state and the Igbo people, as collective memory significantly influences the Igbo identity. The Igbo people forge their identity through narratives that connect the past and present. The official Nigerian narrative characterizes the war as a transient national struggle addressed through reconciliation, highlighting the state's responsibility in upholding constitutional order. The persistent marginalization of the Igbo people stems from profound divisions and a deficiency of consensus.

The Nigerian state's reliance on coercion rather than consent to manage dissent, as seen by actions against organizations such as the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra Republic (IPOB), illustrates the hegemonic crisis.<sup>4</sup> For the Igbo, this corresponds with past trends of state repression, thereby strengthening their narrative of defiance. Allusions to occurrences such as the Biafra War, military blockades and occupation of Igbo towns, and postwar policies that exclude the Igbo from resource management and political authority enhance this viewpoint.<sup>5</sup>

The former Governor of Ebonyi, Nigeria, illustrates a form of memory suppression. In commemorating his six years as a Governor, David Umahi described the directive of IPOB as “an act of foolishness.” Acting on the Federal government capacity as a Governor of the state at that time, he stressed that any trader who celebrates the BRD would forfeit their businesses.<sup>6</sup> This led to the banning of all forms of procession to commemorate any activities of Biafra, which he considers a form of slavery and profiling. Given the political and social developments that commemorative practices such as BRD have brought, it is assumed that one of them is contributing to the present security challenges in the South East zone of Nigeria.<sup>7</sup> This may be misleading, because overwhelming evidence that the army's repression of supporters of the BRD strains security in the Southeastern part of Nigeria.<sup>8</sup> The Nigerian army's heavy-handed approach, ranging from violent dispersal of peaceful commemorations to extrajudicial killings, creates a climate of mistrust and fear that heightens insecurity. These multiple cases where the excessive use of force during BRD observances leads to escalated local tensions, radicalized previously nonviolent sympathizers, and deepened grievances against the state.<sup>9</sup> In this way, it is not the act of remembrance itself, but rather the state's repressive response, that fuels instability. From this perspective, Biafra Remembrance Day functions less as a cause of insecurity and more as a mirror of unresolved historical injustices. As Duruji and Madueke argue, the violent state response to symbolic acts of mourning perpetuates a cycle of repression and resistance that sustains insecurity in the region.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, attributing the crisis solely to BRD commemorations obscures the deeper structural problem, namely, the government's inability to engage with historical memory, identity, and justice in a nonviolent, dialogic manner.

This is one side of the coin, because substantial evidence also exists on how the BRD exacerbate political tensions amidst the current security challenges in Nigeria. Scholars such as Agbu and Onichabor suggest that events like BRD serve as flashpoints for renewed separatist sentiments and state anxiety, reinforcing cycles of confrontation between pro-Biafra groups and security forces.<sup>11</sup> They contend that such commemorations, often organized by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) or other Biafran movements, have transformed from symbolic rituals of memory into performative acts of resistance that challenge the legitimacy of the Nigerian state.

By appealing to collective memory, the Igbo narrative frames the present as part of a continuum of struggle, linking historical resistance to ongoing demands for justice and equity. This understanding of the past as a source of identity and resistance highlights the enduring relevance of memory in shaping the dynamics between the Nigerian state and the Igbo people.

## Structural Drivers of Identity and Tensions beyond Memory

While mnemonic practices animate identity, a fuller explanation of ongoing tensions requires exploration. As Mbembe posits, there is no single explanation for the state of affairs of a particular situation.<sup>12</sup> The theoretical and practical recognition of the fact that there is no proper *raison d'être*, true lawfulness, and relation to nothing other than ourselves is essential. While collective memory, whether imagined or real, shapes Nigerian identity, some studies have challenged its centrality and have offered alternative explanations for ongoing tensions.

Ato Sekyi-Otu interprets Frantz Fanon for African contexts of justice and community. He criticizes two interpretive camps in Fanon's writing. One is the postmodernist readings of Fanon, and the other is nationalist appropriations of Fanon. Both approaches fail to address real, ongoing problems and crises in postcolonial Africa. Postmodernists make everything relative and uncertain, while nationalists turn his revolutionary ideas into tools for narrow, state-based or ethnic nationalism.<sup>13</sup> Recovering a “normative vision” in Fanon, meaning values, principles, or moral commitments guide political action. This is a framework for justice, equality, and human emancipation that speaks directly to questions of class, gender, and democracy that transcends ethnic exclusivism. This, therefore, translates to the centralized federal system and the dominance of specific regions or ethnic groups in political appointments, military leadership, and resource allocation, which continue to reproduce feelings of political alienation. The power imbalance extends beyond collective memory to shape perceptions of exclusion, especially among southeastern Nigerians. This perception fuels a political identity of resistance, reinforcing the idea that the state remains unreconciled to the Igbo experience of the war. Okechukwu Ibeanu et al. examine this more critically in terms of state exclusion, federalism, and ethnic identity.<sup>14</sup>

Chibuike Uche, who works on federal revenue allocation in Nigeria, unravels the economic and resource-distribution politics confronting the country. To him, the uneven distribution of national resources, mainly oil revenue and federal projects, deepens regional inequality and sustains a sense of economic victimization.<sup>15</sup> This inequality becomes interlocked with collective memory, and economic grievances become interpreted through a historical lens of wartime deprivation and post-war neglect. On a similar note, an alternative explanation for ongoing tensions is this socioeconomic frustration, in which youth and even older people use it as an opportunity to invoke historical marginalization. Youth unemployment and corruption are framed as an extension of their low-income status. This increases the opportunity cost or risk of joining a separatist group. In this way, the commemoration of memory under the guise of a secessionist movement can be mistaken for cries for social justice. Instead, it provides an avenue for identity formation that exploits the grievances of unemployed persons by attributing their suffering to the loss of the Civil War.

To understand how ethnic consciousness and national identity interact, Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities is central. In Nigeria, for instance, the Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, and other minority groups all maintain distinct historical memories of the war, independence, and nation-building. These competing mythologies fragment the idea of a single Nigerian identity and sustain rival claims of historical legitimacy. These ethnic groups become products of shared imagination, in which traditions and national identities are constructed.<sup>16</sup> Among many Southerners in Nigeria, the linking of Igbo ancestry with the Jewish act as a mobilizing force for identity making, even when it may not make any genealogical sense. However, both groups have some cultural similarities that they may be misinterpreting. Likening their current state in Nigeria to the antisemitic persecution of the Jews resurrects their collective identity in linking survival with spiritual endurance. Prominent among these churches are annual services held on the BRD, which provoke this identity (Figure 1, below). On this day, the Jewish-like church tries to make sense of post-war reality, interpreting their suffering and survival as divine justice.

The resurgence of Biafran activism among youth, amplified by social media, has also reshaped national discourse. Online spaces such as X, Facebook, and YouTube allow younger generations to reinterpret the war as a symbol of resistance against bad governance, police brutality, and corruption. These platforms democratize memory, allowing unofficial voices to be heard.



**Figure 1: Members of the Biafran separatist movement in Umuahia, Nigeria, commemorating their fallen heroes fifty years after Nigeria's civil war through a Sunday service (May 28, 2017).** *Source:* Associated Press, "Nigeria's Biafra separatist backers mark 50 years after war," *Daily Mail*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-4555378/Nigerias-Biafra-separatist-backers-mark-50-years-war.html>.

### **The Politics of Memory of the Nigerian Civil War and National Identity in Nigeria**

As previously stated, "collective historical memory" has played a role in shaping the post-war identity of the Igbo people and the dynamics of Nigerian nationalism. To Chinua Achebe, "The Nigerian Civil War is one of the most tragic chapters in our history, but its memory is essential to understanding who we are as a nation."<sup>17</sup> Historical memory serves as a tool through which groups construct narratives that frame their collective past and influence their contemporary identity. Politicians and activists refer to these memories to galvanize public sentiment and influence the political dialogue concerning national unity, equity, and justice.

Transitioning into the postwar period, the military head of state, General Yakubu Gowon's proclamation of "No Victor, No Vanquished" emerged as a crucial milestone, garnering much attention to an important chapter in Nigeria's contemporary history. Gowon characterized it as a "triumph in magnanimity to secure peace and ensure that they are men of their word" in the reconciliation effort.<sup>18</sup> Although framed as a healing method, it nevertheless recalled historical recollections of systematic disparities, especially in Southeastern Nigeria, where the impacts of the war and its aftermath were profoundly experienced. Accordingly, historian Obi-Ani expressed that the victorious federal forces employed various forms of subterfuge to stunt Igbo recovery in post-civil war Nigeria, contending that General Gowon's policy was a charade intended to deceive the international community.<sup>19</sup> Using the same line of argument, Onuoha posits that the failure of post-war reconciliation affects the Igbo ethnic group in two ways: first, it ignores

the older generation that experienced the conflict, and second, it perpetuates those victims through neo-Biafra movements both inside and outside of Nigeria.<sup>20</sup> The various Biafra movements house these secondary victims.

We can consider the declaration with multiple dimensions: a historical event that reshaped social relations in unexpected ways, a crisis event that exposed the fragility of Nigeria's national unity, and a narrative event that continues to shape how people remember and interpret the War. Nigerian politics often strategically deploy historical narratives to address critical issues or stir public emotions. Defined as "a selective reconstruction of the past aimed at fostering a sense of shared identity,"<sup>21</sup> historical memory plays a fundamental role in uniting groups around a common cause while often intensifying divisions among others.

For the Nigerian state, this selective reconstruction served as a framework to promote national unity, but it introduced a collective narrative of exclusion and survival for the Igbo people. This has become a cornerstone of their identity and a rallying point against inequalities following the war, particularly through commemorative practices such as the BRD. This reinterpretation of the war's end reflects a broader contest over power, in which hegemonic and counterhegemonic voices vie for control of historical narratives.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, despite the cries of marginalization among the Igbo, the ideology and modus operandi of these separatist movements have always been in conflict with that of the mainstream Igbo political elites and leadership. Hence, both groups often appear to speak in discordant tones. The state rhetoric of unity masks continued exclusion. This is in the atmosphere of unresolved structural injustices that beget unequal citizenship and failure of postwar reconciliation. An instance of the Nigerian state's deliberate suppression of Biafran discourse through censorship, public denial, or reframing of the war as a "civil conflict" shapes identity through silence and erasure.<sup>23</sup> This mnemonic suppression, as theorized in "mnemonic hegemony,"<sup>24</sup> paradoxically sustains Biafra's remembrance by turning it into a counter-hegemonic symbol of truth-telling and justice. This leads to a state where regional elites instrumentalize the memory of Biafra to negotiate political relevance.

In many ways, the kind of treatment meted out against the Igbo in the post-civil war period suggested how their defeat practically excluded them from the national project. This suggests a de-commemorative effort to legacies, as theorized by Guy Beiner. This "de-commemoration" involved suppressing certain memories by removing monuments and rejecting non-hegemonic narratives.<sup>25</sup> Commemoration, therefore, was not just about remembering the past but became a battleground for political expression and factional conflict. Using the Ulster example, loyalists' efforts to suppress nationalist memory underscored the struggle between commemoration and de-commemoration. Despite numerous challenges, the 1798 centenary played a crucial role in reigniting nationalist fervor and shaping the political landscape, leading to the Irish Revolution.<sup>26</sup> One notable instance in Nigeria's case was the Bight of Bonny Act (1975 No. 4), which changed the name from the Bight of Biafra to the Bight of Bonny.<sup>27</sup> Another instance is the civilian government that came to power in Nigeria after the 1979 general elections, which observed the incompleteness of the reconciliation process. Secessionism resurfaced due to these factors.<sup>28</sup>

However, historical memory is fluid and subject to reinterpretation over time, through emotional resonance, or for political expediency.<sup>29</sup> As Alderman and Dwyer note, the sanctification of certain events, such as the declaration of independence, turns dates, actors, and places into potent symbols of resilience and survival.<sup>30</sup> For the Igbo, occurrences such as the assassination of Ironsi and the proclamation of Biafran independence on May 30, 1967, possess profound significance. These symbols frequently underscore the story of historical grievances endured during the conflict and the injustices that continue to prevail in its aftermath. Concurrently, these symbols build cohesive narratives of resilience and oppression.

This process weighs modern relationships against unsolved grievances, making current confrontations seem either repetitions of past injustices or efforts at restitution. The portrayal of the Igbo's lack of representation in federal positions and resource distribution frequently reinforces post-war policies, exacerbating sentiments of marginalization. In contrast, the Nigerian government frequently portrays its actions as essential for preserving national unity, utilizing its narrative of reconciliation to minimize or marginalize Igbo grievances.

Thus, the politics of memory in Nigeria reveals the dual role of historical narratives: as a source of group cohesion and identity for the Igbo and as a tool of legitimization for the state.<sup>31</sup> The enduring impact of the Nigerian Civil War highlights how selective interpretations of history continue to shape the nation's political and social landscape, accentuating the power of memory in both unifying and dividing societies. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that collective memory has come to play such a central role in shaping Igbo identity and the dynamics of Nigerian nationalism, given the country's own struggles with reconciliation and historical acknowledgement in the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War. The lingering desire to acknowledge the atrocities of the war, amplify the voices of victims, and redress the injustices of the post-war policies drives debates over the memory of the war, particularly in the southeastern region. US-based novelist Okey Ndibe, who was a child during the war, echoes this, describing it as the defining event in Nigeria's complex history. He echoed this with the BBC:

. . . the [government's] main goal, but at grave human and moral cost. Nigeria continues to be haunted by the ghost of Biafra. Nigeria's failure to use justice as the arbiter of public policies has resulted in festering violence in the northeast zone, renewed agitations for Biafra, and demands for resource control by residents of the oil-rich Niger Delta.<sup>32</sup>

The use of historical memory to highlight both the specific injustices suffered during and after the war and their contributions to the Nigerian federation is unique to the Igbo experience and closely tied to the evolution of their regional identity. "The war engendered a divide that persists unhealed as it never afforded the opportunity to mend," asserts Achebe.<sup>33</sup> The "politics of memory" has emerged as a contentious arena for cultural and political identity definitions in Nigeria. Although historical memory has traditionally influenced Igbo collective consciousness, the past decade has witnessed a transformation in these narratives, with events such as BRD emerging as emblems of resistance and a need for equitable governance.

Conversely, encouraged by what is presumed to be a centralist approach to governance and resource control, the state's narrative has witnessed a resurgence of nationalist rhetoric, emphasizing the indivisibility of the Nigerian nation. This narrative seeks to downplay regional grievances and present the state as a stabilizing force. The tensions between these contrasting historical memories highlight the profound split and absence of consensus in the narrative. As such, historical memory remains a potent instrument for both contesting and upholding the concept of a unified Nigeria as a collective national memory.

Nationalism intricately connects national identification with the influence of collective memory in the formation of identities throughout time and space. Understanding collective memory, drawing on Maurice Halbwach's seminal work, is crucial, as it is a social construct that reshapes memories to correspond with current issues and concerns. Halbwachs argues, "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories."<sup>34</sup> This framework applies to Nigeria's post-civil war narrative, where collective memory operates as a critical element in constructing both national and regional identities. Social and political structures influence communal memories, which frequently transcend individual experiences and manifest in symbolic cultural practices, including commemorations, oral traditions, and monuments.

In Nigeria, events such as the BRD function as mnemonic devices, rebuilding the memory of the Civil War to mirror contemporary political realities and regional concerns. These politically conscious commemorations serve as instruments for regional marginalization and a means to advocate for justice. Verovšek notes that both bottom-up and top-down impacts on identity and political rhetoric originate from communal memory.<sup>35</sup> Grassroots interpretations of the conflict shape the identities of local communities and affect political elites, whereas public declarations and state narratives embed specific dominant discourses of reconciliation and unity into the national consciousness, frequently silencing alternative Igbo perspectives.<sup>36</sup> However, it is important to note that some Igbo

leaders, who hold public offices, also join the state in this narrative of reconciliation. This leads some individuals to perceive the current agitation of Biafra as merely emotional ranting.<sup>37</sup>

*Vanguard* Nigeria reports that the BRD day was marked by millions of Nigerians, especially in the Southeastern states, who reflected deeply on past traumas and sought justice and unity. In the disclosure, Former President Olusegun Obasanjo emphasized the role played by disinformation in the development of the opinion of people during the war and how the ethnic tensions were dragged into the war, including the collective memory. His words highlight the fact of mistrust between regions and the conflicting accounts of the war.<sup>38</sup> A 2024 study by Nnam reveals demographic data on perceptions of the diverse population to determine how people were perceiving the Biafra movement.<sup>39</sup> The primary forms of social injustice identified are: collective victimization, poor governance, political marginalization, arbitrary federal appointments, and military repression against Biafra protesters. Table 1 (Appendix) clearly shows the persistent pattern of social injustice. This is evidenced by corruption, inequality, and governmental negligence, which directly undermine Nigeria's unity and progress and foster an environment conducive to separatist sentiments and movements.

The contestation around historical memories becomes particularly pronounced in the context of Nigeria's post-civil war dynamics, characterized by these competing hegemonic and counterhegemonic narratives. Drawing on Molden's concept of mnemonic hegemony, the Nigerian state's narrative represents an imposed hegemonic version of the past.<sup>40</sup> This narrative frames the Civil War as a resolved chapter of national reconciliation, suppressing alternative memories that challenge this vision of unity. Counter-memory, on the other hand, emerges to question the dominance of this official narrative and the power dynamics it sustains. On account of interrogating how the public perceives institutionalized social injustices in relation to the cause-and-effect of Biafran social movements, Nnam studies the social composition of the respondents.<sup>41</sup> Table 2 (Appendix) is drawn interpretatively from his paper.

### **Evolution of Armed Forces Remembrance Day (AFRD) in Nigeria**

Armed Forces Remembrance Day in Nigeria originated as a day to honor Nigerian soldiers who fought and died in World War I and World War II. The date of the commemoration has undergone changes. Initially known as Armistice Day on November 11 under British colonial rule, it mirrored similar practices in Commonwealth countries.<sup>42</sup> The day was first observed in Nigeria as part of the colonial government's efforts to highlight the sacrifices made by Nigerian soldiers in the service of the British Empire.

In the post-independence period, the focus shifted to recognizing the contributions of Nigerian soldiers in peacekeeping missions and internal conflicts. The civil war, also known as the Nigeria-Biafran War, was a conflict lasting for three years during which millions of people perished, including the combatants and non-combatants. On January 15, 1970, the secessionist state of Biafra laid down its arms, officially ending the war. Following the war, a sentiment emerged, demanding special recognition for patriotic gallants who made the ultimate sacrifice for the nation. By the mid-twentieth century, the commemoration expanded to include soldiers who fought in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). This shift emphasized reconciliation and the importance of remembering soldiers who fought to preserve the unity of Nigeria.

The Nigerian Legion, an organization that supports ex-service members, significantly contributed to the establishment of Armed Forces Remembrance Day as a national event institutionalized by the federal government. The Federal Ministry of Defense plans and executes the ceremonies, aligning with its mission to honor fallen soldiers and support their families.<sup>43</sup> The National Council of States (NCS), comprising state governors and federal officials, provided advice on the date change after the Civil War. Established as a formal national holiday in Nigeria during the 1970s, the decision aimed to foster unity and collective sacrifice among Nigerians after the Civil War, allowing it to take place at its own pace.<sup>44</sup>



**Figure 2: President Bola Ahmed Tinubu laying the wreath to mark the 2024 Armed Forces Remembrance Day at the National Cenotaph Centre, Eagle Square, Abuja.** *Source:* “Wetin be di tori about Armed Forces Remembrance Day for Nigeria,” BBC News Pidgin, January 15, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/articles/cg6w9eg54yx0>.

Today, Armed Forces Remembrance Day in Nigeria is celebrated to include wreath-laying ceremonies, parades, and fundraising efforts to support veterans and their families (Figure 2, above). The commemorations aim to balance the memory of sacrifice with the promotion of national unity. AFRD is a significant event in Nigeria that honors the military's efforts and marks the end of the civil war.<sup>45</sup> Besides, it is essential to note that there are arguments that this narrative marginalizes Biafran experiences in the Civil War and overlooks their ongoing national challenges.<sup>46</sup> This narrative has created a basis for the continued conflict between the Igbo and the federal government.<sup>47</sup> The day serves as a reminder that Nigerians must unite, forgive, and embrace each other for the sake of peace and unity. As a result, AFRD has become a vital calendar event to rearticulate military loss and mobilize the support of citizens across the country.

### **Origin of the Biafra Remembrance Day (BRD)**

Biafra Remembrance Day emerged as an unofficial commemoration to honor the victims of the Nigerian Civil War, particularly from the southeastern region, where the secessionist Republic of Biafra originated. Unlike Armed Forces Remembrance Day, grassroots movements, civil society groups, and organizations like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) organize Biafra Remembrance Day without state sanction. This day, annually observed on May 30, commemorates the independence of Biafra in 1967 and the commencement of the Nigerian Civil War. We can trace its history back to the declaration of the Biafran Republic at the beginning of the Civil War. General Chukwuemka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Biafran leader, commemorated the proclamation of the republic every year during the war with his speeches.<sup>48</sup> That continued from 1967 through 1970. Nevertheless, after the war, the Nigerian government prohibited anyone from staging any memorial of that kind. This went on until 1999, when there was a return to democracy and civilian rule.

The return to democracy in 1999 raised hopes that the enormous challenges besetting the Nigerian state, including separatist agitations, would be concretely addressed. As a result, the celebration of the BRD resumed. The expectation was that democratic practice, with its ideals of fairness, freedom, justice, equity, and participation, could provide a platform for accommodation that could address the issue. By 1999, the Odua People's Congress was the leading group making separatist demands because of the annulment of the June 12, 1993, election, which was believed to have been won by the late MKO Abiola, a Yoruba from the Southwest.<sup>49</sup> Today, a plethora of separatist groups and social movements, with diverse aims and targets, exist in the six geopolitical zones of the country. It is within the above context that we can locate BRD among the Igbo ethnic group in Southeast Nigeria. The existence of separatist movements such as the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM), and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) also proliferates.<sup>50</sup> From its establishment, observance has been driven by Igbo cultural associations, advocacy groups, and separatist movements. IPOB has played a particularly prominent role by reigniting the observance through campaigns on Radio Biafra, sit-at-home orders, and public memorials. Some churches and traditional rulers in the southeastern states also contribute to the observance by holding prayers, processions, and cultural events that honor the war's victims and call for justice and reconciliation.

Aside from the private memorialization that may take place, Biafrans conceive BRD as a painful memory of their endurance, ethnicity, and the experience of traumatic historical events. It celebrates Biafran's resistance, the deaths of civilians, and starvation throughout the war. As manifested in its physical atmosphere, it is a day of mourning and reflection on the war's heroes and suffering, which includes the estimated over two million deaths, many from starvation due to the conflict's blockade. Not only that, but the unrecognized nature of the day ensures a high risk of encountering a violent attack or hit. This day holds immense importance for the Igbo people and separatist groups, as it serves as a symbol of resistance, resilience, and the preservation of vernacular memory.<sup>51</sup> At this juncture, we proceed now to examine how collective victimization of the Igbo people in Nigeria engenders the Biafra Remembrance Day commemorations.

### **Biafra Remembrance Day: Politics of Lingering Memory and Historical Injustice**

Resignification of historical events, including the war itself and the post-war sidelining of the Igbo, has coincided with the resurgence of Igbo nationalism, particularly through movements like IPOB, to strengthen regional identity and challenge national unity. The broader project of Igbo self-determination strategically weaves these narratives, aiming to undermine the official state narrative of reconciliation and highlighting the unresolved grievances that continue to shape the region's relationship with Nigeria. The origins of the Nigerian Civil War lie in a conflict over governance, resource control, and ethnic tensions. Despite the Biafrans' eventual defeat in January 1970, the Igbo's defense of Biafra has become a cornerstone of their collective memory, symbolizing their bravery and resilience. BRD, observed on May 30, honors the heroes and lives lost during the war and reinforces the Igbo narrative of survival against overwhelming odds. Critical to separatist movements is the ability to narrate a compelling "story" of their region's past and its significance. Generation after generation transmitted the collective trauma in hushed tones in the safety of their homes. Beiner expressed that postmemory entails how later generations inherit and reshape these memories.<sup>52</sup>

A BBC article illustrates that "The government's policy of "no victor, no vanquished" may have led to a lack of official reflection, but many Nigerians of Igbo origin grew up on stories from people who lived through the war."<sup>53</sup> Ben Okafor, who was only 12 when the war started, described to the BBC how joyful celebrations greeted the declaration of independence: "There was a massive explosion of joyful noises. There were dances in the streets." Yet, his father's cautious optimism reflected deeper fears of conflict. Okafor's vivid memories illustrate the ongoing transmission of the war story, which shapes collective identity and historical memory.<sup>54</sup> Generation refers to both the group of people who experienced the rebellion firsthand and the process of generating and shaping memory, where transmission occurred through concealment, hesitations, and omissions, creating traditions of both remembering and forgetting. As Pierre Nora suggested, places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) are also places of forgetting (*lieux d'oubli*), as

the very practices used to preserve memory unintentionally foster forgetfulness by glossing over or hiding specific details and complexities.<sup>55</sup>

This often takes the form of nationalist myths simplified and dramatized narratives that selectively recount a group's history to assert its identity. Bell describes these myths as “stories that simplify, dramatize, and selectively narrate the story of a nation's past and its place in the world.”<sup>56</sup> For the Igbo, these myths focus on the resilience of their people during the Civil War, the injustice of post-war policies, and the ongoing struggle for equity within the Nigerian federation. The Nigerian situation makes his idea of the “mythscape”—“the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of people's memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested, and subverted incessantly”—very important.<sup>57</sup> The Igbo's counter-memory challenges the state's narrative of unity in a mythscape filled with competing narratives about the Civil War and its legacy. These interactions continually rewrite Nigeria's national narratives, highlighting how collective memory shapes identity and political discourse, transcending temporal boundaries. Through these mechanisms, collective memory becomes a powerful tool for negotiating the past, shaping contemporary identity, and influencing future political aspirations.<sup>58</sup>

Moments of crisis that disrupt the dominant discourse shape the politics of memory in Nigeria. The emergence of counter-memory relies on the instability of the hegemonic order, which is evident in persistent grievances and unresolved tensions. Counter-mnemonic commemorations and coalitions such as the BRD and IPOB movements consolidate their narratives through cultural symbols, historical references, and political activism. Notwithstanding, their success depends on their ability to gain broader social and political traction. The state maintains its hegemonic position nationally, while counter-memories gain momentum and find a larger social basis in regions like the Southeast. However, at the national level, the correlation of forces remains asymmetrical, with the state narrative continuing to dominate the broader politics of memory.

The post-war policies, including the political and economic exclusion of Biafran voices, unveiled the instability of Nigeria's hegemonic narrative. The exclusion of Igbo communities from key political and economic opportunities highlighted the Nigerian government's incapacity to address the root causes of the war or to foster genuine reconciliation. The Igbo framed the ideology of the war and its aftermath as both a military defeat and a moral triumph, emphasizing the spirit of resistance and survival in the face of systemic oppression. The Igbo collective memory now centers around this interpretation, shaping not only the understanding of the past but also the envisioning of future actions.

The BRD exemplifies the reinterpretation of historical events in the context of ongoing grievances, transforming the war's memory into a tool for identity assertion and justice advocacy. This narrative of resistance and survival shapes Igbo political and cultural identity, providing a framework for future aspirations. While the Nigerian government promotes its own narrative, the Igbo counter-memory persists, challenging the state's hegemonic narrative and asserting the legitimacy of their historical grievances. The reimagining of past struggles shapes present actions and future aspirations, highlighting the profound influence of historical events on contemporary identity and politics.

The Igbo struggle for justice, dignity, and recognition has connected memories of the war and its aftermath to the institutionalization of collective memory surrounding Biafra. This is particularly evident in the commemorations of BRD on May 30, which have grown as a symbol of resistance and survival for the Igbo people. In recent years, several communities in the Southeast have named or renamed streets and public spaces to honor the memory of Biafra and its leaders. People even sang songs in memory of Ojukwu and other Biafran soldiers who fought or lost their lives during the war.<sup>59</sup> Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Biafran leader, has inspired the renaming of streets and universities in Enugu, Anambra, and other Nigerian towns, further cementing his legacy in the region's collective memory (Figure 3, below). These acts of renaming not only honor the sacrifices made during the war but also serve as a symbolic replacement of national narratives with regional counter-narratives. People often prioritize the Igbo people's resilience and unity during the war over the official state narrative of reconciliation. The declining prominence

of state-sanctioned monuments in these areas and the growing presence of alternative markers of memory that challenge the national discourse reflect this shift.<sup>60</sup>



**Figure 3: Anambra State University renamed after Col Ojukwu (Biafran Leader).** *Source:* Oge Okonkwo, “Anambra State University renamed after late Ojukwu,” *YNaija*, November 2, 2013.

In promoting Biafran memory, the Igbo groups have responded to the perceived “marginalization” in two primary ways: they have advocated for either increased inclusion in the central government or increased separation between the political elites and radical separatists such as Ike Ekweremadu (a former Senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria representing Enugu South LGA) and Nnamdi Kanu (IPOB leader). The above group validates the discussion over the supposed confrontation of agitation. Rather than provoking the Nigerian government and the military, they stress that it would be better to fight for a course within the ambit of the law.<sup>61</sup> The die-hard separatists have proposed four possible routes to sovereignty, namely, commemoration of the BRD, armed secession, civil disobedience, and, more recently, a referendum, which the propaganda from Radio Biafra provides a broader perspective.<sup>62</sup>

These die-hard separatists have been met with suppression efforts from the Nigerian government. The IPOB has been staging a series of rallies, demanding the commemoration of the BRD, among other issues. This intensified in October 2015 when Nnamdi Kanu, leader of the IPOB, was arrested and has since remained in detention. Amnesty International reports on how Nigerian security forces have killed at least 150 people in a series of attacks against the BRD. The report shares evidence that Nigerian security forces committed gross human rights violations at the BRD celebrations in the southeast region on May 30, 2016. In Onitsha, Anambra State, security forces raided homes the night before the event and then opened fire the next day with live ammunition on a crowd of approximately a thousand people.<sup>63</sup> On that day, many supporters were detained, tortured and even killed. A 26-year-old man interviewed in the report said that at the rally, when he was shot, he hid from security forces in a gutter. He continued to narrate that when soldiers found him, they poured acid on him: “I covered my face. I would have been blind by now... he poured acid on my hands..., my hands and body started burning, the flesh was burning . . . . They dragged me out of the gutter and said I’ll die slowly.”<sup>64</sup> Some supporters threw stones, burned tires and in one incident shot at the Police, and this led the police to defend themselves. However, these acts of violence and disorder did not justify the level of force used against the whole assembly.

Campaigns to document and archive materials related to the Civil War have gained traction, particularly in the digital age. To prevent the erasure or distortion of Biafra's memory, activists and cultural institutions have undertaken

initiatives to collect documents, photographs, audio recordings, and oral histories. For example, groups like the Center for Memory (CFM) have taken on the responsibility of collecting and preserving these materials, emphasizing their importance as both historical evidence and cultural heritage.<sup>65</sup> Symbolic artifacts have also gained prominence in these memory projects. Exhibitions and museums dedicated to the memory of the war have curated flags, memorabilia, and even reconstructed wartime artifacts, such as the Biafran currency and military insignia. One notable artifact is a fragment of the Aburi Accord transcript, which some see as symbolic of the failure of peace negotiations and the descent into conflict. Such artifacts not only document history but also carry a narrative of betrayal and resistance that resonates with the Igbo memory of the war.<sup>66</sup>

However, as observed in numerous civil war cases, including those in the US, Ireland, and other countries, efforts to preserve memory often underscore the difficulties in cultivating a shared national history.<sup>67</sup> The resulting dynamic reveals a deeply divided politics of memory. On one side, pro-Biafra movements shape a counter-memory that asserts the legitimacy of Igbo grievances and resistance. On the other hand, state-sponsored commemorations emphasize the triumph of purported unity and the necessity of national stability. These opposing narratives continue to shape collective memory in Nigeria, underscoring the enduring power of historical events to influence both present identities and future aspirations.

The BRD has similarly evolved into a unifying myth for the Igbo people, commemorating their resilience and sacrifices during a time of immense hardship. While the civil war ended in military defeat for Biafra, the memory of the war endures as a symbol of the Igbo struggle for justice, self-determination, and recognition within Nigeria. Like AFRD of January 15, BRD serves as a marker of historical resistance and a rallying point for contemporary political aspirations. However, the federal government of Nigeria, which emphasizes the dangers of secession out of fear that the BRD risks deepening national divisions and perpetuating historical grievances, contests this narrative wholeheartedly.<sup>68</sup>

Since the early 2000s, the commemoration of BRD has gained increasing visibility, with public rallies, symbolic actions, and advocacy for Igbo rights through Radio Biafra. The day has also become a focal point for pro-Biafra movements like IPOB, which have linked the memory of the war to their contemporary demands for self-determination. This interpretation of the war aligns with a broader narrative of Igbo resistance against systemic oppression, with Biafra becoming a symbol of what could have been—a homeland of dignity and autonomy. We can understand the contrasting interpretations of the Civil War through the concept of a mythscape, which imbues historical events with symbolic meaning that shapes collective memory and identity. The relationship between the war and current Igbo rights struggles highlights the use of historical memory in negotiating current political and social realities.

Some commemorative acts have further institutionalized the memory of Biafra. For instance, the Southeast has named public spaces after key Biafran figures, and cultural centers have preserved war artifacts. In Nigeria, from the late 1970s onward, the national flag of the former Republic of Biafra has been a potent and controversial symbolic object, as well as an item in the “strategic toolbox” for Biafra activists.<sup>69</sup> These acts of remembrance connect contemporary independence movements to the reinterpretation of historical events, reinforcing collective identity and inspiring future action.<sup>70</sup> For the Igbo, the civil war and Biafra Remembrance Day symbolize both a tragic past and a hopeful future in aspirations for autonomy in the face of their current suppression in Nigeria. The memory of the war, embedded in federal postwar policies that continue to marginalize them, reflects the Igbo’s right to dignity and freedom. They therefore see it as a solidification of their quest for justice and identity formation.

Igbo counter-memory advocates using the Aburi Accord of 1967 as a symbol of fairness and compromise, advocating for justice and recognition. Leaders frequently urge Nigerians to embrace Aburi’s principles, stating, “Let the spirit of Aburi guide us toward true federalism and freedom.”<sup>71</sup> Similarly, the commemoration of the Siege of Owerri, a defining moment of Igbo resilience, serves as a reminder of sacrifices and ongoing struggles for equity. It serves as a reminder that the fight for dignity and justice is not over. Modern struggles against exclusion and inequality

frequently link both, highlighting the Igbo pursuit of self-determination and development. This connection to the civil war extends historical grievances that connect the past and present in a shared narrative of resistance. These allusions to the Nigerian civil war are deliberate and aim to emphasize the Igbo history of resistance and the struggles for recognition through the commemoration of BRD. The memory of the war highlights both the loss of Igbo autonomy and the centralization of power in Nigeria, drawing a historical parallel to the current marginalization of the Southeast in political and economic matters.<sup>72</sup>

BRD signifies a rupture that underscores the vulnerability of Nigeria's post-war narrative of unity and reconciliation. This commemoration offers an opportunity to rethink and reinterpret the present through the lens of the past, connecting the memory of the Nigerian civil war with other significant episodes of Igbo history. We cannot solely reduce the collective memory emerging from BRD to separatist nationalism, but it undeniably reinforces a deeply divisive sense of regional identity within Nigerian society. As a form of counter-memory, BRD links the Igbo's historical resistance against systemic oppression to their contemporary calls for justice and recognition. The collective memory of the conflict forms a regional community, characterized by its negative perception of Nigeria's restrictive actions and its commemoration of resistance and survival. It became a venue to contemplate their struggles and reaffirm their cultural identity, set against a context of post-war marginalization.

Nonetheless, BRD commemoration often excludes non-Igbo individuals who support self-determination or reconciliation. Thus, conflicting interpretations of the civil war impede the formation of a cohesive national memory in Nigeria, due to the divisive nature of communal memory. The politics of memory associated with the BRD encapsulates persistent frustrations with the Nigerian state. It also reinforces divisions by failing to incorporate viewpoints further than the Igbo experience or those hesitant to contest the official state narrative.

For example, there exists diversity within the Igbo community concerning the BRD. This group consists mainly of traders, transport workers in Southeast Nigeria, Igbos who hold various political and government offices, Nigerians in Diaspora, non-Igbo ethnic groups living within and outside Southeast Nigeria, and intermarried couples or families. Many of them believe that the laws of the land allow for freedom of movement and any attempt by any group, including IPOB, to limit movement in the name of BRD is unacceptable to them. In 2017, an Abuja-based Lawyer, Osuagwu Ugochukwu, decried the BRD that compelled easterners to stay at home on May 30. This, to him, means taking laws into one's hands and limiting the movement of both Igbo and non-Igbos by force.<sup>73</sup> If some individuals do not believe in Biafra, then you cannot make them commemorate what they do not believe in. As easy as this reads, it is also complicated, as not believing in a cause does not always guarantee your abstinence from it. This concerns a large ethnic group, and whether you are Igbo or non-Igbo, respecting their ideals is a fundamental trait of diversity that one should acquire. On the one hand, staying at home on that day does not mean you are now a Biafran or support it, but it is an act of respect. On the other hand, not celebrating the date does not mean you lack empathy for the majority of Igbos who want this date commemorated. What is crucial here is to understand that whether you believe in Biafran ideology or not, you must do so within the ambit of the law and not breach the laws of the Land. "Section 41 of the Nigerian Constitution (as amended), which provides that every citizen of Nigeria is entitled to move freely throughout Nigeria and to reside in any part thereof, and no citizen of Nigeria shall be expelled from Nigeria or refused entry thereby or exit therefrom." The law allows for freedom of movement, and any attempt by any group, including IPOB, to force people to stop moving freely will be treated as treasonous. Also, breach of public peace, confrontational, and the Military and other security Agencies would not take it lightly.

In the case of government officials, it is expected of them to represent Nigeria while also favoring any activities they consider dangerous to the country's unity. They will perceive the commemoration as a threat to the Sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Nigerian Constitution. Again, very easy but complex. If these officials view the beckon for the BRD as a form of succession, they would do their best to block it from becoming reality. Nevertheless, if they view it more as an event that fosters reconciliation and some form of pacification, then the push

for it should be reasonable. This means something needs to be done. As the BRD provides temporary relief, the Igbo can take comfort in knowing that their heroes are not forgotten, even though they lost the war.

Nnia Nwodo, the leader of Ohaneze (Igbo apex socio-cultural organization), gave a BBC Igbo interview on the unresolved triggers of the Civil War. Although it ended over 50 years ago, “. . . the Nigerian government has failed to attend to the grievances that sparked the war.”<sup>74</sup> One may be unclear about how this plays out. An apparent reason he pointed out is the government's lack of effort in preserving the historic event, which gives people room to exploit that vacuum. Musician and Activist Onyeka Onwenu and Tony Nnadi, who were also guests, criticized the non-prioritization of preserving the history of the war. It was compared to other countries, such as Rwanda and the US, that have fought Civil Wars. They cited instances beyond the AFRD; there is no specific date marked for the remembrance of the war, which they consider imperative.<sup>75</sup>

Nwodo further posited: “I am not advocating for a violent revolution, but the fact is that there will always be agitations until the government resolves certain resentments and marginalization of the Igbos,” Marginalization in the form of the government not allowing Nigerians to read, know and understand what happened during the war (distorted stories). Onyeka Onwenu echoed: “They need to know how much their fathers and forefathers suffered to make their future better.” Mr. Nnadi, who was only three years old when the war ended, and has been researching the historic event, affirmed that “. . . the war has not yet ended [because] . . . there are still underlying issues and grievances.”<sup>76</sup>

Tuki foregrounds another form of exclusion, explaining that since Nigeria transitioned to democracy in 1999, the Igbos have been excluded from political power at the center. Presidents and vice presidents have come from the Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba ethnic groups, but no Igbo person has ever held either office.<sup>77</sup> For most of Nigeria's history, political power at the center has been controlled by the Hausa/Fulani group. Harnischfeger contends that, even though the rhetoric of early neo-Biafran movements (especially MASSOB) was radical, their ultimate goal was not to secede from Nigeria, but rather to leverage the threat of secession to gain political leverage and eventually secure an Igbo president.<sup>78</sup>

Resentment over perceived marginalization is also framed in religious terms by the Igbos. They likened themselves to the Jes and the Nigerian state being their persecutor.<sup>79</sup> This increases their likelihood of supporting commemoration of activities such as BRD that breed succession. In the end, BRD creates a shared memory that, depending on the groups involved, either serves as a means of resistance (Igbo) or reflects division (Nigerian government). This shows how deeply controversial historical events can still affect people's identities and political goals today.

In the years following Nigeria's civil war, the memory of Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, Nigeria's first military head of state and an Igbo officer, remains a deeply contested symbol in the country's historical memory. The significance of Aguiyi-Ironsi in Nigeria's historical memory remains profound, where he symbolizes both leadership and the tragic consequences of ethnic tension in the post-independence period. During a fiftieth-anniversary Mass in Umuahia, Aisha Buhari stated “Nigeria's first military head of state, Major General Johnson Thomas Aguiyi-Ironsi, was a great patriot who excelled in all his commissions.” She highlighted Ironsi's legacy, including his roles as equerry to Queen Elizabeth, UN force commander in Congo, and advocate for a united Nigeria.<sup>80</sup>

Governor Alex Otti, on May 29, 2024, a day before the celebration of the BRD, recently inaugurated the reconstructed 3.5-kilometer, six-lane Ossah Road in Umuahia, rechristening it Aguiyi-Ironsi Boulevard. During the road unveiling, an inscribed marble base surrounded a statue of Aguiyi-Ironsi, paying tribute to Nigeria's first military head of state and the intricate history of the civil war. Otti declared: “From today, this road will be named after a legendary Nigerian, a legendary Abia man, a legendary Ibeku man—Gen. Johnson Thomas Umannakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi.”<sup>81</sup> In 2024, during the annual Armed Forces Remembrance Day, held at the Aguiyi Ironsi Cenotaph, Ogurube Layout, Umuahia, the governor of Abia State praised Ironsi's legacy, emphasizing his efforts to unify Nigeria through his policy of centralization. The governor remarked, “Ironsi's vision of a united Nigeria remains a beacon for us today, reminding us of the sacrifices required to bridge our divides.” These commemorative speeches sought to frame Ironsi

as a unifying figure, invoking his memory to promote dialogue and reconciliation in Nigeria's ongoing struggles with ethnic and regional discord.<sup>82</sup>

There have been some reflections on Ironsi's controversial No. 34, which abolished Nigeria's federal structure in favor of a unitary government. It has been argued that while Ironsi sought unity, his approach was misinterpreted as ethnic favoritism, sparking the counter coup that led to his assassination.<sup>83</sup> It draws parallels to contemporary political challenges, arguing that Ironsi's death instructs us to negotiate unity with justice and inclusivity rather than imposing it. In another instance, the failure of the present to address the structural inequities that divide Nigeria has left the vision Ironsi had for Nigeria unrealized, highlighting the ongoing relevance of Ironsi's legacy in debates about federalism, resource allocation, and ethnic reconciliation.<sup>84</sup>

Memorial ceremonies honor Ironsi's legacy, linking historical injustices to contemporary issues, and emphasizing the ongoing efforts for equity and recognition in Nigeria. In 2016, on the fiftieth anniversary of Ironsi's death, during *Aka Ikenga*, a group known as Igbo Renaissance made this statement in Enugu:

The time has come for Ndigbo to remember their own, especially the fallen heroes who struggled to give us a name, those who, by their attitude, ensured that the Igbo have a pride of place in history, and those who, by their contributions, gave us an edge over others.<sup>85</sup>

To them, Ironsi's assassination was not just the death of a man; it marked the beginning of a systematic marginalization of the Igbo people from the political and socioeconomic space of the Nigerian federation. An Igbo leader, at the memorial service, described the event as a stark example of how the politics of ethnicity and vengeance betrayed the quest for unity. In his speech, the leader described Ironsi's death as "a tragedy for Nigeria's hopes for unity and a harbinger of the bloodshed that would follow," drawing attention to the fragility of Nigerian statehood at the time. He emphasized that Ironsi's assassination "symbolized the unequal struggle between the principles of unity and fairness and the entrenched divisions of ethnicity and mistrust."<sup>86</sup> Speakers at the event underscored the tension between law and legitimacy in Nigeria's early post-independence years by recalling Ironsi's brutal murder in the name of maintaining order and stability. For many Igbo, Ironsi's death has come to symbolize the betrayal of the promise of a united Nigeria and the marginalization of their region in the years that followed. At the memorial, an attendee noted, "His death was not just about the man; those who killed him committed treason—it was about the message it sent to the Igbo people, that their voices and aspirations could be violently silenced."<sup>87</sup> Chief Ogbonna Ukoha added:

I think it is time we did so and accorded him the recognition someone who served the country with all he had deserved. If the Federal Government has abandoned him, it should not be in our place to do so. I want to see a time when our socio-cultural groups, our religious, traditional and political leaders can spend a little of their time to honor this hero.<sup>88</sup>

The invocation of Ironsi's memory during these events often extends to criticisms of contemporary Nigeria. The Igbo draw parallels between Ironsi's treatment and the modern-day challenges faced by the Southeast geopolitical zone, including political and economic marginalization. They argue that these issues are part of a broader historical continuum of repression and inequality. One speaker remarked, "The memory of Ironsi's assassination reminds us that the injustices of the past are still alive today, from unequal resource allocation to the lack of political representation for the Southeast."<sup>89</sup> Many perceived a federal official's remarks at the memorial, cautioning against the dangers of reopening old wounds, as a veiled dismissal of Igbo grievances during a particularly controversial moment. However, acknowledging and addressing these wounds is crucial for the Igbo to promote genuine reconciliation. The memorial underscored this tension, as participants invoked Ironsi's assassination to demand not only remembrance but also action to redress ongoing injustices. The resignification of Ironsi's death, much like the invocation of the BRD in the

Southeastern region of Nigeria, also symbolizes a pivotal moment in the Igbo narrative of resistance and survival. It draws explicit parallels between past oppression and present struggles, offering a powerful critique of the Nigerian state's historical and contemporary handling of its ethnic and regional diversity. Through these commemorations, the Igbo political elites continue to assert their place in Nigeria's history while calling for a more inclusive and equitable future. Aguiyi-Ironsi's historical memory is a symbol of contestation, reshaped by different political groups to reflect their narratives. His legacy serves as both a symbol of national unity and a reminder of Nigeria's unresolved ethnic tensions. Through recollections of Ironsi's leadership, commemorative events continue to inspire calls for justice, inclusivity, and dialogue, urging the nation to learn from its past to build a more equitable future.<sup>90</sup>

The collective memory of the Biafran experience extends to a global dimension and Nigeria's borders, carried by those who left or were displaced by the war. The Nigerian diaspora and national belonging show how the Nigerian diaspora plays a decisive role in sustaining remembrance through activism, funding, and storytelling. Their connection to the Biafran identity, from a distance, about domestic repression, enables them to articulate memory within a global human rights discourse. This global diaspora and transnational solidarity ties into Stuart Hall's and Paul Du Gay's view of cultural identity as always in process, remaining the same or changing through self-unfolding from beginning to end, through all the vicissitudes of history.<sup>91</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The legacies of the civil war have created a historical collective memory that links to contemporary struggles for autonomy, justice, and inclusion. This paper, in its own way, posits that the politics of memory is a vital component of Nigeria's post-civil war reconciliation and the persistent difficulties over national identity and unity. The war has established a historical communal memory that connects to current endeavors for autonomy, justice, and inclusion. Redefining the memorial rituals of BRD in recent years has challenged dominant national narratives and promoted equity and justice. The BRD, a significant "crisis event," reshapes discourse on governance, resource allocation, and equity due to the remembrance of the civil war.<sup>92</sup> BRD serves not only as a testament to historical conflicts but also as a fundamental element of cultural and political identity, linking past resistance with current desires for acknowledgement and self-determination. Leaders and communities utilize symbols, like the "specters or ghosts" of the Biafra conflict, to condemn the centralization of authority and promote restructuring.

Preserving historical memory serves multiple purposes, including reinforcing or countering official narratives and lending validity to post-war agitations and unofficial commemorations. For underrepresented populations, these artifacts serve as instruments for creating counter-memories, reinterpreting historical events to contest systematic imbalances. By recalling instances of valor and disgrace, communities guarantee that historical lessons influence the present and cultivate a more inclusive future. Furthermore, commemorative actions such as BRD illustrate how societies memorialize and whom they elect to venerate. These actions, linking the Civil War to overarching themes of governance and justice, underscore the persistent challenge of reconciling Nigeria's historical grievances with its current circumstances. The mobilization of memory is essential for cultivating resistance to marginalization.

In sum, the tales concerning the Civil War and Nigeria's foundational figures promote counter-hegemonic discourses that underscore resistance, survival, and reconciliation. The commemoration and re-evaluation of these events demonstrate the interplay between memory, identity, and justice, influencing both the present and the legacy we leave for future generations. Through the establishment of new frameworks for communal memory, communities and political entities contest the prevailing status quo, promoting a nation that recognizes its intricate history while aspiring for a future grounded in justice, unity, and inclusivity. The interaction between memory and behavior highlights the fleeting nature of present conditions and the lasting influence of history on the formation of national identity.

## Appendix

Variable	Category / Description	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Interpretation
Perceived Link between Governance Failure and Separatism	Participants associated the rise in separatist sentiments with prolonged frustration and poor governance	—	89.3	Strong consensus that ineffective governance and unequal power distribution are central drivers of separatist movements
Experience of Social Injustice	Respondents reporting above-average experiences of social injustice	—	90.0	Majority perceive everyday governance and social life as unfair or exclusionary
Most Significant Social Injustice	Political marginalization (underrepresentation in federal politics, appointments, and resource allocation)	—	60.03	Indicates the dominance of political exclusion as a grievance shaping Igbo regional identity
Other Reported Forms of Injustice	Collective victimization, poor governance, arbitrary appointments, and military repression	—	—	Multiplicity of injustices suggests systemic failure of representation and accountability.
Government Response to Separatist Agitation	Use of military force instead of democratic engagement	—	—	Militarized approach aggravates tension, producing cycles of protest and repression (“burning tires”)
Key Trigger Events Noted by Respondents	2017 “Quit Notice” to Igbo people by Northern youths; government inaction	—	—	Reinforces perception of state bias and ethnic insecurity
Effect of State Countermeasures	Ethnic profiling, criminalization of protests, and refusal to negotiate	—	—	Counterproductive; fuels resistance rather than containment
Long-term Outcome	Socio-political and economic disconnection leading to radical activism	—	—	Suggests a drift toward demands for autonomy or systemic reform
Broader Implication	Persistent injustice undermines unity and national development	—	—	Structural inequality perpetuates instability and separatist ideology

**Table 1:** Public Perceptions of Social Injustice and Separatist Agitations in Southeast Nigeria. Adapted from the findings of Macpherson Uchenna Nnam, “Social Injustice and Public Perception of Biafra Social Movements in the South East Nigeria,” *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024): 1-19.

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Interpretation / Analytical Insight
Gender	Male	717	60.2	Men reflected higher public engagement in political and civic issues in Southeastern Nigeria.
	Female	474	39.8	Significant female participation indicates growing inclusion of women's voices in discussions of injustice and identity.
Age (years)	18–25	150	12.6	Youth engagement indicates generational awareness of inequality and political exclusion.
	26–33	320	26.9	Younger adults, economically active, most affected by unemployment and poor governance.
	34–41	301	25.3	Middle-aged adults relate Biafran struggles to lived experiences of marginalization.
	42–49	216	18.1	Mature adults hold nuanced views shaped by social and family responsibilities.
	50 and above	204	17.1	Older respondents link injustices to historical memory and unfulfilled postwar promises.
Marital Status	Married	540	45.3	Reflects stability and social responsibility, shaping perceptions of government legitimacy.
	Single	414	34.8	Youth and single adults often express stronger frustration toward governance.
	Separated	230	19.3	May reflect social and economic stress linked to instability and insecurity.
Occupation	Student	257	21.6	Students are most vocal in support of resistance movements and reform.
	Trader/Business Person	221	18.6	Economic actors express grievances about uneven opportunities and taxation.
	Civil/Public Servant	208	17.5	More cautious attitudes due to job dependence on the state.
	Artisan	175	14.7	Represent working-class concerns tied to inequality and access to markets.
	Taxi/Keke Driver	105	8.8	Daily exposure to insecurity and corruption shapes negative perceptions of the state.
	Okada Driver	90	7.6	Express discontent with police harassment and unemployment.
	Unemployed	54	4.5	High frustration with economic exclusion; sympathize with separatist narratives.
Religion	Christianity	1101	92.4	Christian moral worldview reinforces themes of suffering, redemption, and justice in Biafran discourse.
	African Traditional Religion (ATR)	73	6.1	Highlights indigenous perspectives on community justice and ancestral identity.
	Islam	17	1.4	Minority view; reflects Nigeria's broader religious heterogeneity.

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Interpretation / Analytical Insight
Educational Qualification	No Formal Education	104	8.7	Contributes grassroots understanding of daily injustices.
	FSLC	141	11.8	Indicates access to basic literacy; interprets injustice through lived experiences.
	O-Level (Secondary Education)	254	21.3	Represents informed but economically vulnerable social class.
	OND/NCE	155	13.0	Lower tertiary graduates aware of institutional and structural inequalities.
	B.Sc.	266	22.3	Largest educated group; critically engaged in debates on justice and governance.
	M.Sc.	145	12.2	Advanced education level links injustice to national policy failures.
	Ph.D.	126	10.6	Intellectual elite offering historically grounded interpretations of social movements.

**Table 2:** Social Composition of Respondents and Perceptions of Institutionalized Injustice in Relation to Biafran Social Movements. Adapted from the findings of Macpherson Uchenna Nnam, “Social Injustice and Public Perception of Biafra Social Movements,” 9-10.

## Notes

I want to thank Dr. Timothy G. McMahon and Mr. Ononiwu Oparah for their suggestions and comments on this writing, which evolved from my final paper in the History and Memory class at Marquette University.

<sup>1</sup> O. Awofeso, “Secessionist movements and the national question in Nigeria: A revisit to the quest for political restructuring,” *Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* 2, no. 7 (2017): 35-55.

<sup>2</sup> This omission can be interpreted as a deliberate act of forgetting, by not engaging with the trauma and collective memory of the war. See Halbwachs’ inadvertent neglect of an essential aspect of memory studies as an example.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Graff-McRae, *Remembering and Forgetting 1916: Commemoration and Conflict in Post-Peace Process* (Irish Academic Press, 2010), 25-30.

<sup>4</sup> Events, such as 2016-2019 Operation Python Dance, were used to calm down on IPOB activities rather than address the underlying grievances. Muhammadu Buhari, former president of Nigeria, said he would teach Biafra the language they understand, which was interpreted as him waging another war. This was reported to Twitter, and they were asked to remove that statement. His account was disabled and banned, which led to the ban of Twitter in Nigeria

<sup>5</sup> Marginalization in federal resource sharing, disparities in state and LGA distribution, and systemic and political exclusion are all present.

<sup>6</sup> “Forfeit Your Business License, if You Honor Biafra’s Remembrance Day, Gov. Umahi Threatens Ebonyi State's Indigenes,” May 30, 2021, Naija 247 News, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/forfeit-your-business-license-if-you-honor/docview/2534212763/se-2>.

<sup>7</sup> In Governor Umahi's view, divisive and misleading utterances may brainwash the youths, which, in turn, will cause mayhem in the state.

<sup>8</sup> Emeffena Ezeani, *In Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot* (London: Veritas Lumen Publishers, 2017); Benjamin Maiangwa, “Revisiting the Nigeria-Biafra War: The Intangibles of Post-War Reconciliation,” *International Journal of World Peace* XXXIII, no. 4 (2016): 53.

<sup>9</sup> *Amnesty International*, “Harvest of Death: Three Years of Bloody Repression of Pro-Biafra Activists by Security Forces,” December 17, 2016; *Amnesty International*, “Nigeria: ‘Bullets Were Raining Everywhere.’ Deadly Repression of Pro-Biafra Activists,” November 4, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Moses Metumara Duruji, “Resurgent Ethno-Nationalism and the Renewed Demand for Biafra in South-East Nigeria,” *National Identities* 14, no. 4 (2012): 329–50; Onyedikachi Madueke, “Reimagining Biafra: Between Historical Memory and Political Reality,” *The Round Table*, (September 2025): 1-21.

<sup>11</sup> Osita Agbu, “Ethnic Militias and the Threat to Democracy in Post-Transition Nigeria,” *Research Report* 127 (2004), 22; Tochukwu Faith Onichabor, “The Indigenous People of Biafra: A Noble Cause Gone South?” *Global History Dialogues* (2022).

<sup>12</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On Postcolony* (University of California Press, 2001), Introduction <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb02640.0001.001>.

<sup>13</sup> Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Harvard University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Okechukwu Ibeanu, Nwachukwu Orji and Chijioke K. Iwuamadi, *Biafra Separatism: Causes, Consequences and Remedies* (Enugu: Institute for Innovations in Development, 2016), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Chibuike Uche, “Oil, British Interest and the Nigerian Civil War,” *The Journal of African History* 49, no. 1 (2008): 120.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (Penguin Group, 2012), 215.

<sup>18</sup> *Nigeria History Channel*, “Major-General Gowon: Ojukwu Acted in a ‘Cowardly Way’,” posted October 26, 2013, [YouTube](#), 12 min., 12 sec. [Bing Videos](#).

<sup>19</sup> Paul Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War: Political and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland, 1970–1983* (Nsukka: GreatAP Express Publishers Ltd., 2009). See also: Paul Obi-Ani, “The History of the University of Nigeria: Looking at Our Foundation with the Future in Mind,” a paper presented at the 2010 First Year Orientation, University of Nigeria.

<sup>20</sup> G. Onuoha, *Memory, Reconciliation, and Peacebuilding in Post-Civil War Southeastern Nigeria* (Princeton University, 2018), 33.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Paula Nascimento Araújo and Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos, “History, Memory and Forgetting: Political Implications,” *RCCS Annual Review* [Online], 1 (2009): 81 URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rccsar/157>.

<sup>22</sup> Ngozika A. Obi-Ani, “Memories of Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970: A Case of Nsukka Igbo,” in *Remembering Mass Atrocities: Perspectives on Memory Struggles and Cultural Representations in Africa*, eds. M. Ndlovu, L. A. Tshuma, and S. Mpofu (Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2024), 244.

<sup>23</sup> Apollos O. Nwauwa and Chima J. Koriech, *Against All Odds: The Igbo Experience in Postcolonial Nigeria* (Goldline & Jacobs Publishers, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Molden, “Resistant Pasts versus Mnemonic Hegemony,” 125-42.

<sup>25</sup> The removal of monuments and the ongoing destruction during the BRD are examples.

<sup>26</sup> Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 576-577. The reunification of the Irish Parliamentary Party under John Redmond in 1900. The commemorative activism also strengthened nationalist organizations, like the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and paved the way for the rise of the separatist Sinn Féin party in 1905.

<sup>27</sup> “Bight of Bonny Act (1975 No. 4),” *Law Care Nigeria*, <https://lawcarenigeria.com/bight-of-bonny-act>.

<sup>28</sup> Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War Political and Economic Reconstruction*, 102.

<sup>29</sup> Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French*, 212.

<sup>30</sup> D. H. Alderman and O. J. Dwyer, “Memorials and Monuments,” *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (2009): 51-8.

<sup>31</sup> John de St. Jorre, *The Brothers’ War: Biafra & Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

<sup>32</sup> “Nigeria’s Independence: Six Images from Six Decades,” September 29, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Achebe, *There was a Country*, 215.

<sup>34</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 52-4.

<sup>35</sup> Peter J. Verovšek, “Collective memory, politics, and the influence of the past: the politics of memory as a research paradigm,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no. 3 (2016): 529.

<sup>36</sup> Obi-Ani, “Memories of Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970,” 244.

<sup>37</sup> J. N. Uwalaka, *The Struggle for Inclusive Nigeria: Igbos to Be or Not to Be* (Enugu, Nigeria: Snaap Press, 2003), 50.

<sup>38</sup> J. Adibe, “Rethinking January 15 as Nigeria’s Armed Forces Remembrance Day,” *Vanguard*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/01/rethinking-january-15-as-nigerias-armed-forces-remembrance-day-by-jideofor-adibe/>.

<sup>39</sup> Macpherson Uchenna Nnam, “Social Injustice and Public Perception of Biafra Social Movements in the South East Nigeria,” *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024): 15.

<sup>40</sup> Berthold Molden, “Resistant Pasts Versus Mnemonic Hegemony: On the Power Relations of Collective Memory,” *Memory Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016): 125-142. The politics of history and memory in any society are determined by the relations of forces between hegemonic master narratives, defiant counter-memories, and silent majorities whose historical experience is rarely articulated in public.

<sup>41</sup> Nnam, “Social Injustice and Public Perception of Biafra Social,” 9-10.

- <sup>42</sup> O. Nwolise, "The Biafran War and the Reintegration of the Igbo into Nigeria," *Journal of African Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016): 1-15.
- <sup>43</sup> Federal Ministry of Defense (FMoD).
- <sup>44</sup> Achebe, *There Was a Country*, 215.
- <sup>45</sup> E. Ejiogu, "The Roots of Political Instability in Nigeria: Historical Perspectives on Violence and Insecurity," *African Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (2015): 35-53.
- <sup>46</sup> Ejiogu, "The Roots of Political Instability," 35.
- <sup>47</sup> C. Okolie, "Remembering Biafra: Memory, Identity, and the Quest for Self-Determination," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 38, no. 1 (2020): 43-58.
- <sup>48</sup> National Archives, London (henceforward, NAL), File, FCO 26/300, Memorandum on Biafra propaganda, 1969. *Effort in the USA*, March 21. See also: NAL, File, FCO 26/299, *Nigeria: Publicity and Propaganda*, 1968, Biafra, 30 January. See, NAL, File, FCO 26/302, *Nigeria: Publicity and Propaganda*, 1969, Biafra, October. See, NAL, File, FCO 65/324, *Nigeria: Reports in brief*, 1969. Ojukwu's call for increased food production, January 27.
- <sup>49</sup> T. N. Tamuno, "Separatist agitations in Nigeria since 1914," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 8, no. 4 (1970): 563-84.
- <sup>50</sup> Ononiwu Oparah, "IPOB Renewal of Biafra agitation and Violence in Igboland, 2012-2023," Conference paper presented at the 31<sup>st</sup> Biennial Conference of the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom (ASAUK), August 29-31, 2024. Oxford Brookes University. (Theme: Generation and Regeneration).
- <sup>51</sup> Ejiogu, "The Roots of Political Instability," 40. Aside from the memory of suffering, pain, and death, the BRD is also a day dedicated to hero worship. Stories of victories in the war, such as the Abagana incident, in which the Nigerian army achieved a significant victory, the Oguta victory, and the recapture of Owerri by the Biafran forces, are recounted. People mimic and emulate these heroes.
- <sup>52</sup> Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French*, 80. This process is also like the Lost Cause in the US South
- <sup>53</sup> Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, "Remembering Nigeria's Biafra war that many prefer to forget," BBC, January 14, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51094093>.
- <sup>54</sup> BBC News, "Ben Okafor remembers the Biafran war," July 5, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com>.
- <sup>55</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24.
- <sup>56</sup> Duncan S. A. Bell, "Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," *The British Journal of Sociology* 54, issue 1 (2003): 75.
- <sup>57</sup> Bell, "Mythscape: Memory, Mythology," 66.
- <sup>58</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (revised and enlarged edition) (London: Verso, 1991), 18.
- <sup>59</sup> PUZ TV, "Tribute to the legendary hero of Biafra, Dim Odumegwu Ojukwu EzeIgbo (1933-2011)" posted May 28, 2016, [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...), 4 min., 58 sec.
- <sup>60</sup> Commemorations such as Biafra Remembrance Day and the activities of groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) represent counter-mnemonic efforts to challenge the state's dominant narrative. These counter-memories assert alternative histories that foreground Igbo resilience and highlight the systemic inequities perpetuated by post-war governance.
- <sup>61</sup> "Biafra: IPOB has no Right to Restrict Movement, Force People to Sit at Home - Lawyer Ugochukwu," *Vanguard*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/biafra-ipob-has-no-right-restrict-movement-force/docview/1898674062/se-2>.
- <sup>62</sup> Oparah, "IPOB Renewal of Biafra Agitation."
- <sup>63</sup> Briana Duggan and Stephanie Busari, "Nigerian Officers Killed 150 Peaceful Protesters, Amnesty Report Claims," CNN Wire Service, November 24, 2016, <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/nigerian-officers-killed-150-peaceful-protesters/docview/1842890454/se-2>.
- <sup>64</sup> Briana Duggan and Stephanie Busari, "Nigerian Officers Killed 150 Peaceful Protesters."
- <sup>65</sup> CFM utilizes movies, documentaries, and film series as key educational tools on issues related to Igbo history, memory, culture, and the future. In January 2020, they produced a documentary titled *January 15, 1970: Untold Memories of the Nigeria-Biafra War*.
- <sup>66</sup> Otoabasi Akpan and Blessing J. Edet, "From 'Jaw-Jaw' to 'War-War': Aburi Accord and the Nigerian Civil War, 1967 – 1970," *JHMS* 4, no.1 (June 2018): 95. See also: Williams Amah, "The Aburi Accord and its Role in the Nigerian Civil War," *The RUSI Journal* 3, no. 2 (June 2022): 27-37.
- <sup>67</sup> Ty Seidule, *Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020).
- <sup>68</sup> Since its memorials and commemorations give credit to the Igbo collective narrative of exclusion, AFRD also represents historical resistance to colonial rule.
- <sup>69</sup> Scholastica Ngozi Atata and Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale, "Biafran Objects and Contention in Nigeria," in *Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics*, eds. Benjamin Abrams and Peter Gardner (University of Michigan Press, 2023), 250.
- <sup>70</sup> J. Effiong, "MASSOB Hoists Biafra Flag in Aba," *The Punch*, May 23, 2000.

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<sup>71</sup> Ikem Emmanuel, “Echoes of Aburi: The Pivotal Accord that Paved the Path to Nigerian Civil War,” Anaedo Online, January 4, 2024, <https://www.anaedoonline.ng/2024/01/04/echoes-of-aburi-the-pivotal-accord-that-paved-the-path-to-nigerian-civil-war/>.

<sup>72</sup> Some of the most pertinent examples of marginalization today that southeasterners highlight on such occasions include: Cases like the summary execution of all males over the age of ten in Asaba also took place in the Nsukka area. One could argue that the ferocity of the 1966 massacre’s killings, and the fact that no one stood trial despite the Nigerian army’s involvement in many of them, indicate acceptable behavior. The commencement of the activities of the separatist group coincided with the inauguration of Muhammadu Buhari as Nigeria’s president. His administration has made no pretension about deliberate marginalization and victimization of the Igbo, especially those in the Southeast geopolitical zones.

<sup>73</sup> “Biafra: IPOB has no Right to Restrict Movement, Force People to Sit at Home.”

<sup>74</sup> “Biafra Remembrance Day: Why Grievances, Resentments Linger 50 Years After,” *Premium Times*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/biafra-remembrance-day-why-grievances-resentments/docview/2408457598/se-2>.

<sup>75</sup> Nwodo, Onwenu, and Nnadi took turns recounting several events that shaped the war’s history. They talked about their personal experiences and roles they played during the war. Mr. Nwodo said anyone up to 5ft in the Southeast was enrolled in the Biafran Army (this has psychological damage). He recounted how the Biafran soldiers built different local weapons they used in the fight, even an airport and an aircraft. Onyeka Onwenu served as a nurse at a clinic during the war, where she learnt public health in just two weeks.

<sup>76</sup> “Biafra Remembrance Day: Why Grievances, Resentments Linger 50 Years After.”

<sup>77</sup> Daniel Tuki, “Undead Past: What Drives Support for the Secessionist Goal of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria?” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics* 9, no. 1 (2024): 26-54.

<sup>78</sup> J. Harnischfeger, “Biafra and secessionism in Nigeria: An instrument of political bargaining,” In L. de Vries, P. Englebert and M. Schomerus (eds), *Secessionism in African Politics: Aspiration, Grievance, Performance, Disenchantment*. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 329-30.

<sup>79</sup> D. J. Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 206. They link Igbo ethnicity with Christianity on their website, with the hope that they are pursuing the restoration of the sovereign, independent, and Judeo-Christian Nation-state of Biafra. The group references the peril of Igbos (i.e., Christians) being subjugated by a predominantly Muslim national government. They do this intending to combat radical, state-sponsored Islamic terrorism that has massacred millions of our people and is determined to occupy our land and Islamize our populace.

<sup>80</sup> Godwin Comrade Ameh, “Aguiyi Ironsi, a great Nigerian patriot who excelled in all his commissions – Mrs. Buhari,” *Daily Post*, August 2, 2016, <https://dailypost.ng/2016/08/02/aguyi-ironsi-great-nigerian-patriot-excelled-commissions-mrs-buhari>.

<sup>81</sup> Agency Reporter, “Otti Inaugurates, Rechristens Ossah Road Aguiyi Ironsi Boulevard,” *The Nation*, May 30, 2024, <https://thenationonlineng.net/otti-inaugurates-rechristenes-ossah-road-aguiyi-ironsi-boulevard>.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Ukandu, “Armed forces Remembrance Day: Otti seeks support for service men, veterans,” *Kenga: Voice of the People*, January 15, 2024, [Armed forces remembrance day: Otti seeks support for service men, veterans - Ikenga Online](https://www.kengamagazine.com/armed-forces-remembrance-day-otti-seeks-support-for-service-men-veterans-ikenga-online).

<sup>83</sup> Nkasi Wodu, “Nigeria’s Unitary Federalism,” Council on Foreign Relation, December 16, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/nigerias-unitary-federalism>. See also: A. Ariyo and O. Olaniyan, “Structural Transformation and Inequality: Evidence from Nigeria,” *Development* 57 (2014): 531-9. <https://doi.org/10.1057/dev.2015.42>.

<sup>84</sup> Eric Teniola, “Abused Decree no. 34 and demand for restructuring,” *Vanguard*, July 21, 2020, [Abused Decree no. 34 and demand for restructuring - Vanguard News](https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/07/21/abused-decree-no-34-and-demand-for-restructuring/). See also: [50 years On: Aguiyi Ironsi’s Decree 34 And The Hypocrisy Of The North - By Lawrence Nwobu - 247 Ureports](https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/07/21/50-years-on-aguiyi-ironsi-decree-34-and-the-hypocrisy-of-the-north-by-lawrence-nwobu-247-ureports/).

<sup>85</sup> Lawrence Njoku and Iyabo Lawal, “50 years after... remembering Ironsi, Fajuyi,” *The Guardian*, July 29, 2016, [50 years after... remembering Ironsi, Fajuyi | The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News — Saturday Magazine — The Guardian Nigeria News – Nigeria and World News](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/jul/29/50-years-after-remembering-ironsi-fajuyi).

<sup>86</sup> Njoku and Lawal, “50 years after.”

<sup>87</sup> *The Biafran*, “Details of the brutal assassination of Aguiyi-ironsi: 50 years ago, a group of Arewa militants led by Major Theophilus Danjuma committed a terrible act of treason,” August 2, 2016, [The Biafran: Details of the brutal assassination of Aguiyi-ironsi: 50 years ago, a group of Arewa militants led by Major Theophilus Danjuma committed a terrible act of treason](https://www.thebiafran.com/details-of-the-brutal-assassination-of-aguiyi-ironsi-50-years-ago-a-group-of-arewa-militants-led-by-major-theophilus-danjuma-committed-a-terrible-act-of-treason).

<sup>88</sup> Njoku and Lawal, “50 years after”

<sup>89</sup> *The Biafran*, “Details of the brutal assassination of Aguiyi-ironsi.”

<sup>90</sup> Udoka Agwu, “Initiate programs that will impact Armed Forces, Otti tasks Nigerians,” *Business Day*, January 16, 2024, <https://businessday.ng/news/article/initiate-programmes-that-will-impact-armed-forces-otti-tasks-nigerians/>.

<sup>91</sup> Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Los Angeles: Sage, 1996), 4.

<sup>92</sup> This is drawing from parallels of theoretical frameworks like “mnemonic hegemony” or “mythsapes.”

# Racism, Atlantic Slavery, and Italy: Revisiting a Neglected Past

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In the last two decades, a significant number of translations of books by American, British, and French historians about Atlantic slavery have appeared in Italy. Starting with the translation of Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau's global history essay two years after its French release, Italian publishing houses such as Il Mulino and Einaudi have published various important translations on these topics. These include *Africa and Africans in the Formation of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* by John Thornton; *The Slave Trade* by Lisa A. Lindsey; *The Atlantic Slave Trade* by Herbert Klein; *The American Crucible. Slavery, Emancipation, and Human Rights* by Robin Blackburn; *Haiti: A History of a Revolution* by Jeremy D. Popkin and *The White and the Black: A Historical Investigation of the Racist Order* by Aurélia Michel. With a few exceptions, most translations appeared at least a decade after the original versions.<sup>1</sup>

While research on Atlantic slavery began in the United States more than half a century ago, studies on slavery in the early modern and modern eras began much later in Europe. These studies were heavily influenced by the North American debate despite the presence of a long-forgotten tradition of Brazilian and Cuban studies on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Historians in Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands have started to address the Atlantic slave trade and slavery because of the impact of their colonial empires on their respective contemporary societies. This impact has been less evident in Iberian countries, which, despite the duration and extent of their colonial empires, have only recently begun analyzing their involvement in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. Even more recently, countries such as Germany and Italy, which did not possess colonies in America, have shown interest in these issues, despite the fact that their inhabitants were more or less directly involved in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery.<sup>3</sup>

Another objective of the essay is to illuminate the relationship between Atlantic slavery and slave trade and the emergence and development of racism in Europe, particularly in Italy. Most Italian historiography considers racism to be closely linked to Italian colonialism in Africa and, in particular, to the rise of fascism.<sup>4</sup> However, the

article seeks to trace its roots back to earlier times, emphasizing the connection between Atlantic slavery and contemporary racism in European societies.

Clearly, the translation of these works responds to specific needs that have emerged in Italy over the last two decades. The increasing use of exploited and underpaid African labor, growing migration from sub-Saharan regions, the complex issue of integrating migrants into Italian society, the emergence of racist practices and attitudes, the global repercussions of social movements around the memory of slavery and racism (e.g., the removal of statues) and the demand for rights denied to people of African descent (e.g., Black Lives Matter) have undoubtedly prompted the Italian publishing world to address these issues through the translation of significant books on slavery and racism. However, this connection is rarely made explicit in new or updated prefaces.

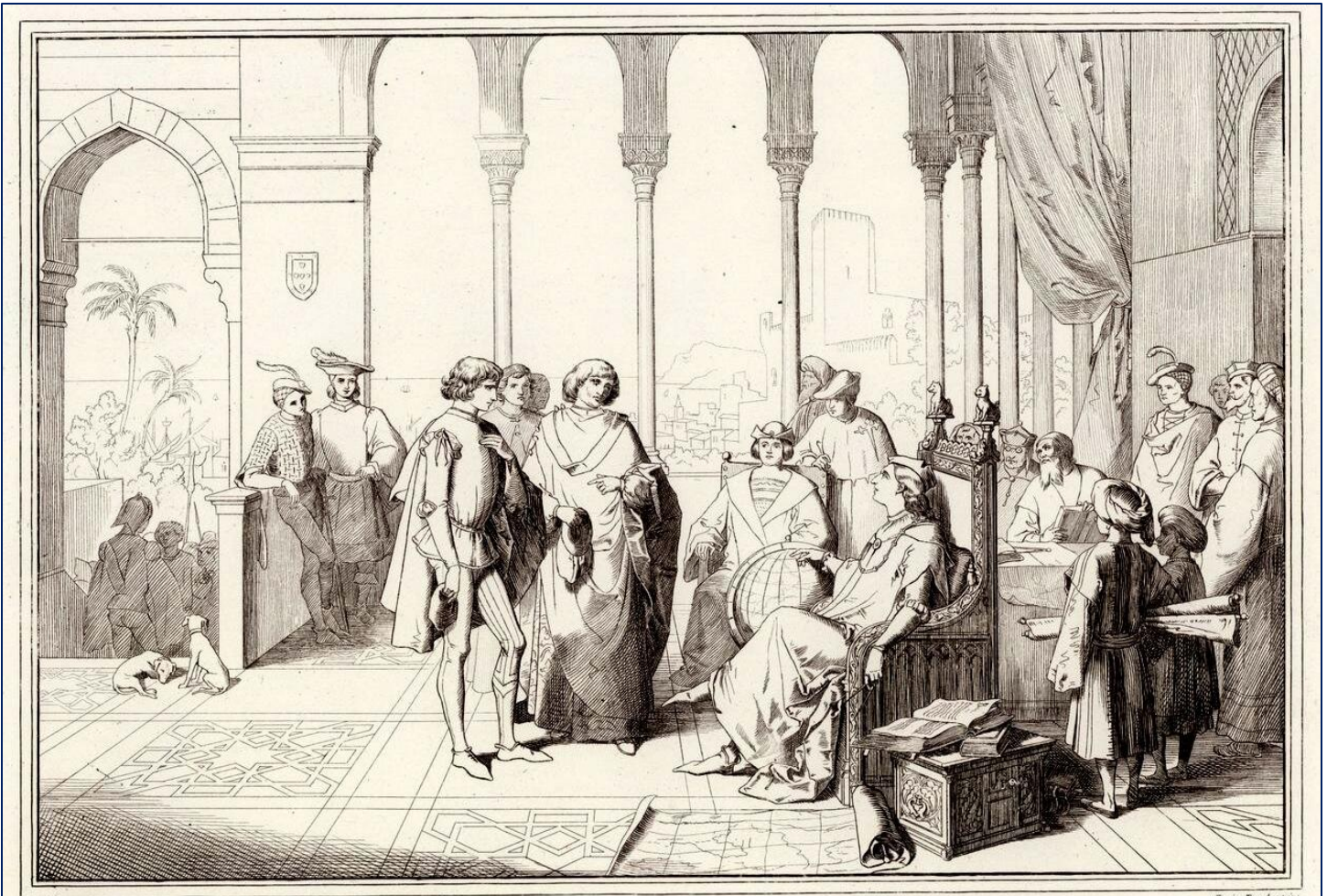
We must also consider the growing interest in approaches to Atlantic and global history in academia and beyond. These approaches encourage us to view the past in a less fragmented manner and to consider it beyond the confines of national or imperial borders. Atlantic history, which considers the ocean and the societies around it as a unit of analysis through which to study the cultural, economic, and political interactions between Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans, has been particularly important in the Italian context, because it has revealed the involvement of Italian actors in the colonization of the New World, as well as in the Atlantic slavery and slave trade.<sup>5</sup>

## The Italian Peninsula and Slavery: A Long History

The Italian peninsula's extensive history with slavery is crucial for understanding the connection between slavery and racism in the present day. However, although research on slavery has increased recently, few studies have linked Italian involvement in Atlantic slavery and the slave trade to the origins of racism in Italy.

In recent decades, studies on slavery have completely transformed the Italian and European historical landscape. While the study of slavery and its memory had been completely forgotten by historians until the late twentieth century, in the last two decades, studies on slavery and captivity in the Mediterranean have multiplied. These studies have helped outline important aspects of this form of slavery, the methods of capture, the living conditions of the captives, ransoms, and conversions, and its persistence from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

slavery. It was characterized by principles such as reversibility and reciprocity, and was essentially based on religious arguments unrelated to the racial categories of the Atlantic slave trade. However, the differences between the two forms of slavery are not clear-cut. Mediterranean slavery set a precedent for Atlantic slavery, and the two systems influenced each other throughout the modern era until slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Connections between the Mediterranean and Atlantic slave trades emerged in the late Middle Ages with the colonization of eastern Atlantic



**Alvise de Mosto is presented to Prince Henry of Portugal.** Source: Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:80.\\_Alvise\\_da\\_Mosto,\\_o\\_Cadamosto\\_presentato\\_all'Infante\\_D.\\_Enrico\\_di\\_Portogallo,\\_anno\\_1454.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:80._Alvise_da_Mosto,_o_Cadamosto_presentato_all'Infante_D._Enrico_di_Portogallo,_anno_1454.jpg)

As previously mentioned, the renewed interest in Mediterranean slavery stems from the growth of slavery and Atlantic slave trade studies, particularly in the Anglophone world. However, these two subjects are usually studied separately, as if they had no points of contact or commonalities. Mediterranean slavery is often described as more "humane" than Atlantic plantation

archipelagos, such as the Canary Islands, Madeira, and the Azores. These connections persisted into the sixteenth century, marked by the importation of Ladinis (slaves who had lived in Europe) from the Iberian Peninsula to the Americas, as well as the importation of slaves from West Africa to the Mediterranean via the ports of Lisbon and Seville. Although slaves had

previously arrived in the Mediterranean via land routes from North Africa and the East, the development of western ocean routes partially altered the regions from which African slaves originated. Thus, Mediterranean slavery must be considered within a broader context of other forms of slavery rather than analyzed within predetermined parameters or stereotypes. According to Davis, one must use a “cross-cutting approach” to restore the full picture of Western slavery, which spans many centuries and places.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to reconstructing the connections and mutual influences between Mediterranean and Atlantic slavery, it would be necessary to examine the participation of individuals and groups from the Italian peninsula—merchants, bankers, and missionaries—in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery more systematically than has been done to date. This would enable us to grasp the profound interest that Italians had in the slave system and to fully incorporate the Italian peninsula into the context of the Atlantic economy. It would also challenge the theory that the emergence of Atlantic Europe signifies the peninsula's decline. This approach would also enable historians to reconstruct the long-term circulation of racist ideas and racial categories, considering them to be more widespread chronologically than is generally believed and closely connected to the Atlantic experience. While studies on individual cases have been published (e.g., the Florentine Marchionni family or the Genoese Grillo family),<sup>9</sup> other studies providing an overview of Italian groups' and families' actual involvement in the Atlantic slave trade and plantation economy are lacking.<sup>10</sup>

Since the fifteenth-century Atlantic explorations, Italians participated in large numbers in the construction of future transoceanic empires. They served the Iberian crowns and contributed as investors to the preparation of ships and expeditions. For example, thanks to Venetian agent Alvise Ca' da Mosto, we have one of the most detailed accounts of mid-fifteenth-century Portuguese expeditions along the West African coast in search of slaves.<sup>11</sup> Once the papacy granted the Portuguese crown a monopoly on this emerging trade, not only Italian urban elites were among the buyers of African slaves, but one of them, Bartolomeo Marchionni from Florence, became the manager of the increasingly complex financial side of that trade.<sup>12</sup> For the Florentines and the Genoese,

the Iberian Peninsula—especially the cities of Lisbon and Seville—was the privileged gateway to new global spaces and the slave trade.<sup>13</sup> The Medici court's colonial projects in the early seventeenth century, which aimed to establish settlements in Sierra Leone and on the coast of Espirito Santo in Brazil, were closely linked to investments in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. Linked in part to the early development of the port of Livorno, which was attempting to seize commercial opportunities offered by Sephardic diaspora networks, these projects were the result of exchanges between the Medici court and Sephardic Jewish merchants in Tuscany and Holland, as well as English explorers. The projects culminated in the 1608-09 expedition to Brazil led by Robert Thornton.<sup>14</sup> Madrid's opposition thwarted the Medicis' plans, but it would be reductive to dismiss the rich corpus of documents consisting of notes, reports, opinions, and economic calculations accumulated at the court of Ferdinand I in the early seventeenth century as vain aspirations or failed plans.

The Genoese were also very active in the Atlantic trade. Starting in the mid-fifteenth century, they established settlements in southern Spanish and Portuguese port cities and traded with West Africa to the south and with Flanders and England to the north. The islands of the eastern Atlantic were strategic to their mercantile activities. Madeira and the Canary Islands, inhabited by many Genoese families, were crucial for sugar production and expanding plantations.<sup>15</sup> Thanks to the shipping revolution achieved by the Republic at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Genoese became leaders in the slave trade during that century. From 1662 to 1665, Ambrogio Lomellini and Domenico Grillo negotiated the *Asiento de Negros* (Slave Trade Agreement) with the Spanish Crown. This agreement gave the Genoese direct control over a significant portion of the trade between Africa and Spanish territories in the Americas until the mid-1670s. By signing this contract, the Genoese fully inserted themselves into ocean traffic with their own personnel and resources, also proposing a technical change: the adoption of galleons with a higher tonnage than in the past. Grillo and Lomellini's system initially relied on transporting slaves from the Dutch to Curaçao, where they were distributed to Spanish ports such as Veracruz, Portobelo, Caracas, Cartagena de

Indias, and Cumaná. Secondly, they used the "English route" via Jamaica and Barbados.<sup>16</sup>

The commercial activities of the Genoese in the Atlantic, including the slave trade, continued throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although they have been relatively understudied. Catia Brillì has amply demonstrated the importance of the Genoese merchant community in Cádiz during this period, as well as their increasingly widespread presence in the Río de la Plata, particularly in Buenos Aires after its independence from Spain.<sup>17</sup> The Genoese's long-standing involvement in the slave trade is evident in debates about abolishing the trade in the Kingdom of Sardinia until at least the mid-nineteenth century. After Genoa was annexed to the kingdom, British diplomats accused its ships of being directly or indirectly involved in the illegal trade between West Africa and Brazil. In fact, the Genoese opposed the 1853 decree that abolished the slave trade in the Kingdom of Sardinia.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Impact of Slavery in Europe: The Revival of a Debate**

These data suggest that the peninsula's involvement in the slave trade was extensive and not the result of isolated cases. Giulia Bonazza's research corroborates this, demonstrating that slavery persisted in Italy until at least the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> The fragmentation and dispersion of sources on this topic partly explains why historiography has not devoted much attention to the phenomenon. Another reason may be the academic distinction between the early modern and modern ages. This neglect is also influenced by the belief that Italian families and groups were only sporadically involved in the Atlantic slave trade due to the absence of colonies. Finally, the notion that the peninsula's experience with slavery was less widespread and less dramatic for slaves than the plantation economy has led to its characterization as "special" or "humane," distinguishing it from the Atlantic experience. However, many recent studies on the impact of slavery in European countries are challenging the notion that slavery was only a significant quantitative phenomenon in colonial peripheries. These studies are bringing the topic back to the center of European history and identity.<sup>20</sup>

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a wide range of initiatives, not only academic, have explored the

history and legacy of slavery in European societies. These initiatives have revealed slavery's pervasive presence in material and visual contexts. Particular attention has been given to creating databases that reconstruct the wealth accumulated by plantation owners and how it was reinvested in the home country.<sup>21</sup> Attention has also been given to initiatives for a wider audience, such as opening museums, organizing exhibitions on slavery, and mapping urban places that refer to slavery and its memory.<sup>22</sup>

These public initiatives have stimulated new research questions in academia. The increased visibility of slavery in modern Europe has sparked a growing interest in the forgotten history of slaves transported from the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.<sup>23</sup> In the Netherlands, Germany, and Scandinavia, for example, research indicates that slaves were present in royal courts and were certainly not limited to nobles and merchant elites. While their presence in the north was not as prevalent as in southern Europe, communities of Africans were documented in London and Amsterdam beginning in the early seventeenth century.<sup>24</sup> Despite the common perception of Europe as a bastion of freedom and civil rights and the principle of "free soil," which stipulated that slaves who touched French, English, or Dutch soil would be free, studies indicate that slaves who reached Europe were not always freed. Instead, they remained under the control of their owners in conditions of servitude. The belief that slavery did not exist in northwestern European countries does not always correspond to reality; slavery existed in practice and was often provided for by law.<sup>25</sup>

The impact of slavery on European societies is increasingly being studied from the perspectives of economic history, capitalism, and inequality. The initial debate on the role of slavery in the development of European capitalism centered on Eric Williams's thesis that profits from the slave trade financed industrialization. However, subsequent studies have emphasized the impact of slavery-related activities, broadening the scope of the debate beyond the discourse of profits and profitability.<sup>26</sup> By analyzing the role of the slave trade in supply chains of goods produced through slavery, this research provides new data to measure the impact of slavery, the slave trade, and related economic activities on European societies and their economies.<sup>27</sup>

Compared to other European countries, both public debate and academic studies on the role of slavery in the early modern era are still in their infancy in Italy. This is true not only in relation to countries that had colonies in the Atlantic world but also in relation to countries such as Germany, which did not establish empires until the late nineteenth century. German historians have conducted numerous studies on the involvement of German states and shipowners in the Atlantic slave trade during the early modern period, as well as in the imperialist enterprise of the nineteenth century. They have also studied slavery within German cities.<sup>28</sup>

To better understand the economic and political impact of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery on the Italian peninsula, as well as its influence on the emergence of racist thinking, three major areas of research should be explored in greater depth. First, more comprehensive research is needed on individuals and families from the peninsula who invested in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. Although some research has been made, as mentioned above, there is still much to be done. Involvement in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery was not limited to a few Florentine and Genoese families in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Actually, it was a much broader phenomenon involving other regions of the peninsula and other historical periods, particularly the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Further research is also needed into the methods these families used to invest in and participate in trade and slave plantations, and how they subsequently used the profits from these activities. Second, more detailed research on the slaves who arrived on the peninsula from Sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the Atlantic World is necessary. Unlike previous studies, which have focused on the presence of Africans in European courts and represented these individuals as exceptions or exotic cases, this research should focus on ordinary slaves. Studies are needed that highlight the commonalities among African slaves, such as their working conditions, legal status, methods of resisting slavery, and integration into society after being freed. Third, the circulation of ideas and racial categories before the nineteenth century must be thoroughly studied. This analysis should include texts written by Jesuits from the peninsula on missions in the New World (some of whom wrote treatises on slavery<sup>29</sup>), texts by ecclesiastical authorities in Italy, the jurisprudence of the

Holy Office regarding people of African descent, newspaper articles, writings by jurists and intellectuals, and debates about abolishing the slave trade and slavery in the peninsula.

Only through a more in-depth study of the social, political, and cultural consequences that Italian participation in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery had on the peninsula throughout the early modern era is it possible to understand the extent to which these phenomena influenced the emergence of racial thinking in Italy. In this way, Italian colonialism in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century can be understood as part of a broader historical context. This context is not limited to the era of imperial nations but has its origins in experiences and processes that began much earlier linking the empires of the early modern age to those of the modern era.

### **The Origins of Racist Thinking: From Anti-Semitism to Skin Color Racism**

Although scholars now agree that race does not exist except as an ideological construct, they disagree on when these ideologies—considered in their normative, institutional, discursive, or visual dimensions—emerged. Some argue that they arose at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the development of so-called “scientific racism,” while others trace them back to an earlier period.<sup>30</sup> Proponents of a shorter time frame argue that racism only emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when cultural differences between human groups were increasingly seen as biological differences, fixed in racial taxonomies. According to this interpretation, it is impossible to speak of race or racial prejudice in the early modern era, as the definition of otherness was essentially based on cultural elements. However, a growing number of historians suggest that the birth and formation of racial categories occurred in an earlier era, between the Middle Ages and the early modern period. This broad timeframe enables us to avoid treating the period before the contemporary era as merely a phase in which the models that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were formed.

Many authors who take a long-term perspective to explain the emergence of the concept of race consider the blood purity statutes that developed in the Iberian Peninsula in the mid-fifteenth century to be a significant

turning point.<sup>31</sup> These statutes excluded converted Jews from various bodies and institutions before and after Jews' expulsion in 1492. Once they were forced to convert, religious faith could no longer justify their discrimination. Thus, the concept of blood purity became the basis for distinguishing them from Old Christians. Candidates needed documents certifying their purity of blood to access certain civic and ecclesiastical positions. Converted Jews were accused of insincerely converting and secretly persisting in Jewish practices. This suspicion extended to not only those who had converted but also to their descendants because the stigma of Jewish origin was considered hereditary. Thus, the stigma of race had concrete discriminatory effects and was used as a political tool to exclude converts from the highest levels of Iberian society.

Discrimination based on blood impurity not only affected converts to Islam but also represented a turning point in the formation of the concept of race as it defined an ideological device that could be adapted to different contexts. It was used in the Americas against indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans brought to the New World colonies.<sup>32</sup> To demonstrate the significant influence of the concepts of race and blood on Spanish American societies, the analysis of the category of *castas* is particularly interesting. *Castas* were individuals born from unions between Europeans and natives or between Europeans and Africans. Even if they emancipated themselves from servitude and climbed the social ladder, the stain of their racial impurity excluded them from the privileges that whites enjoyed.<sup>33</sup>

Although the ideological construct of race was created in the Iberian Peninsula between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in relation to converted Jews, slavery and the Atlantic slave trade had a significant impact on the spread and evolution of racial ideologies in the Western world. The transatlantic slave trade was unparalleled in its intensity and scale. At the same time, the colonization of the New World caused a demographic catastrophe and subjugation of Native Americans. This is why colonial America seems to be a place where racial practices and theories formed the backbone of the social order more than elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> The development of the Atlantic slave trade not only solidified the association of African origin with enslavement, which perpetuated the idea of Black

people's natural inferiority, but it also enabled European colonists to differentiate themselves from other groups within the colonial population by employing racial classification as a tool. The inferiority of free people of African descent was based on the infamy of slavery, which was transmitted through the blood (according to the principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*, slavery was passed down through the maternal line), so the stigma did not disappear until after many generations, just as in the case of converted Jews.

These experiences demonstrate that racist political systems emerged before doctrinal references capable of defining race were established. Stigmatization, inferiorization, segregation, exploitation, and even genocide occurred within socio-political and economic dynamics that often relied on ideological justifications, sometimes giving rise to new ones and other times operating without them. Studying the concept of race from a long-term perspective does not aim to establish a line of continuity of racism from the fifteenth century to the present day, nor does it aim to show that racism increased from a low level in the early modern era to a high level in the twentieth century. Rather, the goal is to reject any teleology and explore the contexts in which racial categorization is functional for organizing power and creating relationships of inequality, exclusion, and political and economic subordination among individuals and groups. This approach helps us understand why racial inequalities and racist violence still exist today, despite the scientific consensus that race does not exist. Thus, the historicization of the concepts of race and racism becomes a useful tool for decoding and deconstructing the sources of racist ideas and patterns that are becoming increasingly familiar in contemporary societies.<sup>35</sup>

### **Conclusion: How to Study Racism in Italy?**

Studies on slavery in Italy and the relationship between the spread of racist ideologies and Atlantic slavery can help outline a different chronology of racism in the Italian peninsula. Until recently, the study of racism tended to focus on the ideas and theories of race developed by "scientific racism" proponents like Cesare Lombroso and other positivist intellectuals, as well as on the institutionalization of racism and anti-Semitism during fascism. After World War II, both academia and

public opinion held that racism was an exclusively fascist practice and ideology. This view assumed that racism had little or nothing to do with the “authentic character” of Italians, who were essentially “good people,” tolerant, and incapable of racism. Italians were often seen as victims of racist prejudice themselves. According to this narrative, anti-Semitism was a German invention that fascism adopted in 1938 only to please Nazi Germany. Although historians have definitively disproved this thesis, the concept of “good people” was useful in absolving Italians of the crimes of World War II.<sup>36</sup>

By placing all the blame for racism on the fascist regime, Italy was able to transition from fascism to democracy without discussing the deep roots and methods of colonialism.<sup>37</sup> For many decades, Italian colonialism in Africa was considered a brief, non-traumatic experience conducted with peaceful, nonviolent methods. However, since the 1970s, historians have gradually debunked this myth by revealing the crimes, massacres, and deportations that characterized the military occupation of African countries. More recently, scholars have considered Italian colonialism a key to understanding the historical roots of racism and racial ideologies in contemporary Italy, definitively rejecting the notion that colonialism was exclusively a fascist phenomenon.<sup>38</sup> Using a multidisciplinary approach and a postcolonial perspective, scholars have also revealed how whiteness has been a constitutive element of Italian identity.<sup>39</sup>

Building on these studies, other research has sought to link the concept of race to the formation of the nation. This research questions the deeply rooted historiographical interpretation that, unlike the German idea of nationhood, the Italian idea of nationhood was

not ethnic in nature, but rather based on voluntaristic principles.<sup>40</sup> Recently, historians have persuasively argued that the naturalistic components of the idea of nationhood in Risorgimento Italy were not negligible. In addition to the concept of natural territorial boundaries, a strong emphasis was placed on kinship ties, which were understood not only metaphorically, but also as literal blood ties.<sup>41</sup> According to some authors, nationalism sparked new theories about the ethno-racial history of the peninsula. Traditional ideas of lineage from the early nineteenth century merged with theories of natural history and comparative linguistics, contributing to the biologization and racialization of national characteristics and making the “Italian nation” a tangible concept.<sup>42</sup>

Historicizing the concepts of race and racism not only helps redefine their roles and meanings, but it also reveals their presence long before race was defined by science and codified by law. This helps explain why racist ideologies and racial discrimination continue to survive and reproduce in the present, even after it has been established that race does not exist from a scientific point of view. However, limiting the emergence of racist thinking in Italy to the colonial period or the Risorgimento obscures the presence of racist attitudes and practices prior to the formation of the nation and creates misunderstandings about how such ideas have persisted to the present day. There is no cumulative racism that evolves in a linear way because discriminatory actions against certain groups respond to different political circumstances and projects. Rather, racial prejudices are constantly invoked—such as the idea that Blackness conveys immorality, unreliability, and immaturity—but respond to different political objectives over time.

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## Notes

This article has been published as part of the Advanced Grant project “BlackItaly” (FIS 1 Notice, CUP D53C23002720001), which is funded by the Italian Ministry of Universities and Research and coordinated by Federica Morelli (FBK-ISIG).

<sup>1</sup> Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, *La tratta degli schiavi. Saggio di storia globale* (Il Mulino, 2006; original edition 2004); John Thornton, *L’Africa e gli africani nella formazione del mondo atlantico, 1400-1800* (Il Mulino, 2010; original edition 1992); Lisa A. Lindsey, *Il commercio degli schiavi* (Il Mulino, 2011; original edition 2008); Herbert Klein, *La tratta atlantica degli schiavi* (Carocci, 2014; original edition 1999); Robin Blackburn, *Il crogiolo americano. Schiavitù, emancipazione e diritti umani* (Einaudi,

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Zeuske and David Fernbach, “Historiography and Research Problems of Slavery and the Slave Trade in a Global-Historical Perspective,” *International Review of Social History* 57, no. 1 (2012): 87-111.

<sup>3</sup> Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, ed., *The European Experience in Slavery, 1650-1850* (De Gruyter, 2024); Stephan Conermann, Claudia Rauhut, Ulrike Schmieder, and Michael Zeuske, *Cultural Heritage and Slavery: Perspectives from Europe* (De Gruyter,

2023); Martín Rodrigo y Alharilla ed. *Del olvido a la memoria. La esclavitud en la España contemporánea* (Icaria Editorial, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Francesco Cassata, *Racism and Antisemitism in Fascist Italy: The Politics, Ideology, and Imagery of La Difesa della Razza* (Routledge, 2025); Guido Abbattista, *Ethnic Expositions in Italy, 1880 to 1940: Humans on Exhibition* (Routledge, 2024); Lucia Piccioni, “Images of Black Faces in Italian Colonialism: Mobile Essentialisms,” *Modern Italy* 27, no. 4 (2022): 375-96; Silvana Patriarca, *Il Colore Della Repubblica: «Figli Della Guerra» e Razzismo nell'Italia Postfascista* (Einaudi, 2021); Nicola Camilleri, “Colonial Subjects and Others: Racism and Inequality during Italian Rule in the Horn of Africa,” *Northeast African Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 27-57; Gaia Giuliani ed., *Il Colore Della Nazione*. (Le Monnier, 2015); Olindo De Napoli, “Race and Empire: The Legitimation of Italian Colonialism in Juridical Thought,” *The Journal of Modern History* 85, no. 4 (2013): 801-32.

<sup>5</sup> Catia Brillì, *Genoese Trade and Migration in the Spanish Atlantic, 1700-1830* (Cambridge University press, 2016); Pierre Niccolò Sophia, «Dall'Atlantico a Rialto. Note sul commercio dello zucchero a Venezia nel Settecento», *Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea* 8/1 (2021): 105-128; Luca Codignola, *Blurred Nationalities across the North Atlantic. Traders, Priests, and Their Kin Travelling between North America and the Italian Peninsula. 1763-1846* (University of Toronto Press, 2019); Francesco Guidi-Bruscoli, “Beyond Iberia: Florentine bankers and John Cabot’s Voyage to the New Land,” in *Shores of Vespucci. A historical research of Amerigo Vespucci’s life and contexts*, ed. A. Cattaneo (Berlin, 2028), 179-91.

<sup>6</sup> The historiography is endless. I will limit myself to mentioning a few of the works: Salvatore Bono, *Schiavi musulmani nell'Italia moderna. Galeotti, vucumprà, domestici* (Edizione Scientifiche Italiane, 1999); Alessandro Stella, *Histoires d’esclaves dans la péninsule ibérique* (Editions de l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2000); Marco Lenci, *Corsari. Guerra, schiavi, rinnegati nel Mediterraneo* (Carocci, 2006); Wolfgang Kaiser, ed., *Le Commerce des captifs. Les intermédiaires dans l’échange et le rachat des prisonniers en Méditerranée, XVe–XVIIIe siècle* (École Française de Rome, 2008); Giovanna Fiume, *Schiavitù mediterranea. Corsari, rinnegati e santi di età moderna* (Bruno Mondadori, 2009); Fabienne P. Guillén, Salah Trabelsi, eds., *Les esclavages en Méditerranée, Espaces et dynamiques économiques* (Casa de Velazquez, 2012); Chouki El-Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Aurelia Martín Casares, *Esclavitud, Mestizaje y abolicionismo en los mundos hispánicos* (Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2015); Salvatore Bono, *Schiavi. Una storia mediterranea (XVI–XIX secolo)* (Il Mulino, 2016); Giulia Bonazza, *Abolitionism and the Persistence of Slavery in Italian States, 1750–1850* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> On the connections between Atlantic and Mediterranean slavery, see: Nabil Matar, *British Captives from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, 1563–1770* (Brill, 2014); Stefan Hanß e Jualiane Schiel, eds., *Mediterranean Slavery Revisited* (Chronos Verlag, 2014); Giulia Bonazza, “Connecting the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Forms of Slavery in Naples and Rome (1750–1850),” *Journal of Global Slavery* 3 (2018): 152-75.

<sup>8</sup> David Brion Davis, “Looking at Slavery from Broader Perspectives,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 2 (2000): 452–66.

<sup>9</sup> Francesco Guidi Bruscoli, Bartolomeo Marchionni, «*bomem de grossa fazenda*» (ca. 1450-1530). *Un mercante fiorentino a Lisbona e l'impero portoghese* (Olschki, 2014); Alejandro García-Montón, *Genoese Entrepreneurship and the Asiento Slave Trade, 1650–1700* (Routledge, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Hopefully, the BlackItaly FIS Advanced Grant will address this void in the following years: <https://blackitaly.fbk.eu/s/eng/page/project>.

<sup>11</sup> Anna Unali, *Andar per mare. Le navigazioni in Africa di Alvise da Ca' da Mosto mercante veneziano al servizio del Portogallo* (Bulzoni, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Sergio Tognetti, *The Trade in Black Africans Slaves in Fifteenth Century Florence*, in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 213-24.

<sup>13</sup> Nunziatella Alessandrini and Antonella Viola, “Genovesi e fiorentini in Portogallo: reti commerciali e strategie politico-diplomatiche (1650-1700),” *Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche* 28 (2013): 295-322.

<sup>14</sup> Giuseppe Marcocci, “L'Italia nella prima età globale (ca. 1300-1700),” *Storica* 60 (2014): 7-50.

<sup>15</sup> Luca Lo Basso, “Diaspora e armamento marittimo nelle strategie economiche dei genovesi nella seconda metà del XVIII secolo: una storia globale,” *Studi Storici* 56, no. 1 (2015): 137-55.

<sup>16</sup> García-Montón, *Genoese Entrepreneurship*.

<sup>17</sup> Catia Brillì, *Genoese Trade and Migration in the Spanish Atlantic*.

<sup>18</sup> Marco Mariano, “The Atlantic slave trade on Italian shores: The case of the Kingdom of Sardinia (1815–1853),” in *Global Perspectives in Modern Italian Culture. Knowledge and Representation of the World in Italy from the Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century*, ed. Guido Abbattista (Routledge, 2021), 249-65.

<sup>19</sup> Bonazza, *Abolitionism and the Persistence of Slavery*.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Earle, Kate J. P. Lowe, eds., *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Eric Martone, *Encyclopedia of Blacks in European History and Culture*, 2 vol. (Greenwood Press, 2008); Olivette Otele, *African Europeans. An Untold History* (Hurst Publisher, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the project coordinated by Catherine Hall that led to the establishment of The Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery at UCL: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>.

<sup>22</sup> There are now numerous museums and exhibitions on slavery in Europe. Notable examples include the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool and the Rijksmuseum's slavery exhibition in Amsterdam. In Italy, the MUDEC in Milan hosted the exhibition “La Voce delle Ombre. Presenze africane nell’Africa settentrionale” (The Voice of Shadows: African Presences in North Africa [5/13-9/18/2022]). On mapping sites of slavery, see, for example: *Mapping Slavery* (<https://mappingslavery.nl>), *Black Heritage Tours* (<http://www.blackheritagetours.com>), Ulrike Schmieder,

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“Sites of Memory of Atlantic Slavery in European Towns with an Excursus on the Caribbean,” *Cuadernos Inter.c.a.m.bio sobre Centroamérica y el Caribe* 15, no. 1 (2018): 29-75.

<sup>23</sup> James H. Sweet, *The Hidden Histories of African Lisbon*, in *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade*, eds. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Matt D. Childs, and James Sidbury (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 233-47; Erin Kathleen Rowe, *Black Saints in Early Modern Global Catholicism* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain 1780-1830* (Routledge, 2013); Rebeka von Mallinckrodt, “There Are No Slaves in Prussia,” in *Slavery Hinterland: Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680-1850*, ed. Felix Brahm and Eve Rosenhaft (Boydell & Brewer, 2016), 109-32; Dienke Hondius, *Blackness in Western Europe: Racial Patterns of Paternalism and Exclusion* (Routledge, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Sue Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford University Press, 1996); Samuel L. Chatman, “‘There Are No Slaves in France’: A Re-Examination of Slave Laws in Eighteenth Century France,” *The Journal of Negro History* 85, no. 3 (2000), 144-53; “Free Soil in the Atlantic World,” ed. Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg, special issue, *Slavery & Abolition* 32, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>26</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (University of North Carolina Press, 1944). For a new interpretation of Williams’s theses, see: Barbara L. Solow e Stanley L. Engerman, *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Pepijn Brandon, “Rethinking Capitalism and Slavery: New Perspectives from American Debates,” *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis / Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 12, no. 4 (2015): 117-37; Karwan Fatah-Black and Matthias van Rossum, “Beyond Profitability: The Dutch Transatlantic Slave Trade and Its Economic Impact,” *Slavery & Abolition* 36, no. 1 (2015): 63-83.

<sup>27</sup> Leonor Freire Costa, Nuno Palma, Jaime Reis, “The Great Escape? The Contribution of the Empire to Portugal’s Economic Growth, 1500-1800,” *European Review of Economic History* 19 (2014): 1-22; Klas Rönnbäck, “On the Economic Importance of the Slave Plantation Complex to the British Economy during the Eighteenth Century: A Value-Added Approach,” *Journal of Global History* 13, no.3 (2018): 309-27.

<sup>28</sup> H. Raphael-Hernandez, P. Wiegink, “German entanglements in transatlantic slavery: An introduction,” *Atlantic Studies* 14, no. 4 (2017): 419-435; Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, “There are no slaves in Prussia?”; Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, Sarah Lentz, Josef Köstlbauer, *Beyond Exceptionalism – Traces of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Early Modern Germany, 1650-1850* (De Gruyter, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Giorgio Benci’s essay, *Economia christãa dos senhores no governo dos escravos* (Rome: Officina di Antonio de Rossi, 1705).

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton University Press, 2004); M. Elian-Feldon, B. Isaac, and J. Ziegler, eds., *The Origins of Racism in the West* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Terri E. Givens, *The Roots*

*of Racism: The Politics of White Supremacy in the US and Europe* (Bristol University Press, 2022).

<sup>31</sup> George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2002); Max S. Hering Torres, Maria Elena Martínez, and David Nirenberg, eds., *Race and Blood in Iberian World* (Lit Verlag, 2012); Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2013); Jean-Frédéric Schaub and Silvia Sebastiani, *Race et histoire dans les sociétés coloniales (XVe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Albin Michel, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> James H. Sweet, “The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54/1 (1997): 143-66; María Elena Martínez, “The Black Blood of New Spain: Limpieza de Sangre, Racial Violence, and Gendered Power in Early Colonial Mexico,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2004): 479-520; Nikolaus Böttcher, Bernd Hausberger, and Max. S. Hering Torres, eds., *El peso de la sangre. Limpios, mestizos y nobles en el mundo hispánico* (El Colegio de México, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Ben Vinson, *Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Laura A. Lewis, “Between Casta and Raza: the example of colonial Mexico,” in *Race and Blood in the Iberian World*, ed. Max Hering Torres, María Elena Martínez and David Nirenberg (Verlag, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Schaub and Sebastiani, *Race et histoire*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Marius Turda, Maria Sophia Quine, *Historicizing Race* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire* (Neri Pozzi, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> Nicola La Banca, *Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Il Mulino, 2002), 427-44.

<sup>38</sup> Olindo De Napoli, *La prova della razza: cultura giuridica e razzismo in Italia negli anni Trenta* (Mondadori, 2009); Alberto Burgio e Gianluca Gabrielli, *Il razzismo* (Ediesse, 2012); Valeria Deplano and Alessandro Pes, *Quel che resta dell’impero. La cultura coloniale degli italiani* (Mimesis Edizioni, 2014); Gianluca Gabrielli, “Il curriculum razziale.” *La costruzione dell’alterità di “razza” e coloniale nella scuola italiana (1860-1950)* (EUM, 2015); Gabriele Proglgio, *Libia 1911-1912: immaginari coloniali e italianità* (Mondadori, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Gaia Giuliani, Cristina Lombardi Diop, *Bianco e Nero. Storia dell’identità razziale degli italiani* (Le Monnier, 2013); Giuliani, *Il colore della nazione*.

<sup>40</sup> Federico Chabod, *L’idea di nazione* (1961), ed. A. Saitta and E. Sestan (Laterza, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> Alberto M. Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell’Italia unita* (Einaudi, 2000); *Id*, “Le invasioni barbariche e le origini delle nazioni,” in *Immagini della nazione nell’Italia del Risorgimento*, ed. A. M. Banti and R. Bizzocchi (Carocci, 2002), 21-44.

<sup>42</sup> Silvana Patriarca, *Le relazioni pericolose: ‘razza’ e ‘nazione’ nel Risorgimento*, in *La costruzione dello Stato-nazione in Italia*, ed. Adriano Rocucci (Viella, 2012), 109-19; Edoardo Marcello Barsotti, “Race and Risorgimento: An unexplored chapter of Italian history,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 25, no. 3 (2020): 273-94; E. M. Barsotti, *At the Roots of Italian Identity: ‘Race’ and ‘Nation’ in the Italian Risorgimento, 1796-1870* (Routledge, 2021).

# The Struggle Continues: Preserving the Legacy of the American Committee on Africa

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The records of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) represent an impressive collection of documents from what I will define as African Liberation Movement Solidarity Organizations (ALMSOs); or, NGOs that worked in solidarity with African Liberation Movements like the African National Congress (ANC). In fact, ACOA started as the Americans for South African Resistance (AFSAR) in the early fifties aiding the ANC's Defiance Campaign Against Unjust Laws in South Africa. The ACOA was an important national leader coordinating their campaigns with groups at the local level. In the mid-1960s, the ACOA collaborated with civil rights, church, labor, and student groups to form the Consultative Council on South Africa which culminated in the first Bank Boycott.<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, the ACOA would collaborate with many other NGOs in the Gulf Boycott Coalition to protest Gulf Oil's presence in Angola.<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, during the Divestment Movement, ACOA pamphlets and newsletters provided background info that local movements used in their protests.<sup>3</sup> The ACOA was also an important global leader in the movement working with international counterparts in Europe and at the UN and OAU.<sup>4</sup> As the oral history of the ALMSOs, *No Easy Victories*, makes clear the ALMSO movement was much larger than just the ACOA especially as the liberation struggle expanded across the continent after the Year of Africa 1960.<sup>5</sup> The ACOA, while it was an important player on the stage it was not the only one.<sup>6</sup> There were organizations as important as ACOA to the movement; in the 1970s, the African Liberation Day protests organized by the African Liberation Support Committee were significant.<sup>7</sup> The Free South Africa Movement in the 1980s organized by TransAfrica was transformative.<sup>8</sup> Globally, the International Defense and Aid Fund for Southern Africa as well as the UK Anti-Apartheid Movement were just as significant as the ACOA. The ACOA was a small, underfunded organization with limited storage space; so, inevitably, some archival records were lost, and some failed to be recorded in the first place. In the decades since, those papers have been deposited at several

archives which have done their best to ensure that those records were preserved intact; however, no human endeavor is perfect. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has noted in *Silencing the Past*, what goes into the archive directly affects what kinds of histories future historians can write.<sup>9</sup> As a researcher who has spent much time perusing ACOA records, several case studies of lost records can be brought forth.

A brief history of how the records of the ACOA were preserved will provide a proper context for the case studies to follow. Jennifer Davis, who emigrated from South Africa, related a story of when she first started as the Research Director at the ACOA in 1967, "The first time I went to ACOA seriously thinking about what I could do there . . . [I took a] look at their files, and I actually had a marvelous cartoon which I gave to everybody for their Christmas . . . which was a picture of maybe sixty file cabinets and all of them labelled general . . . they had the most amazing research material."<sup>10</sup> Davis related that organizing the files in a more professional manner was not just to be more practical. The ACOA had started a 501(c)(3) fundraising organization, The Africa Fund, the previous year, and Houser tasked her with making sure their records were in order so authorities, who were often hostile to the work that ACOA was doing, could not close down The Africa Fund. She remembered separating out the files by the nation where the liberation struggles originated.<sup>11</sup>

In 1983, the ACOA donated their files over to the Amistad Research Center on Tulane University's campus. They were in better shape than in 1967 when Davis took over but it still took five years to develop the collection, by Amistad archivist Kenneth Coleman, to make it ready for scholarly research.<sup>12</sup> At the time of the donation, the ACOA was still active in the anti-Apartheid movement. In fact, the ACOA continued to be active in African causes until 2001 when it merged with The Africa Fund and the Africa Policy Information Center to become Africa Action (an NGO still active to this day). Amistad later created an addendum to the ACOA records, because from 1989 until 2000, ACOA continued to send the

Amistad additional tranches of documents reflecting their activism during the 1990s against Apartheid and in solidarity with other African causes. The ACOA Addendum records were processed by archivist Laura J. Thomson, from March 2012 to February 2013.<sup>13</sup>

Three figures also played a large role in the preservation of the ACOA's records through the establishment of the African Activist Archive Project (AAAP), a digital archive hosted online for free through Michigan State University (MSU): David Wiley, Christine Root, and Richard Knight. All three are veterans of ALMSOs that worked in solidarity with African liberation movements. Professor David Wiley joined several NGOs in places where he settled for work.<sup>14</sup> Wiley was part of the Southern Africa Committee (SAC) out of New York in its earliest iteration when it was part of the University Christian Movement. He wrote articles for the *Rhodesia News Summary*, an organ concerned with the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by Southern Rhodesia. The SAC later created *Southern Africa* magazine, an organ central to the movement, that Jennifer Davis was one of the first writers/editors on. Wiley also helped found the Madison Area Committee on Southern Africa (MACSA) which became an important regional organization centered at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where Wiley served on the faculty. When Wiley moved to East Lansing to join the Sociology faculty at Michigan State University and become the Director of the African Studies Center his activism continued with the Southern Africa Liberation Committee that MSU Presbyterian campus minister Warren "Bud" Day, MSU political science doctoral candidate Carol B. Thompson, Lovemore Nyoni, an MSU graduate student from Zimbabwe, and MSU anthropology professor Bill Derman, founded in the early 1970s.<sup>15</sup> In 1977, Wiley was also a founding member of the Association of Concerned Africa Scholars (ACAS) which asked the Carter administration to reform US-Africa policies in the wake of the Nixon-Ford administration's policies that favored the white minority governments in Africa.<sup>16</sup> In the early 2000s, Jennifer Davis approached Wiley because the African Activist Archive "needed an organizational sponsor that was a non-profit," and his position as Director of the African Studies Center at MSU proved to be a perfect fit.<sup>17</sup>

Christine Root got involved in the movement while at Oberlin College as an undergrad.<sup>18</sup> She was one of two students on a student/faculty/administrator commission to get Oberlin to divest from corporations involved in South Africa. After college, Root began working at the Washington Office on Africa (WOA), a major lobbying arm of the movement designed to get Washington to change its policies in Africa. The WOA was involved in the efforts to get the United States to stop importing Rhodesian chrome, as part of the successful effort to get the Clark amendment passed in Congress which limited covert intervention in Angola from 1976 until it was appealed in 1985, and in the anti-apartheid movement's successful effort to get sanctions passed over Reagan's veto. While in DC, Root worked in DC Bank Campaign and in DC Divest both focused on economic sanctions against South Africa. Root also served as co-chair of the Political Action Committee of the ACAS in the 1980s. After her time at the WOA, Root moved to Michigan and began working with the Democratic Research Staff of the Michigan House of Representatives on legislation that would secure divestment of the state public employee pension funds from South Africa. In the 1990s, she started up at MSU working at the International Studies Program as a grant writer and working on Matrix, their center for digital humanities and social sciences.<sup>19</sup>

Richard Knight began his activism at Ithaca College around the Allegría Wine boycott campaign which was a protest against Portuguese colonialism in Africa.<sup>20</sup> That campaign in solidarity with Lusophone African nationalism also involved Cornell University as well as the University of Wisconsin-Madison where MACSA was based. During that campaign, Knight worked with ACOA and later joined their staff in 1979. Knight spent the next two decades working as a Researcher and Press Officer at the ACOA and The Africa Fund. Knight coauthored the "Unified List of United States Companies Doing Business in South Africa," and helped draft the "Guidelines for Divestment" adopted by several significant anti-apartheid organizations.<sup>21</sup> A few years after the ACOA merged to become Africa Action, Knight started development of the AAAP up at MSU.<sup>22</sup>

The creation of the AAAP combined the efforts of Wiley, Root and Knight. The AAAP in its preliminary form started in 2004 and was never primarily about preserving the records of the ACOA. Root and Knight

stressed that point to me recently in email correspondence.<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Davis, who as previously mentioned had been the Executive Director of the ACOA, and Dumisani Kumalo, also an émigré from South Africa, who worked over a decade at the ACOA during the height of the movement for sanctions, stressed that, “it is extremely important that the history of the solidarity movement be documented.”<sup>24</sup> While the AAAP website, had advisors like Jennifer Davis, George Houser, David Wiley, Christine Root, Richard Knight, and Dumisani Kumalo, who were all veterans of the movement with numerous contacts; in 2004, the AAAP produced a series of questionnaires designed to help the website locate materials they could archive that would expand that list of contacts even further.<sup>25</sup>

However, the AAAP website did not have the funding to archive huge organizations like the ACOA by itself. The Aluka Project stepped up.<sup>26</sup> Starting in the fall of 2002, JSTOR launched a new non-profit organization, Ithaka. One of Ithaka’s first projects was to create an online archive known as Aluka. Starting in 2003, Aluka’s first theme focused on “Struggles for Freedom,” which collects primary materials from the African liberation struggles in Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.<sup>27</sup> Sometime between 2004 and 2009, Jennifer Davis, Richard Knight, George Houser and various other stakeholders at the ACOA and at the SAC allowed the Aluka Project to digitize many records of the ACOA as well as *Southern Africa* magazine. In exchange, the AAAP got to keep a digital copy of the records.<sup>28</sup> The Aluka Project in an effort to address the digital divide between the Global North and South decided to make it free for Africa and charge a subscription through JSTOR for Western institutions.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile back at MSU, from 2006 to 2009, Root was working at Matrix to transform the AAAP website from one that could only upload pictures to one that could handle documents. Knight and other advisors to the AAAP had painstakingly expanded their collections to numerous NGOs beyond the ACOA by seeking out permissions from members of each NGO.<sup>30</sup> Peter Limb, an anti-Apartheid activist from Australia, who was serving as Africana librarian at MSU during this transition, conducted several oral histories of significant figures within the movement that made their way onto the AAAP website.<sup>31</sup> In 2009, the new version of the

AAAP website which could support documents made its debut.<sup>32</sup>

Today it serves as a digital home to the records of hundreds of NGOs that worked in solidarity with the African liberation and anti-Apartheid movements and offers primary sources of various kinds for free online to scholars throughout the world. The AAAP website increased the variety and coverage of its collections over time. For example, the number of US NGOs with documents archived grew from 106 in 2009 to 380 in 2025.<sup>33</sup> The number of documents held by the AAAP in important NGOs also grew over time. For example, TransAfrica, an important African American NGO involved in the Free South Africa Movement demonstrations that dramatized the call for sanctions by utilizing civil disobedience; their documents grew from five in 2009 to 277 today.<sup>34</sup> To get back to the subject of this paper, the holdings of the ACOA records grew dramatically from when it first became possible to add documents starting in 2009; from 103 to 1,956 documents.<sup>35</sup> While, as several archivists at the AAAP will emphasize, the AAAP was never designed to be primarily an archive for the ACOA as its focus was on the complexity and nuance of the movement as a whole; nonetheless, the AAAP is one of the best sources for ACOA documents other than its physical archive, the Amistad Research Center in New Orleans.

The Swarthmore College Peace Collection is the largest depository for organizations and individuals devoted to peace activism held within the United States. It also hosts some records from the AFSAR (predecessor to ACOA) and ACOA through multiple different manuscript collections, because many of the early officers of both organizations such as George Houser and Homer Jack were pacifists. It has dedicated collections for both organizations though its holdings are limited in comparison to Amistad or the AAAP.<sup>36</sup> It also has boxes or folders mentioning either AFSAR or ACOA or both within the personal papers or organizational papers of others. To give just a few examples. Homer Jack’s papers contain folders with AFSAR and ACOA papers.<sup>37</sup> The Women Strike for Peace Records also includes a folder about the ACOA.<sup>38</sup> While not as extensive, Swarthmore’s holdings are nonetheless significant as will be outlined below. Now that the context has been laid out a few case studies that address the “silences of the

past” within the records of the American Committee on Africa can be brought forth.

This first case study involves AFSAR, which ACOA emerged from. During the Defiance campaign working in solidarity with the ANC, AFSAR distributed sixteen bulletins in the US. Six decades later, this writer happened to notice that the first three bulletins were missing from one of the archives that housed AFSAR papers. I found them in the Swarthmore Peace Collection but they were missing from the AAAP website.<sup>39</sup> The AAAP had thirteen of the bulletins and the first bulletin they had started in August of 1952, but the three found in Swarthmore predated this one as all three were from June or July of 1952; those documents are also numbered one through three. The reason I believe there was confusion years later by archivists is that the first three bulletins have a different heading; “Bulletin of the Campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws,” as opposed to “Americans for South African Resistance,” for bulletins four through sixteen. The first three are also credited to the National Action Committee of the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress. But at the end of Bulletin two and three it says, explicitly, “This Bulletin is distributed in America by the Americans for South African Resistance.”<sup>40</sup> Also, the only way the math works out to have sixteen bulletins total is to include these first three bulletins. When I contacted one of the archivists of the AAAP website, Richard Knight, he graciously acknowledged the oversight and even credited me with digitizing and providing them to the AAAP.<sup>41</sup> As noted above, Mr. Knight had worked at the ACOA and at The Africa Fund during the 1980s and 90s, but these documents predated his involvement by nearly thirty years. It was difficult to reestablish the proper context of these historical documents and took over six decades as well as steadfast effort by both an archivist and researcher working together to correct the record.

After the Defiance Campaign ended in 1953, AFSAR reorganized as ACOA dedicated to the emerging independence struggles on the African continent. During the early years, the ACOA traveled to many conferences at the forefront of the independence struggles. For example, the ACOA attended all three All African People’s Conference (AAPC) meetings held in Accra, Tunis, and in Cairo. At these conferences, there were representatives of every major independence struggle

throughout the continent and the ACOA met with many of them establishing relationships that would last decades. After each conference, its executive director George Houser wrote a report about ACOA’s experiences there. Each report is a contemporaneous examination of the issues debated by the African delegates of the conference, a sampling of who Houser met with, as well as how the conference fit in with the East-West struggle of the Cold War. Another case study of the phenomenon of lost records that this article concerns itself with is that in the report about the second AAPC meeting, produced in March of 1960, in the section entitled, “The Soviet in Africa,” Houser began a description of the program for Soviet scholarships that African students were able to take advantage of; however, it is marred by a typographical error where a phrase, “Students from these parts of European-dominated Africa are willing to make these arrangements because they are so hungry for education, because full scholarships are . . . ,” is repeated five times.<sup>42</sup> The next page picks up discussing how the Soviets are aiding African governments in other ways and Houser speculates that because of this aid the “Soviet Union will make great gains in the years ahead.”<sup>43</sup> But there is a gap in the discussion for one who is interested in the concerns of African liberation movements, especially during the Year of Africa, including African attitudes toward the Soviet Union; some necessary context has been lost.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the ACOA hosted numerous African leaders from Kenya and the Central African Federation (composed of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland; or today’s Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi) on speaking tours of the United States. The third case study involves these speaking tours. At the time, Kenya was undergoing the Mau Mau Uprising so the ACOA invited Tom Mboya to give an African perspective of the situation in Kenya. ACOA’s organ, *Africa Today*, wrote an article about The Emergency in 1954, which by that point had already resulted in 531 Africans executed and about 40,000 detained in concentration camp-like detention centers.<sup>44</sup> According to a report produced by the ACOA on the Central African Federation, it had only formed in 1953; prior to that, the two Rhodesias and Nyasaland had been separate colonies.<sup>45</sup> Southern Rhodesia was in the mold

of Apartheid South Africa with its policies towards the African majority whereas in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland the African majority participated more fully in the economic and political life of their colonies; so African opposition to the formation of the Federation was immediate. Many of the leaders the ACOA invited from the Federation had participated in the AAPC meeting held in Accra, Ghana, in December 1958. That next spring the white authorities feared the ideas that those leaders had learned during that conference; even though the conference had emphasized Gandhian nonviolence to achieve political ends. As a result of that fear, those white officials arrested many of the liberation leaders and declared a Federation-wide emergency; the equivalent of declaring martial law where African political organizations were banned and protests were disallowed.<sup>46</sup> The Devlin Report, conducted by a royal commission of the British Crown, confirmed that the fears that had caused the emergency were largely baseless and the actions of the settler police forces were in many instances excessively violent.<sup>47</sup> On their release, months later, these liberation leaders toured the US and spoke at numerous stops around the country.

While the ACOA has some records from these tours, their records are nonetheless incomplete. This writer recently wrote a chapter for Routledge about the American travels of Tom Mboya from Kenya, Dr. Hastings Banda from Malawi, and Kenneth Kaunda from Zambia sponsored by the ACOA, but I was forced to limit the article to those speaking tours because those records were the best preserved.<sup>48</sup> Even those trips, with the best preserved evidence, presented their own evidentiary problems that will be highlighted below. Many of the trips by other liberation leaders had to be left on that chapter's cutting room floor because it would have been difficult to include them based on how little of their trips survived the archive. The records for these speaking tours are stored mainly at Amistad Research Center. The AAAP has only scattered remnants from these trips and the collections at Swarthmore I perused have nothing or almost nothing about them. At Amistad, within the American Committee on Africa records, the speaking tour records are stored in a few locations. There is a box containing the Speaker's Bureau, which is how the ACOA organized and referred to these tours at the time. The records for each tour are also stored in boxes

dedicated to each African nation—i.e., in boxes for Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, and Zimbabwe.

The tours documented in that forthcoming chapter, Mboya, Banda, and Kaunda, as noted above had much better evidence, yet I struggled to capture their travels utilizing their voices because many of their speeches were never recorded. Just to give an example, according to an *Africa Today* article summing up Mboya's 1959 tour, he "arrived in the United States for a five-week tour. Thirty-five days and about one hundred speeches later he returned home. He had crisscrossed the United States, giving as many as six addresses a day, from New York City to San Francisco, Boston to Miami Beach"; yet only a couple of those 100 speeches made it into the archive.<sup>49</sup> As for Hastings Banda, while a pretty detailed itinerary survives, no speeches survived the archive; though the ACOA did provide Banda the opportunity to pen an article in *Africa Today* where he expressed his views.<sup>50</sup> To write that chapter I had to largely rely on contemporary press coverage that was racially biased; reading closely and deeply against the grain. Articles from publications like *Time* or *Life* magazine were suffused with assumptions that Africans could not govern themselves and that colonialism had been a positive influence on Africa.

The ACOA records at Amistad, in addition to an itinerary and biography, do have a speech by Kenneth Kaunda delivered at the conclusion of his tour providing a glimpse into his perspective.<sup>51</sup> However, there was one unfortunate oversight left out of the ACOA archive. Fortunately, I found it in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) papers microfilm.<sup>52</sup> During his tour in the spring of 1960, he visited the South while the student sit-in movement erupted across the region. I found a poster announcing a meeting with Kaunda held in Atlanta, sponsored by the SCLC led by Martin Luther King Jr., under the auspices of the American Committee on Africa, where it emphasized Kaunda was "especially eager to meet the leaders and participants in the Student Movement."<sup>53</sup> Atlanta, next to Nashville, was the most important center of the Student Movement towards civil rights in the United States; the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) formed in Atlanta that spring. Yet, that document, perhaps one of the most concrete examples

of the linkages between American civil rights and African liberation to exist, is not present in any ACOA archive.

Kanyama Chiume of Malawi and Joshua Nkomo of Zimbabwe did a tour starting in November of 1959. This tour was left on my forthcoming chapter's cutting room floor because it would have been difficult to write about their travels through their eyes since so few records from their perspectives survived in the archive. In Zimbabwe's box, in a folder dedicated to their tour, it appears that the ACOA wrote a newsletter to their subscribers announcing their tour.<sup>54</sup> ACOA also issued a press release announcing their arrival for a six-week tour starting October 14, 1959.<sup>55</sup> That folder in Amistad also includes a fairly detailed itinerary spelling out not just where they were going but what they were going to do there.<sup>56</sup> It includes a basic biography for both Chiume and Nkomo and provides the context for why they are touring the US; presumably for press consumption.<sup>57</sup> The box containing the Speaker's Bureau files has a folder dedicated to this tour which has a clipped *Washington Post* article about their tour.<sup>58</sup> That is the extent of the documents chronicling their tour. *Africa Today* mentions their tour twice: the first article gives brief biographies of them; the second article describes the tour as "very successful."<sup>59</sup> What is largely missing from the archives is the voices of Chiume and Nkomo; that was largely lost over time. As that second *Africa Today* article notes, "For six weeks they spoke to university and other audiences from Massachusetts to California," yet no evidence of those speeches survived the archive.<sup>60</sup> However, in the box dedicated to Malawi, in a folder dedicated to this tour, there is a pamphlet written by Chiume, entitled, "Nyasaland demands Secession and Independence: An Appeal to Africa."<sup>61</sup> That somewhat restores Chiume's voice. The AAAP has a copy of a pamphlet published by ACOA in which both Chiume and Nkomo expressed their thoughts on the Federation.<sup>62</sup> In the interests of fairness, the ACOA also invited Roy Welensky, then the Prime Minister of the

Federation, as well as Garfield Todd, the former Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia, to contribute to the discussion. While Welensky and Todd, both moderate reformers, argued for multiracial democracy and for cautious progress, Nkomo and Chiume would have none of it—the two men laid out their case for why the Federation should end and majority rule should be granted. Chiume argued that "multiracialism" was merely propaganda from the white minority to hold back the black majority's struggle for independence and their quest for "human dignity and recognition as persons in their own country" after seven decades of white domination.<sup>63</sup> Nkomo, a future vice president of an independent Zimbabwe, placed the struggle for independence in Southern Rhodesia in the larger context of the struggle for freedom across Asia and Africa. He argued that to stand in the way of the "wild fire" of independence was to "court disastrous consequences."<sup>64</sup> Fortunately, that *Africa Today* pamphlet about the Central African Federation exists, otherwise Nkomo's voice, at least in the ACOA archive, would be entirely lost to time.

The American Committee on Africa records demonstrates that not all "silences of the past" are malicious. Some are merely mistakes like typographical errors. Some are just a reflection on the fact that the real world has practical limitations on the number of records that can be preserved. Some are a reflection that context is lost over time. Others a reflection of the fact that historical figures have no idea what later historians will find valuable as historical evidence. The staffs at Amistad, the AAAP, and Swarthmore are dedicated professionals who work closely with researchers to help one find material relevant to their topic. Luckily with dedication and hard work researchers and archivists can often make up for some of these inevitable "silences of the past," perhaps rediscovering that lost context.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> ACOA, Congress of Racial Equality, National Student Christian Federation, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Students for a Democratic Society, "Dollars in Chase Manhattan Bank Support South African Racism," November 1966, accessed on November 14, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record/210-849-29572/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gulf Boycott Coalition, accessed on November 14, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/organization/210-813-657/>.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Knight, ACOA and Africa Fund, "Unified List of United States Companies Doing Business in South Africa and Namibia, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition," 1988, accessed on November 14, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record/210-849-30538/>. ACOA published the *Student Anti-Apartheid Newsletter* from 1979 to 1987 to help connect the various local student

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groups across the country through establishing “inter-movement communication,” accessed on November 14, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/browse/results/?title=newsletter=Student+Anti-Apartheid+Newsletter>. The quote is from the first issue dated to December 1979. The ACOA also published the *ACOA Action News*, from 1977 to 1996, to inform the public on “how you can aid in influencing events,” accessed on November 14, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/browse/results/?title=newsletter=ACOA+Action+News>. The quote was from page 1 of issue No. 1 from July/August 1977.

<sup>4</sup> Anti-Apartheid Movement (London), American Committee on Africa records addendum, 1949-2001, Sub-series 3-Organizations, 1967-2000, Box 71, Folders 1 and 2, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana; Anti-Apartheid Bewegung (Austria, Netherlands, West Germany), ACOA Addendum, Sub-Series 3, Box 70, Folders 13-15, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana; Anti-Apartheid Movement (Ireland), ACOA Addendum, Sub-Series 3, Box 70, Folder 19, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

<sup>5</sup> William Minter, Gail Hovey, and Charles Cobb, eds., *No Easy Victories: African Liberation and American Activists over a Half Century, 1950-2000* (Africa World Press, Inc., 2008). The Council on African Affairs also dominated the 50s.

<sup>6</sup> See also: John S. Saul, *On Building a Social Movement: The North American Campaign for Southern African Liberation Revisited* (Africa World Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> African Liberation Support Committee, accessed on November 15, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/organization/210-813-780/>.

<sup>8</sup> Free South Africa Movement, accessed on November 15, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/organization/210-813-110/>. See also: David L. Hostetter, *Movement Matters: American Anti-Apartheid Activism and the Rise of Multicultural Politics* (Routledge, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Davis, Interview by author, interview 1, August 11, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Davis, Interview 1, August 11, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> “American Committee on Africa records,” finding aid, Amistad Research Center, accessed on May 21, 2025, <https://amistad-finding-aids.tulane.edu/repositories/2/resources/109>.

<sup>13</sup> “American Committee on Africa records addendum,” finding aid, accessed on May 21, 2025, <https://amistad-finding-aids.tulane.edu/repositories/2/resources/8>.

<sup>14</sup> “African Activist Archive Project Advisory Committee Members, David Wiley,” accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/about/>.

<sup>15</sup> David Wiley, e-mail to Zac Peterson, “RE: Dave’s Reply,” May 25, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> “A Petition of Concerned Africanist Scholars Addressed to the President and Congress,” November 1976,

accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record/210-849-20262/>.

<sup>17</sup> David Wiley, e-mail to Zac Peterson, “RE: Dave’s Reply,” May 25, 2025.

<sup>18</sup> “Christine Root, MSU Project Manager,” accessed on May 20, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/about/>; Christine Root, e-mail to Zac Peterson, “RE: Chris’ work between WOA and AAAP,” May 25, 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Christine Root, e-mail to Zac Peterson, “RE: Chris’ work between WOA and AAAP,” May 25, 2025.

<sup>20</sup> “Boycott Allegria Wine,” accessed on May 21, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record/210-849-20227/>.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Knight, interview by author, July 29, 2016; “Richard Knight, CV,” accessed on May 21, 2025, <https://richardknight.homestead.com/files/cv.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Knight, e-mail to Zac Peterson, “RE: African Activist archive origins,” May 19, 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Christine Root, e-mail to Richard Knight and Zac Peterson, “RE: African Activist archive origins,” May 19, 2025. See also: Richard Knight, “The African Activist Archive Project: Preserving the History of the Solidarity Movement,” *Peacework Magazine*, issue 382 (February 2008), accessed on November 15, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121017063342/www.peaceworkmagazine.org/print/913>.

<sup>24</sup> This quote is from a letter Kumalo wrote to David Wiley that was placed on the AAAP website home page. It is no longer present on the modern homepage but was there in 2004. “African Activist Archive,” accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20041120193048/http://www.africanactivist.msu.edu/>.

<sup>25</sup> “African Activist Archive, Questionnaires,” accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20041210033848/http://africanactivist.msu.edu/questionnaires.php>.

<sup>26</sup> “Aluka: Struggles for Freedom in Southern Africa Collection,” *ASA News*, April 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Allen Isaacman, Premesh Lalu, and Thomas Nygren, “Digitization, History, and the Making of a Postcolonial Archive of Southern African Liberation Struggles: The Aluka Project,” *Africa Today* 52, no. 2 (2005): 55-77.

<sup>28</sup> Christine Root, e-mail to Zac Peterson, “RE: African Activist archive origins,” May 24, 2025.

<sup>29</sup> Isaacman, Lalu, and Nygren, “Digitization,” 59.

<sup>30</sup> Christine Root, e-mail to Richard Knight and Zac Peterson, “RE: African Activist archive origins,” May 19, 2025.

<sup>31</sup> For example, Interview with Frank Beeman, by David Wiley and Peter Limb, December 12, 2003, accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record/210-849-19626/>.

<sup>32</sup> “African Activist Archive Project,” accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090423122720/http://africanactivist.msu.edu/aboutus.php>.

<sup>33</sup> “Browse,” accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090326003445/http://africa>

[africanactivist.msu.edu/browse.php](http://africanactivist.msu.edu/browse.php); “Browse/U.S. Organizations,” accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/browse/us-organizations/>.

<sup>34</sup>“Browse,” accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090326003445/http://africanactivist.msu.edu/browse.php>; “Browse/U.S. Organizations,” accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/browse/us-organizations/>.

<sup>35</sup> “Browse,” accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090326003445/http://africanactivist.msu.edu/browse.php>; “Browse/U.S. Organizations,” accessed on May 25, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/browse/us-organizations/>.

<sup>36</sup> American Committee on Africa (hereafter, ACOAC). Collected Document Group: Category A, SCPC-CDG-A. Swarthmore College Peace Collection; Americans for South African Resistance, 1952-1953. Collected Document Group: Category A, SCPC-CDG-A. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

<sup>37</sup> ACOAC, 1953-1955, Box: Series VI: 14 [offsite SCPC-6077]. Homer A. Jack Papers, SCPC-DG-063. Swarthmore College Peace Collection; Americans for South African Resistance, 1952-1953, Box: Series VI: 14 [offsite SCPC-6077]. Homer A. Jack Papers, SCPC-DG-063. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

<sup>38</sup> ACOAC, Box: DG 115: Series C.2: 2. Women Strike for Peace Records, SCPC-DG-115. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

<sup>39</sup> “Bulletins: Americans for South African Resistance,” accessed on May 20, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/browse/results/?title=newsletter=Bulletin%3A+Americans+for+South+African+Resistance>; Americans for South African Resistance, 1952-1953. Periodical Collection, Collected Document Group: Category A, SCPC-CDG-A. Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

<sup>40</sup> AFSAR, Bulletin of the Campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws, No. 2, Late June or early July 1952, accessed on November 16, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record/210-849-24823/>; AFSAR, Bulletin of the Campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws, No. 3, July 1952, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record/210-849-24824/>, accessed on November 16, 2025.

<sup>41</sup> Zac Peterson, e-mail to Richard Knight, “RE: Missing AFSAR Bulletins,” December 19, 2016; See also: AFSAR, Bulletin of the Campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws, No. 1, June 1952, accessed on May 20, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record/210-849-24821/>.

<sup>42</sup> George Houser, “A Report on George Houser’s Trip to Africa,” March 1960, American Committee on Africa Records (hereafter, ACOA Records), accessed on May 18, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record/210-849-30605/>.

<sup>43</sup> Houser, “A Report on George Houser’s Trip to Africa.”

<sup>44</sup> “Executions and Detentions in Kenya,” *Africa Today* 1, no. 3 (Aug.-Sept. 1954): 6.

<sup>45</sup> Channing Richardson, Kanyama Chume, Joshua Nkomo, Roy Welensky, Garfield Todd, and Guy Clutton-Brock, *The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland: The Future of a Dilemma*, *Africa Today* Pamphlet 4, 1959, accessed on June 1, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record/210-849-29534/>.

<sup>46</sup> Richardson et al., *The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland*.

<sup>47</sup> “Report of the Nyasaland Commission of Inquiry,” July 1959 (colloquially known as the Devlin Report), American Committee on Africa records, Series III, Box 91-Malawi, folder 44-Printed ephemera, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana

<sup>48</sup> Zachary C. Peterson, “‘Through African Eyes:’ African Liberation Travellers and the American Committee on Africa,” in *Decolonising Travel Studies: Sources and Approaches*, ed. Natalya Din-Kariuki and Guido van Meersbergen, *Hakluyt Society Studies in the History of Travel* (New York: Routledge, 2026).

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<sup>52</sup> Southern Christian Leadership Conference (hereafter, SCLC), “A Rare Treat from Africa: Hear and Meet Mr. Kenneth Kaunda,” May 5, 1960, SCLC Records, Part 2, series III-Wyatt Tee Walker, sub-series 2, reel 4, box 36, folder 31-Kenneth Kaunda, 1960.

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<sup>54</sup> ACOA, Dear Friend newsletter, September 7, 1959, ACOA Records, Series III, Box 151-Zimbabwe, Folder 67-Speaker’s Bureau, 1959 Chiome and Nkomo Tour, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

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<sup>56</sup> Itinerary Chiome-Nkomo Tour, October to November 1959, ACOA Records, Series III, Box 151-Zimbabwe, Folder 67-Speaker’s Bureau, 1959 Chiome and Nkomo Tour, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

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<sup>60</sup> “Inside ACOA,” *Africa Today*, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Kanyama Chiume, “Nyasaland Demands Secession and Independence: An Appeal to Africa,” ACOA Records, Series III, Box91-Malawi, Folder 42-Kanyama Chiume Tour, 1959, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

<sup>62</sup> Richardson et al., “The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland,” 23-39.

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## The 35<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the World History Association Incheon, Korea | June 25-27, 2026

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### Conference Theme

#### “Closed Borders and Global Connections: Being Global after Globalization”

The world is changing, and the discipline of World History must respond to those changes. In the 2005 article “Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History,” one of the founders of the World History Association, Jerry Bentley, noted that the world has been moving towards a state of globalization as long as the field has existed, noting that the general narrative is that “the intensity and range of cross-cultural interactions has generally increased over time.” Yet he also praised modern historical scholarship for its “openness to examination and criticism from all angles.”

The world history he called for, he writes, “does not pretend to know the end of history.” Indeed, we find ourselves today in a world that many world historians did not predict: one that remains intensely interconnected through trade, migration, culture, and shared planetary futures, while globalization as a narrative and as a political project has faltered. Nationalism, protectionism, deportations, and regional conflict have all surged in ways that challenge the logic of global integration. In teaching and scholarly work alike, this reality asks us to rethink what it means to teach and study the global past in a world that no longer embraces globalization as an ideal or inevitability.

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The Program Committee of the 35th Annual Meeting of the World History Association invites proposals that explore this new terrain. We ask: how can we write, teach, and think about world history in a moment characterized both by global entanglement and anti-globalist politics? What historical precedents —such as empires, invasions, epidemics, diasporas, trade routes, or cross-cultural encounters—might help us imagine a world that is connected but not necessarily globalized in the modern sense? What models of both interconnection and interdiction have emerged or persisted outside the framework of globalization? And how might the changing present force us to rethink historiographical frameworks about the past?

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# Understanding the Communist Experience Through Gaming: *Papers, Please* as Pedagogical Tool

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In recent years, educators' desire to more successfully reach our students has led to the adoption of new pedagogical approaches to supplement traditional lecture-based instruction. Among these new pedagogies, the introduction of role-playing games (RPGs) has attracted particular attention among historians. Countless RPGs, whether physical tabletop RPGs (ITRPGs) or computer-based video games, ask players to engage with a character or set of characters in a defined historical context. For historians, the potential goals of such an exercise are myriad: encouraging students to consider individual agency, exploring the idea of historical contingency, or even simply trying to get students to grasp the lived experience of the past in the way that a standard lecture or a dry primary source might not. This essay considers my own use of the historical RPG puzzle simulation game, *Papers, Please*, to not only engage with the above-mentioned goals, but also to encourage students to dig more deeply into some of the major issues of Soviet and twentieth-century East European histories. Although these issues are deeply embedded into the way that Slavic, East European, and Eurasian studies scholars approach our field of study—the relationship of the citizen to the state, the question of perpetrators as victims and victims as perpetrators, the nature of totalitarianism—they have wide applicability to scholars of other times and places. Therefore, while this essay will tend to approach the use of *Papers, Please* in the classroom from the perspective of a historian of Modern Russia and the Soviet Union, it nevertheless may resonate with those coming from different scholarly backgrounds.

## *Papers, Please*

Designed by game developer Lucas Pope and first released on Windows and OS X in August 2013, *Papers, Please* is officially labeled as a “puzzle simulation” game. In the game, the player takes on the role of a nameless, faceless immigration officer posted at a passport control station at a border-crossing in the fictional communist nation of Arstotzka. The primary focus of the game is the

player's daily routine of processing migrants, some of whom are Arstotzkans returning home, others who are attempting to immigrate permanently, coming for temporary work, for a visit, or for any number of plausible or non-plausible reasons. Over the course of up to 30 days, the player's task becomes more and more complicated, as changing bureaucratic procedures force the player first to check only passports, but then to also check visas, to check work permits, eventually to weigh and measure potential migrants, to check for contraband, and a variety of other increasingly specific and overwhelming criteria. Other concerns related directly to the processing of migrants might include different procedures for individuals from different countries, requests from superiors to allow or disallow certain individuals regardless of their documents, or the heartbreaking stories of migrants themselves—some of whom are attempting to escape sexual slavery or reconnect with lost family members using falsified or expired documents. Other migrants are active in a revolutionary movement and will try and recruit the player character, citing the totalitarian nature of the Arstotzkan regime. Although the player has a certain number of “mistakes” that can be made (whether accidentally or on purpose), too many mistakes can have severe consequences—including the dreaded “Game Over” screen.



*Papers, Please* logo. Source: Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons,  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Papers,\\_Please.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Papers,_Please.svg)

Behind the work of processing migrants, and in many ways elevating the stakes of that endeavor, is the reality of the player character's life outside of the passport control station. As it turns out, the player has a family—a wife, two children, and a mother-in-law. As the only source of income for the family, the player is incentivized to try and process as many migrants as possible as quickly as possible—each of the thirty days has a time limit, and players are paid based on the number of individuals they process. The less law-abiding player might also take bribes in order to supplement their income—although there is always a danger of being caught. Returning home at the end of the day, the player must decide how to spend their meager earnings. Should I heat my home tonight? Does everyone need to eat today? How many days can I hold off purchasing medicine before the consequences for my family become dire? As the player gets further into the game's timeline, there are opportunities to move into more luxurious apartments with cheaper heating costs but more expensive rents. Knowing that it's not just the player character's life that is on the line, but also that of their family, adds further to the moral quandaries that the player faces when processing migrants. In a society where your very life depends upon quietly and effectively doing your job, why should you put the lives of migrants over that of yourself and your family?

### Popular Reception and Scholarly Literature

*Papers, Please* has received near-universal acclaim from gaming media outlets, the majority of which cite both the game's satisfying gameplay and the complexity of the game's narrative.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, however, *Papers, Please* also received significant coverage in non-gaming outlets, with articles appearing in NPR, *Slate*, *The Ringer*, and *Financial Times* upon release and continuing over the following decade. These pieces vary in their details but have tended to maintain the “review” format wherein the author recounts their experiences in playing the game, interspersing this with commentary about broader issues that the game raises. Especially after 2016, these pieces have tended to become explicit in their connection of the game's themes with contemporary geopolitical issues such as the first Trump administration's immigration

policies, the European migrant crisis, and the United Kingdom's plan to deport refugees to Rwanda.<sup>2</sup>

What is notable about these articles from a pedagogical perspective is that, despite leads like “How *Papers, Please*—a video game about border agents—illustrates the cruelty of our immigration system”—much of the discussion in these articles is nuanced rather than nakedly partisan. Critically, several authors note how the internal logic of the game itself forces players, who might otherwise feel sympathy for those migrants who must be turned away or detained, to “choose between responsibility to your family, your job and your conscience.” One author notes that, “over time, I sense myself hardening” and that, “if Hannah Arendt had made a game to explore the banality of evil, it would look something like this.”<sup>3</sup> A different article, citing Lucas Pope's comments about his development of the game, asserts that whereas “one point of *Papers, Please* is to force the player to reflect on the dehumanizing aspects of immigration systems,” players may instead choose to “embrace as fun the act of turning away migrants fleeing violence and enduring hardship for a chance at a better life.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a common theme of these articles is their reflection on the game as “humbling because of the way it depicts how easily a person's morality can become subsumed by the machinery of state power.”<sup>5</sup>

Scholars have tended to approach *Papers, Please* similarly, with most of the existing academic literature focusing on ethical concerns. Common avenues of inquiry revolve around the potential for video games to encourage moral behavior, the ability of players to engage in ethical self-reflection, and the overall efficacy of utilizing role-playing exercises to achieve pedagogical goals related to ethics/morality/sociopolitical awareness.<sup>6</sup> A smaller trend in the scholarship of *Papers, Please* instead focuses on the game's depiction of immigration and border control. These studies consider how the game models real life institutions and procedures, how it approaches the idea of the border as a liminal space, and the way in which the player engages in the process of fictive nation-building through their enforcement of state policy.<sup>7</sup> Although the quasi-historical setting of the game is mentioned in these articles, it is not discussed at any length, and there are few broader explorations of the game's historicity.<sup>8</sup>

If *Papers, Please* has not received much scholarly attention from the historical perspective, it is not for lack of a broader scholarship on historical gaming. Beyond the broader questions of roleplaying, gamification, and student engagement that are central to bigger pedagogical debates about the use of games in the classroom, historically-oriented literature explores how history games allow students to interact with and gain a better understanding of the past.<sup>9</sup> Some of this literature focuses on games designed for pedagogical use, such as the *Reacting to the Past* series, while others have instead focused on the applicability of commercial games to the history classroom, from *Oregon Trail* to *Red Dead Redemption 2*.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, scholarship examines how historical games can be utilized to foster a deeper understanding of broad historical processes and/or the lived experience of individuals living in the past. Historical gaming thus both broaches potential topics and sites of knowledge for students and helps to reinforce and make more relatable issues that have been explored through other approaches in the classroom.

Among scholars of Russia and the Soviet Union, gamification has recently emerged as a topic of pedagogical discussions. Barbara Allen, Professor of History at LaSalle University, has written about the use of both published and unpublished *Reacting to the Past* games in her Russian history courses, emphasizing the games' usefulness in exploring the idea of historical contingency. When discussing her use of a RTTP game focusing on the February Revolution of 1917, Alen notes that the students' uncertainty about the historical context of the revolution and the ideological considerations of those individuals whom they were roleplaying as was actually a positive feature of the simulation because it mirrored the same sort of uncertainties that plagued the historical actors of 1917 themselves.<sup>11</sup> Alexis Peri, Associate Professor of History at Boston University, has written about how "three short rounds" of a modified version of the boardgame *Monopoly* "taught my students what the lumbering article I assigned explained over 25 dense pages." As Peri notes, the experience of historical gaming empowered students to engage more fully with academic readings and "conjured within them an ability to imagine and empathize with a range of Russians' reactions" to the economic crisis of the early 1990s.<sup>12</sup>

### Using *Papers, Please* in the History Classroom

I first incorporated a structured use of *Papers, Please* in my Summer 2024 "Living Under Communism" course. A five-week, fully-online and asynchronous course, "Living Under Communism" was designed to introduce students to the lived experience of citizens of communist states (chiefly the Soviet Union) through the exploration of topics that were intentionally eclectic, unexpected, and seemingly-unconnected. Students encountered scholarly and primary sources about gay cruising in Moscow, the popularity of astrology and mysticism, criminality and black-market activity, and the varied delights of the average Soviet kitchen, all of which highlighted distinct and often surprising aspects of everyday life under communism. Each week students were asked to consider the weekly materials and to respond to a set of open-ended questions on the class discussion board. Questions required that students unpack weekly topics analytically but also encouraged them to observe and reflect on what they had learned. For example, a student response would explore the ambiguities surrounding which elements of homosexual activities were policed and which were not but would often also express a sort of wonder about how Soviet gay culture was both familiar and alien to its Western counterpart.

I used *Papers, Please* as both a supplement to weekly topics and as a tool for exploring overarching themes which connected all elements of Soviet citizens' lived experiences. Students were asked to play throughout the class and to keep a journal of their experiences, with smaller entries devoted to each play session and larger ones to come at the end of each in-class week and in-game completed playthrough. I was open with students about the experimental nature of my use of the game, explaining that I did not have any particular set of expectations of outcomes beyond a sincere commitment to playing the game and recording their thoughts. I did, however, give them some guidelines that I hoped would be helpful: how best to start the game, how long to dedicate to each play session, how to approach in-game success or failure. I also told them about my own history with the game, how I found it intriguing but frustrating, how I rarely "won" or even successfully completed a playthrough. Because many students had previously identified themselves as either completely or partially

uncomfortable with video games, I was hopeful that talking about my own experiences would help them to feel more at ease with the idea that they didn't need to be "good" at the game for the exercise to be useful as a learning device.

When reviewing students' journal entries, I was pleased to see that many found the game relevant to the overall themes of the course. One student succinctly noted that the game taught that "you are not without agency" even as "an agent for an authoritarian government." Another noted that "the difficulties paying bills, the strict monitoring of potential rebellious activities, and so many other things reflect various topics discussed in many of our other in-class documents." A third student reflected on how their approach to the game changed over the session: first, they tried to stick to the rules and play the game "by the book"; then, they tried riskier strategies, trying to "beat" the regime; finally, as a result of numerous losing sessions, they decided simply to embrace being as strict as possible so as to try and survive the game's timer. Although this student did not directly comment on how their own shifting attitudes might have reflected the thoughts, feelings, and actions of citizens of communist regimes, their narrative provides clear evidence that *Papers, Please* might be effectively used towards that learning objective. This is further supported by another student's response to the same "set up to fail" sort of feeling that the game establishes: "I'm tired of being a rule follower. My government treats me like shit and the people constantly hate me when they enter my place of work. I am taking all of the money and working the system in my favor."

In terms of the overall applicability of *Papers, Please* to the study of authoritarian regimes (especially, but not exclusively of the communist variety), student reactions to the games reveal three major sites of relevance. First and most concretely is the way in which *Papers, Please* effectively, although exaggeratedly, depicts its characters' living standards. Numerous students wrote journal entries in which they complained about their meager income, and how it was difficult to cover the necessary expenses of rent, heating, food, and medicine. Failure to balance your finances inevitably leads to deaths, and may even end your game—after all, not providing for one's family is criminal. While life in the Eastern Bloc and the

Soviet Union was not quite as dire as depicted in *Papers, Please* by the 1980s, it is true that shortages of goods were a feature of everyday life. One student reflected that they "found the pressure to take bribes, and the struggle to make ends meet really valuable in explaining the participation in the secondary economy." They further explained that "given how hard it has been to keep up with paying for everything, [being offered a bribe] is not an unwelcome situation." Another simply stated that "it is difficult for the player to feed his family or afford to turn on the heat at times, so this game demonstrates the necessity of occasional bribes... it seems like corruption is a natural mechanism of this country." These sorts of realizations fully conform with our understanding of the black market and corruption in late communist society.

A second, more abstract concept that *Papers, Please* communicates is the constant uncertainty of living under a regime whose rules are subject to instantaneous and arbitrary change. Even where rules exist and are legible, they might be extremely difficult or even impossible to follow. Almost all students noted in their journal entries that they had difficulty in keeping up with the constant changes to the passport procedure as rules were added or modified on each day. Although most students simply responded to the rule changes as a gameplay element, a few noted the theoretical ability of the state to change policy or law—i.e., things that may drastically impact an individual's life—on a whim must have introduced serious uncertainty into people's lives. One student connected the opacity of Soviet bureaucracy and law to Lydia Chukovskaya's *Sofia Petrovna*, which she had read in a previous course with me. In the novel, the titular character tries in vain to find out what happened to her son, who had been arrested for unclear reasons in the era of the Great Purges in the 1930s Soviet Union. The student went further and explained that her character in *Papers, Please*, in denying entry to foreign travelers, was ultimately doing the same thing which the nameless, faceless bureaucrats did to Sofia Petrovna: deny the request without much more than a one- or two-word explanation. Explaining that "when I would deny people . . . [I didn't have] to give a real reason why they weren't allowed to pass through," the student underscored the extent to which authoritarian regimes were purposely unknowable to their citizenry.

Students frequently noted in their journals that *Papers, Please* helped them to better understand the challenges that individuals living in authoritarian societies face. In other words, *Papers, Please* helped students to cultivate what I refer to as historical empathy. Most commonly, students find themselves feeling sorry for those individuals who had been denied at the border station, and sometimes felt compelled to break rules to assist those with particularly heart-wrenching stories. One student, himself an immigrant, reflected on how “the game felt very similar to my own experience” with border-crossing. He further explained that he felt like he was personally “betraying” people who simply wanted to enter Arstotzka, and that his unwillingness to correctly do his job led to frequent in-game sanctions and “game over” screens. He ended his journal by stating that, “I was not that good at my job. But at least I can say I understand the things that have to be done in that situation.” The realization that the player character—the border agent who enforces the regime’s rules regardless of their morality—is also an individual navigating life under authoritarianism is an important one. Another student reflected on this realization in a different way, stating, “I feel like my character is probably always tired and I am not sure if they ever get the chance to eat themselves. The game does not say anything about if I am getting sick, cold or hungry so I’m not sure how the character really feels. Is this to show that the character can’t think about themselves because they have to support their family, or is this just a gaming flaw?”

Reflecting on my experience using *Papers, Please*, there are several potential ways in which its use as a pedagogical tool in courses exploring authoritarian regimes might be expanded and refined. Although I provided only minimal parameters for students’ use of the game in my class, it may better serve certain course objectives to explicitly pair the game with other course goals. In my course,

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sam Machkovech, “*Papers, Please* Review: Paper trail of tears,” *Arstechnica*, August 8, 2013, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2013/08/papers-please-review-paper-trail-of-tears/>; Justin McElroy, “*Papers, Please* Review: Mundane tyrant,” *Polygon*, August 9, 2013, <https://www.polygon.com/2013/8/9/4606420/papers-please-review-mundane-tyranny/>; Dan Whitehead, “*Papers,*

students observed connections between the game and some course readings; other instructors might decide to refer to these connections directly and use them as sites for in-class debates or assignments. As I look forward to incorporating *Papers, Please* into my standard Soviet survey course, I anticipate assigning it together with readings on Soviet bureaucracy, the black market, and Soviet border politics. *Papers, Please* also provides fertile ground for a discussion of the classic theory of the “atomization” of society under communism—were citizens so oppressed by the regime and burdened by basic life needs that they could not create meaningful connections with others? Students might not just reflect on the question itself, but on how the game—as well as other media—attempt to answer it.

## Conclusion

*Papers, Please* is a valuable potential tool for exploring the history of the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc, and other authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century. Student responses to the game in my “Living Under Communism” course indicated that it not only gave them greater insight into questions of human agency, but also into specific topics such as the black market, the opacity of authoritarian bureaucracies, and to the everyday lives of citizens. As one student noted, the use of *Papers, Please* allows students to personally “face the daily uncertainties of changing rules and the ongoing struggle to balance duty, morality, and self-preservation . . . [providing] a deeper understanding of authoritarianism, showing that even those who enforce its rules can be victims of the system.” Combined with other elements of a sound pedagogy, *Papers, Please* represents an exceptional and innovative tool which we as scholars and teachers can incorporate into the classroom to further encourage students engage with the complexities of the past.

Please review: Law and border,” *EuroGamer*, August 9, 2013, <https://www.eurogamer.net/papers-please-review/>; Richard Corbett, “*Papers, Please* Review: Stamp of quality,” *IGN*, last modified August 12, 2013, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2013/08/12/papers-please-review>.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Mullis, “*Papers, Please*: A Game That Puts Your Sympathy to the Test,” NPR, November 26, 2013,

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<https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2013/11/10/244413539/papers-please-puts-your-loyalty-sympathy-to-the-test>; Cyrus Nemati, “This Tedious Video Game Will Make You Hate Yourself. You Should Play It,” *Slate*, August 23, 2013, <https://slate.com/technology/2013/08/papers-please-serious-video-game-raises-tricky-moral-questions.html>; Eva-Marie Quinones, “‘There’s Basic Rules. I’m Sorry’: How *Papers, Please* – a video game about border agents – illustrates the cruelty of our immigration system,” *Slate*, July 9, 2019, <https://slate.com/technology/2019/07/papers-please-pewdiepie-jacksepticeye-youtube-border-agent.html>; Jason Concepcion, “‘Papers, Please’ Is a Disturbingly Relevant Video Game About Immigration: The 2013 title puts players in the shoes of a border agent in a fictional dystopian country,” *The Ringer*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.theringer.com/2017/02/09/uncategorized/papers-please-is-a-disturbingly-relevant-video-game-about-immigration-96cda43156af>; Tom Faber, “Papers, Please—a game of agonising choices: The breakout indie title about borders, bureaucracy and survival comes to mobile,” *Financial Times*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/b72cd338-98be-4b94-a0c0-17c7592f6270>.

<sup>3</sup> Faber, “Papers, Please – a game of agonizing choices,” *FT*.

<sup>4</sup> Quinones, “‘There’s Basic Rules. I’m Sorry,’” *Slate*.

<sup>5</sup> Concepcion, “‘Papers, Please’ Is a Disturbingly Relevant Video Game About Immigration,” *The Ringer*.

<sup>6</sup> Beatriz Cabellos, Juan-Ignacio Pozo, Kevin Marín-Rubio, Daniel L. Sánchez, “Do pro-social video games promote moral activity?: an analysis of user reviews of *Papers, Please*,” *Education and Information Technologies* 27 (2022): 11411-442; Matthew Kelly, “The Game of Politics: Examining the Role of Work, Play, and Subjectivity Formation in *Papers, Please*,” *Games and Culture* 13, no. 5 (2018): 459-78; Jess Morrisette, “Glory to Arstotzka: Morality, Rationality, and the Iron Cage of Bureaucracy in *Papers, Please*,” *Game Studies* 17, no. 1 (2017): <https://gamestudies.org/1701/articles/morrisette>; Antranig Sarian, “Ethical Self-Reflection in *Papers, Please*,” *Cultural Science Journal* 11, no. 1 (2019): 41-53.

<sup>7</sup> Gene Carolan, “‘Papers, Please’ – Using a Video Game to explore Experiential Learning and Authentic Assessment in Immigration and Asylum Law,” *Irish Journal of Academic Practice* 9, no. 2 (2021): article 11; Cátia Ferreira and Carla Ganito, “The representation of borders as historic liminal spaces in

digital games: The case of *Papers, Please*,” *OBS\* Journal* 18, no. 1 (2024): 60-72; Gary Kafer, “Gaming Borders: The Rhetorics of Gamification and National Belonging in *Papers, Please*,” *American Literature* 94, no. 1 (2022): 181-209.

<sup>8</sup> *Papers, Please* has been discussed by historians Bob Whitaker and Zach Doleshal on the former’s historical gaming podcast, *History Respawned*. See Bob Whitaker, host, *History Respawned*, podcast, “Papers, Please,” November 3, 2014, <https://www.historyrespawnd.com/home/2018/9/14/papers-please>.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Binczewski, “Finding the Witch: Imaginative Role-Play in the Classroom,” *Fides Et Historia* 55, no. 1/2 (2023): 155-61; Cedric Beidatsch and Susan Broomhall, “Is This the Past? The Place of Role-Play Exercises in Undergraduate History Teaching,” *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 7, no. 1 (2010): article 6; Julia Gressick and Joel B. Langston, “The Gilded Classroom: Using Gamification to Engage and Motivate Undergraduates,” *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 17, no. 3 (2017): 109-23; Jonathan Mozier et al., “Simulation and games: Overcoming the barriers to their use in higher education,” *Active Learning in Higher Education* 10, no. 3 (2010): 207-24.

<sup>10</sup> James Coltrain and Stephen Ramsay, “Can Video Games Be Humanities Scholarship?” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, eds. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (University of Minnesota Press, 2019): 36-45; Michael Grimley et al., “Using computer games for instruction: The student experience,” *Active Learning in Higher Education* 12, no. 1 (2011): 45-56; Hilary Jane Locke and Thomas Ashley Mackay, “‘You Are a True Progressive’: *Red Dead Redemption 2* and the Depiction and Reception of Progressive Era Politics,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 20, no. 1 (2021): 174-93; Jeremiah McCall, “Video Games as Participatory Public History” in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David Dean (Wiley-Blackwell, 2018): 405-16; Sandra Sousa and Ann Neville Miller, “Reacting to the Past Mini Role Play Games,” *The Journal of Faculty Development* 34, no. 3 (2020): 70-1; A. Martin Wainwright, “Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games,” *The History Teacher* 47, no. 4 (August 2014): 579-612.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara C. Allen, “Gaming Russian and Soviet History,” *ASEEES NewsNet* 61, no. 1 (January 2021): 16.

<sup>12</sup> Alexis Peri, “‘Who Wants to be a Billionaire?’ Teaching Russian Capitalism with Monopoly,” *ASEEES NewsNet* 64, no. 6 (November 2024): 18.

# How I Forced a Room Full of Historians to Laugh at a Butt Joke: Genre and Message in a Public History Podcast

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Like many who read the *World History Bulletin*, I've devoted my career to ethical study and preservation of the past. But recently, I deliberately distorted the historical record in my public-facing history podcast, targeting my respected colleagues and friends at the Southeast World History Association (SEWHA).

special, recorded-live-in-front-of-a-studio-audience episode of my podcast.<sup>1</sup> The general theme of the show is "how history helps us understand the strangeness of now." Inverting the famous L. P. Hartley quotation, I called the SEWHA conference session, "The Present is a Foreign Country."<sup>2</sup>



**Historian Doug Sofer records an episode of his podcast, "You Are A Weirdo," at the annual SEWHA Conference. October 25, 2024. Source: The Editors of World History Bulletin.**

My transgression? I edited my podcast to make it sound as if the audience at SEWHA laughed at a butt-joke I'd told.

Here are the facts of my confession. In October 2024, I interviewed the entire SEWHA conference for a

I created my show to defend scholarly history and highlight its insights. Amid digital propaganda, deepfakes, bogus news, and sensationalized amateur podcasts, I wanted to show why professional academic history matters. Understanding today's odd world lets history

challenge our cultural assumptions, much as experiencing foreign norms does. Academic historians gain similar insights by immersing themselves in different past contexts.

I started off the panel doing what I always do these days: urging my fellow professionally trained historians and advanced history students to get better at engaging the public. More than ever, we must explain patiently, engagingly, in as many ways as we can muster, how we use evidence to understand the past. Academic history is on the ropes these days. Outside of academia, people seem to understand little about what historians do for a living. Some 66% of Americans think history is simply memorizing dates, names of leaders, famous battles, and so forth.<sup>3</sup>

In academia, history department budgets are being slashed, and our programs are being mischaracterized as impractical. At SEWHA, I wanted to convey the desperate straits in which our profession finds itself.

“History,” I explained, “is getting its butt kicked.”

I paused dramatically and added slowly, deliberately, doing my best to channel some kind of North American version of John Cleese:

“Insofar as history may be said to have a butt.”

Yep: that was the joke.<sup>4</sup>

I braced myself for the inevitable raucous laughter, expecting everyone to recognize my comic genius.

But nobody laughed. Silence. Crickets.<sup>5</sup>

Except in the episode that I dropped in January 2025, you can hear my colleagues laughing their heads off.<sup>6</sup> To a listener who didn’t know any better, it sounds as if I’ve charmed my audience with the boldness of my quip. They’re delighted as they marvel at what the posterior of history must look like. Maybe they’ve conjured up a double-entendre—something to do with Hegel’s or Francis Fukuyama’s musings about “the end of history.” Either way, they’re clearly laughing at something.

The butt-ugly truth is I spliced their laughter from another part of the session onto this line. By doing so, I made myself the villain—a real-life, modern Lt. Stephen Hauk from *Good Morning Vietnam*, who, in cringy earnestness, pleads with his superior officer,

“Sir, in my heart I know I’m funny.”

In the movie, Bruno Kirby’s Lt. Hauk represents overbearing military bureaucracy, believing his own jokes

are superior to Robin Williams’ irreverence as Sgt. Adrian Cronauer<sup>7</sup>, a real Vietnam War deejay.<sup>8</sup>

Had Hauk lived in the twenty-first century, he would have relished the ease with which he could use software to physically coerce his audiences into laughing.<sup>9</sup> While editing my episode digitally, I took liberties with the raw recording of the SEWHA session. In retrospect, it was pretty ungrateful of me to have been allowed to interview an entire history conference, which had been a very generous gift in itself. It was an entire session at the October 2024 meeting—no concurrent panels. I had more or less the entire conference in attendance to help me put this podcast episode together. The forum’s discussion centered around a single question, stated as follows on the conference program:

Imagine that the historical people you investigate suddenly appeared in the present day. What would surprise them the most about the present-day world, not only technologically but also socially, politically, and culturally? What else would they find strange?<sup>10</sup>

The chat went very well. About a dozen historians and students, at various career stages, shared insights on why professional history matters. They reflected on how odd the present appears in historical context, joked about its potential strangeness to ancestors, and discussed how historical research reveals our current assumptions rest on a young, fragile status quo.

If the history conversation exceeded my expectations, the audio engineering challenge was daunting. I had never interviewed an entire audience before. As host, producer, writer, and sound engineer, I was figuring things out on the fly. I set up two wired mics on desk stands, connected to my laptop through a USB interface, and recorded with Logic Pro, which I learned during my 2022 sabbatical. I arranged everything—laptop, mics, and folding chairs—on a folding table. The room, unfortunately, was large and echoey, more cafeteria than studio.<sup>11</sup> From the moment I saw the venue, I knew extensive editing awaited—what real audio engineers, I hear, do *not* call “post.”<sup>12</sup>

During the live conference session, I had led off with the butt comment, followed by the awkward silence. I'd been a bit rattled by its lack of impact, but I managed to keep going. My many years of telling objectively hilarious jokes to college students have inoculated me to the hush of unimpressed crowds—even though I know in my heart that my jokes are funny.

*Plus*, I reasoned at the time, *they're nervous*. And I had just started recording, so they must have been quiet so as not to interrupt my intro with their rowdy guffawing. Maybe they were just being polite. And perhaps I had brought everyone down a bit when I mentioned the sad state of the history profession. Who could blame them for not laughing at what was an otherwise unmistakably sidesplitting line?

In either case, the show went on.<sup>13</sup> A few minutes later, my initial nervousness melted away, and the process began to flow more naturally. Better still, the audience became increasingly energetic about the topic, and more scholars began to chime in. The hour flew by, and I forgot all about how no one laughed at my initial hilariousness.

Until, that is, I began to edit the episode. I already knew that I'd have to redo my own moderator role in the conversation because I hadn't positioned myself anywhere near my mics during the talk. I was standing and walking around, working the crowd, but I had contributors sit down on either side of the folding table near the two mics. Moreover, *all* of my episodes are heavily edited, even my scripted shows with no interviewees. I make it a standard practice to remove my own “ums,” “ahs,” awkward pauses, my frequent maladroit verbal blunders, and my amateurish involuntary saliva noises. In this episode, thankful for such enthusiastic audience participation, I resolved to make each speaker sound as coherent, clean, and professional as possible. Though my first priority was to represent their comments as faithfully as possible to their intended meaning, I also wanted their words to sound polished and slick. With some digital fiddling, I figured out how to minimize the room's echoes. I found a plugin for Logic Pro that digitally cleaned the gymnasium feel, making it sound instead like a reasonably small classroom. From my home studio, I re-recorded greatly embellished versions of my own moderator comments.<sup>14</sup>

Then I digitally *added* a small amount of additional reverb to my newly recorded track, so it sounded like I was in the same small space as everyone else. All of which is to say that present-day podcasters with a little bit of training and a smattering of technical acumen have at our disposal a massive quiver full of digital arrows, capable of transforming sounds into more or less whatever audio fantasies we can imagine.

My own fantasy was to make myself far more coherent than I'd actually been as a nervous, live moderator. I wrote elaborate executive summaries of each speaker's comments and added transitions between sections. I rearranged some of the conversation to make it flow more logically, and then I even removed an entire (excellent) thread because it didn't fit comfortably with the rest of the session's themes, which made the episode longer than I'd wanted. In short, I attempted to make the entire session as clean and compelling as possible to better align with the podcast genre.

Except for the laughter, I don't believe that any of those additions and subtractions is any more nefarious than any other kind of revision process. I had not transformed the session's content any more than if I had written down the participants' words instead of recording them directly.<sup>15</sup> When we write, we're constantly shuffling words, sentences, and paragraphs around; adding, removing, and subtly altering content for the sake of coherence. That illusion takes place as soon as we record on paper anyone's spoken lines. We clean up the “ums” and the “ahs.” We polish up imprecise vocalizations. We strike from the written record various coughs, breaths, and any other facial noises that happen to get made. If someone mispronounces a word—“expecially,” for example—we remove the “x” in our transcription.<sup>16</sup> In fact, I've edited the very essay you're reading right now scores of times in order to make it clearer, smoother, more coherent, and a better all-around representative of the essay genre.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, if written transcripts and essays take liberties with their contents, most other genres take many, many more. Those of us who study world history understand that each and every genre contains at least some distinctive and fabricated elements. That is why we must be thoroughly familiar with the genre of any primary source to understand it. After all, genres

fundamentally shape the information we consume. When a 2024 report by the National Library of Medicine from the National Institutes of Health claims that “The global tobacco epidemic is one of the most significant public health challenges, claiming the lives of over 8 million people annually,” that statement of fact carries a level of scientific rigor—peer review, repeatability, and so on.<sup>18</sup> By obvious contrast, when a full-color page in a magazine claims that “20,679 physicians say Luckies are less irritating,” we recognize it as a cigarette advertisement.<sup>19</sup> Both sentences claim to be statements of fact about smoking, but identifying the latter as pertaining to the ad genre fundamentally changes how we understand it in contrast to the research report.

The same is true, for instance, when you start reading an account of the seemingly unquenchable lust of St. Mary of Egypt (ca. 344–421 CE). Before the narrative even gets going, you already know that by the end she will trade in her lascivious ways for a life of piety. Why? Because she’s a saint; *it’s right there in her name*. Redemption from one’s sinful lifestyle is always part of the genre of hagiography.

An understanding of genre is essential for making sense of the over 250 varieties of Chinese opera. Aficionados of one or more of these genres already know the well-known traditional stories upon which these works are based. In other words, audiences frequently know how a Chinese opera will end before it begins. The actual form of a given operatic work must conform to those conventions.<sup>20</sup> And in Sichuan opera, even the characters’ faces get edited during the performances. The three-century-old practice of *Bian lian* (變臉) allows performers to instantly change their masks, delighting and astonishing audiences. To outsiders, it feels like a simple magic trick, but to genre-savvy audiences, the meanings of these facial transformations play a major role in forwarding the stories. Understanding any Chinese opera performance, then, requires a deep understanding of time, place, and any given operatic work’s myriad cultural conventions.<sup>21</sup>

If world history is full of stylized narrative genres, it makes sense that my podcast should fit into one as well. In fact, when I posted the show to my podcast hosting service, it required me to list *two* thematic categories.<sup>22</sup> The first was, obviously, the podcast genre of “History.”

For the second, I looked for a category called “Humor.” But seeing none, I took in a deep breath and, in my hubris, checked the box labeled “Comedy.”

By clicking that little checkbox, I had claimed my podcast uses humor to explain why history matters. Doing so meant that I *had* to be funny. In turn, people must laugh when I say things I’d designated in my head as jokes. Since the SEWHA show was my first one in front of a live audience, I felt I almost *had* to depict people laughing. And if that meant sledgehammering the triangular peg of a real-life conversation into the square hole of humor through digital editing, then so be it.

Except that, weeks later, it made me feel what might be called, for lack of a better descriptor, *icky*.

My father used to take a lot of digital photographs, and he once used Photoshop to force-edit me to smile in a photo when I, in my edgy youthfulness, had been trying my best to appear sullen. The digitally manufactured smile felt like a betrayal of trust, of reality itself. In the big picture of breaches of trust, it was probably a misdemeanor. Still, after publishing the podcast episode, I found myself recalling that feeling of having been sold out in this doctored photo.

That aforementioned *ick* is why I decided to edit the podcast episode again, inserting a brief explanatory *mea culpa* about how I faked the laughter at my joke. In re-editing that part, I once again had to distort a bit of history—in this case by altering the originally released version of my own episode. A reality of any online digital medium is that it can be altered at pretty much any time. I’ve corrected errors before on already-published episodes—usually just cleaning up minor audio glitches that I’ve found after having officially uploaded the audio file. There seems to be no statute of limitations; a podcaster can just replace one audio file with a new one, no explanation needed.

In the process of editing, re-editing, and re-re-editing, I find myself reflecting on how a history podcast differs from a history essay. I believe that the speed and scope with which any jerk with a microphone and some reasonably affordable hardware can scatter information all around the world has increased in ways that would astonish those who lived before us. When I publish an episode, people in Turkey, Bhutan, or Malawi can listen to it almost immediately in the little rectangular boxes

they carry in their pockets.<sup>23</sup> Equally impressive is that when I alter the content, it changes it everywhere. It's like I'm virtually reaching into those pockets and switching out what's contained therein, all without the owners being any the wiser.

That ability to alter audio may be used for good or evil. Cleaning up background echoes in an acoustically uncooperative room, removing “ums,” “ahs,” and hems and haws—I believe those actions sharpened my guests' arguments. It made them sound clearer while preserving and even improving the impact of their words. As media scholar Siobhán McHugh asserts in *The Power of Podcasting*, a successful narrative nonfiction podcast of any variety requires substantial digital editing to convert raw audio into a compelling story. In one example, she details a podcast production team struggling with the first draft of the podcast “Phoebe’s Fall,” which would eventually become a prestigious audio series and an exemplar of excellent audio journalism:

To anyone with an attuned ear for audio narrative, listening to [the initial draft] was a dismaying experience. Though it contained gems of interview quotes and some moving and even funny stories, the overall impression was of a dreary lecture. It was dense with expository narration that could not be absorbed in a single hearing; turgid, due to relentless swaths of interview excerpts with no nonverbal relief . . .<sup>24</sup>

McHugh continues, describing how these podcasters added many narrative elements, radically reorganizing

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## Notes

Doug Sofer, PhD, is Professor of History at Maryville College in East Tennessee. He casts his pod and blogs his blog at [findyourselfinhistory.com](https://findyourselfinhistory.com). Sofer is past president of the Southeast World History Association, a regional affiliate of the World History Association. Sofer would like to thank the Southeast World History Association, the conference organizers, and Southeast Missouri State University for offering him the amazing opportunity described in this essay. He also extends his appreciation to the members of the Knoxville Writers' Guild's literary nonfiction writing group who offered invaluable comments on an early draft of this essay.

and reframing the piece until it formed a single, coherent, and compelling arc across multiple episodes. For my part, I don't (yet) have a team, but I definitely didn't want my listeners to have a “dismaying experience” when they heard the SEWHA episode.

It does not take much historical imagination, though, to realize I could have easily used these same techniques and technologies nefariously to distort the speakers' meaning. I might have taken them out of context to make them seem loyal to some mad demagogue, or to promote some unjust cause. I could have engaged in the sonic equivalent of Josef Stalin airbrushing his assassinated political rivals out of official photos.<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, my deception with the audience's laughter probably wasn't totalitarian censorship or a predatory scam that could make me rich at the public's expense. But upon reflection, I realized it was genuinely dishonest. Moving the laughter to where I told the butt-joke ultimately did come from a genuinely self-aggrandizing impulse. It was a deception designed to make me appear smarter and funnier than I actually am.

In publishing this confession, I'm attempting to relieve myself of some of the *icky* feeling. In my heart, I know I wasn't as funny as I'd hoped. Even so, upon considering our lives in the digital age, I am reminded once again of how utterly strange our world has become. It's yet another demonstration of how even my own history project and attempts to stay true to the standards of our profession have contributed in some small part to the peculiarity of the present.

<sup>1</sup> Doug Sofer, host & producer, *You Are A Weirdo*, podcast, December 2022–, <https://findyourselfinhistory.com/where-to-listen/>.

<sup>2</sup> Hartley's opening line is “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

<sup>3</sup> American Historical Association, “History, the Past, and Public Culture: Results from a National Survey,” accessed September 23, 2023, <https://www.historians.org/history-culture-survey>. Over 90% of respondents acknowledged that history is important. Some simply appreciated how history offers knowledge of the past (39%), others recognized the experience and/or knowledge the past brings to the present

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(19%), and a full third found historical information entertaining (33%).

<sup>4</sup> Insofar as it may be said to be a joke.

<sup>5</sup> No, not even crickets; if there had been a cricket or two around, I would have greatly appreciated it. I could have pretended that my little orthopteran insect friend was offering up its chirpy leg-rubbings as a merciful gesture. No such luck.

<sup>6</sup> Or, perhaps, their butts.

<sup>7</sup> In a 2008 public address to the American Veterans' Center, Cronauer asserts that while "none of the [other] characters in the film are based on actual people . . . . On the other hand, if you name any character in the film, I could think of a half-dozen people" whom they resembled. American Veterans Center, "Good Morning, Vietnam! Adrian Cronauer on Accuracy (2008 AVC Conference)," YouTube video, 9:42, March 25, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8FkXRgA4Sg>.

<sup>8</sup> The movie, like the original, pre-disclaimer version of my podcast episode, also distorts the historical record. Real-life Sgt. Cronauer co-wrote the script for *Good Morning, Vietnam* and, in the process, deliberately wedged his own experiences into the particular subgenre of comedy that was very popular in the US in the late-twentieth century. In the final years of the 1970s, Cronauer and another US Vietnam veteran originally wanted to create a television show about their wartime experiences. Inspired by the success of the program M\*A\*S\*H and its depiction of the Korean War, Cronauer's show would take on serious issues through a humorous lens. And much of that humor would be about cheeky, irreverent soldiers speaking truth to power and defying orders of humorless military bureaucrats. The factual Cronauer was much more of a rule-follower than Williams' character. In fact, the Air Force's bureaucrats recognized Cronauer's value and awarded him multiple medals for his exemplary service.

<sup>9</sup> That is, if he had been a real person to begin with.

<sup>10</sup> Southeast World History Association (SEWHA), "Prior Conferences," accessed October 1, 2025, <https://www.sewha.org/prior-conferences/>.

<sup>11</sup> I think my public junior high called our version of this kind of room a "cafetorium." To be fair, having never recorded an audience before, I hadn't thought to ask the kindly organizers at our host institution for a more acoustically manageable space.

<sup>12</sup> Okay, *some* do say 'in post' but that phrasing comes from filmmaking. The preferred audio term seems to be 'in the mix.' At least that's the impression I picked up from lurking the Audio Engineering sub at Reddit. Search for "in post" at

r/audioengineering, Reddit, accessed July, 2025, <https://www.reddit.com/r/audioengineering>.

<sup>13</sup> It must.

<sup>14</sup> "Home studio" sounds better than "spare bedroom," but the latter is more accurate.

<sup>15</sup> Oral historians understand very well that the very act of converting an audio conversation into a written transcript may involve a great deal of interpretation, redaction, and clarifying addition. See, e.g., Shelley Trower, "Oral History Transcribed, Edited and Published," in *Sound Writing: Voices, Authors, and Readers of Oral History*, ed. Shelly Trower (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), Ch. 3.

<sup>16</sup> I find that pronunciation especially "escruciating."

<sup>17</sup> Insofar as this contribution may be said to be an essay.

<sup>18</sup> National Institutes of Health, National Library of Medicine, "A Review of Smoking Cessation Interventions: Efficacy, Strategies for Implementation, and Future Directions," accessed June 3, 2025, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10858725/>.

<sup>19</sup> See <https://tobacco.stanford.edu/cigarettes/doctors-smoking/20679-physicians/>.

<sup>20</sup> Samantha Webster, "A Lesson in Sichuan Opera to Celebrate the Year of the Dog," Feb. 13, 2018, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/blog/2018/02/a-lesson-in-sichuan-opera-to-celebrate-the-year-of-the-dog>. This blog post is an interview with Susan Pertel Jain, then-Executive Director of UCLA's Confucius Center.

<sup>21</sup> For an overview of Chinese opera forms and the significance of the Chinese Revolution in altering the genre, see Hsiao-t'i Li, *Opera, Society, and Politics in Modern China*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019), Ch. 1, "Overture." On bian lian, see, e.g., Smithsonian Institute, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, "Face Changing in Chinese Sichuan Opera," accessed June 6, 2025, [https://www.si.edu/object/face-changing-chinese-sichuan-opera:yt\\_K1IVyo7Txus](https://www.si.edu/object/face-changing-chinese-sichuan-opera:yt_K1IVyo7Txus).

<sup>22</sup> The fine print on Buzzsprout, my hosting service, explains that most podcast directories use only the first genre, but that some specialty tools check for the second genre as well and make recommendations to listeners accordingly.

<sup>23</sup> Insofar as some of those pockets might be on their butts.

<sup>24</sup> Siobhán McHugh, *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), especially 157–162. Italics are McHugh's.

<sup>25</sup> Made infamous in David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1997).

# World History Bulletin

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# BEYOND THE FOCUS

## Salmon, Sovereignty, and Sustainability

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**Salmon weir, 1933.** *Source: Asbjørn Nesheim, Norsk folkemuseum, CC by 4.0.*

The Deatnu River, one of Europe's last strongholds of wild Atlantic salmon, has long served as a vital lifeline for the Indigenous Sámi people. This article explores the complex interplay between environmental conservation and Indigenous sovereignty by examining the Deatnu River, which straddles the border between northern Norway and Finland. The analysis reveals that state-led conservation efforts, while ostensibly aimed at preserving ecological integrity, often marginalize Indigenous knowledge and rights, thereby perpetuating colonial legacies.

Historians and scholars have increasingly recognized the significance of water rights and environmental justice in discussions of Indigenous sovereignty. However, there has been less focus on how these issues intersect in transboundary contexts, particularly in regions like Sápmi, where the Sámi people's traditional territories cross multiple national borders. This study contributes to this scholarship by situating the Deatnu River case within the broader historiography of Indigenous environmental

stewardship and the impact of colonial regulatory frameworks on Indigenous communities.

The Sámi's profound connection to the Deatnu River and their role in its sustainable management can be understood within a broader global context, such as Charles Menzies' account of the People of the Saltwater, which details the enduring history of the Gitxaala and the central importance of their fisheries to their culture.<sup>1</sup> Similar conflicts over fisheries resource management and Indigenous sovereignty persist among the Nuu-chah-nulth Nation in western Canada and the Mi'kmaq in the Shubenacadie River.<sup>2</sup> By foregrounding the human stakes in managing the Deatnu River, this article contributes to the discussion of global challenges in environmental governance and Indigenous rights. The Deatnu case is a microcosm of broader issues facing Indigenous communities worldwide. Through this lens, it becomes clear that redefining conservation paradigms to prioritize Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge is not only just but also essential for building a more sustainable and

equitable future. This perspective underscores the inseparability of cultural and ecological significance in Indigenous worldviews and the need for a more integrated approach to resource management that respects and incorporates Indigenous knowledge systems.

### **Background on the Deatnu River**

The Deatnu River, which means “the great river” in the Indigenous Sámi language, is also known by the names Tana River (Tanaelva) in Norwegian and Teno River (Tenojoki) in Finnish.<sup>3</sup> Draining into the Arctic Ocean after traversing nearly 360 kilometers, this river is one of Europe’s last refuges for the largest stock of wild Atlantic salmon with over 30 salmon species unique to the Deatnu.<sup>4</sup> The Deatnu River system flows through the municipalities of Deatnu (Tana), Kárášjohka (Karasjok), and Guovdageaidnu (Kautokeino) in Norway and Ohcejohka (Utsjoki) in Finland.<sup>5</sup> The Deatnu holds significant ecological importance due to its extensive and genetically diverse salmon stocks, which have been central to the Indigenous Sámi way of life for centuries.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Deatnu River: Conflict and Controversy in the Subarctic**

Historically, the subarctic Deatnu River was not a border but a vital lifeline for Sámi communities along both banks. Since time immemorial, the Sámi people have inhabited a region spanning from the Kola Peninsula in Russia to the northern areas of Finland, Sweden, and Norway. This ancestral territory is often referred to as “Sápmi” or “Samiland,”<sup>7</sup> and the Sámi have continuously inhabited their lands.<sup>8</sup> Although Sápmi is divided by the national borders of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, the Sámi view themselves as *buotsámi* (one people united across state boundaries). The relationship between the Sámi and the river involves a mutual dependency, with the river providing sustenance and forming a core part of their cultural practices. Both Finland and Norway have recognized the Sámi as an Indigenous people in their respective Constitutions.<sup>9</sup> The Sámi historically survived the harsh Arctic environment by adapting to changing conditions and utilizing available resources. Maintaining traditional Sámi lifestyles requires a healthy natural resource base, which in turn necessitates *árbemáhttu* (traditional skills), as the skills needed to use

*árbediehtu* (traditional knowledge).<sup>10</sup> Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) refers to an understanding, practices, and beliefs developed through observation and adaptive processes and passed down across generations through cultural transmission.<sup>11</sup> This knowledge is applied to resource management, ensuring the environment's ongoing preservation.<sup>12</sup> The Sámi have developed sophisticated salmon fishing and river management techniques, reflecting an in-depth traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) or *árbediehtu* of the river’s ecological cycles over thousands of years.<sup>13</sup>

The management of the Deatnu River and its resources has been marked by conflict between the Sámi people and the states that claim colonial sovereignty over Sápmi, the Sámi's traditional lands. This conflict represents a broader clash between neoliberal conservation efforts and Indigenous rights and traditional practices. The bilateral agreements between Norway and Finland, which regulate salmon fishing on the Deatnu, exemplify this tension. While ostensibly aimed at preserving salmon stocks, these agreements have often placed undue pressure on Sámi ways of living, marginalizing their rights in favor of external control.<sup>14</sup> This external control over the river has gradually eroded the Sámi’s traditional harvesting practices.

Recent legislative reforms, such as Finland’s 2017 Fishing Act, have further complicated the Sámi-state relationship by criminalizing traditional Sámi fishing rights in Deatnu’s “state” waters. The Act requires the purchase of separate permits for fishing in salmon and trout migration areas - while permits in other areas are at no cost - forcing the Sámi to compete with others for limited licenses due to quota restrictions.<sup>15</sup> The 2017 Deatnu Agreement, which intensified these tensions, was widely criticized by both the Finnish and Norwegian Sámi Parliaments for disregarding Sámi traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and imposing severe restrictions on traditional Sámi fishing practices, such as *golgadeapmi* (net fishing).<sup>16</sup> These restrictions vary between Finland and Norway but include limiting net fishing to just four days a year and only for those living on river-adjacent properties, which have disproportionately impacted the Sámi, reducing their fishing activities by 80% while tourist fishing was only reduced by 40%.<sup>17</sup> This disparity reflects a broader pattern of prioritizing economic interests, such as tourism, over Indigenous

rights, though the Sámi have immemorial fishing rights in Deatnu under the Finnmark Act in Norway.<sup>18</sup>



**Navigating the Deatnu River Rapids with poles, 1933.**

*Source: Ashjørn Nesheim, Norsk folkemuseum, CC by 4.0.*

The Deatnu Agreement also introduced new fishing eligibility categories, notably benefiting “Finnish vacation homeowners” who receive favorable treatment compared to other tourists.<sup>19</sup> These homeowners are not required to use local rowers or boats, unlike other tourists, and may have up to one-third of the 11,000 Finnish licenses reserved for them.<sup>20</sup> Such measures highlight the unequal distribution of fishing rights, exacerbating tensions between conservation efforts and Indigenous cultural practices. The introduction of modern technologies, such as outboard motors, has disrupted the delicate balance the Sámi have maintained for centuries and further altered traditional fishing methods, as people used to travel upstream by pushing the boat with a wooden stick called a *čuoibmi*, a method known as *goarkjūt*.<sup>21</sup>

Tourism, which has increased significantly since the construction of the road to Ohcejohka in 1957, has further strained the Deatnu River’s resources. Tourists have purchased approximately a million daily fishing licenses and caught over a million kilograms of salmon, with an estimated 30-40% of the total salmon catch attributed to tourists since 2005.<sup>22</sup> If ecological restrictions are necessary, they should primarily target reducing fishing tourism, including that by Finnish vacation homeowners, rather than infringing upon Sámi rights. The expropriation of Sámi fishing rights without compensation underscores the challenges of balancing ecological preservation with the protection of cultural rights and local traditions.<sup>23</sup> These regulations marginalize the Sámi’s deep-rooted connection to the Deatnu,

undermining their autonomy and traditional knowledge in managing the river’s resources.

This conflict can be framed within a larger context of the neoliberal “conservation” paradigm, which often disregards Indigenous practices and knowledge in favor of state-led wildlife management. This approach mirrors forest protection in Finland, where research and conservation efforts have historically aligned with the interests of timber industries rather than Sámi reindeer herders<sup>24</sup> or Indigenous people working to restore salmon passages historically blocked by hydroelectric dam projects in the Columbia Basin, which in turn is reminiscent of the damming of the Áltá-Guovdageaidnu waterway to construct a hydroelectric power plant.<sup>25</sup> These cases reveal how state-led conservation measures frequently perpetuate colonial legacies, undermining Indigenous autonomy and marginalizing traditional knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

Traditionally, Sámi villages or *Siida* governed their lands with a focus on sustainable management, dividing areas among families to ensure the long-term availability of resources.<sup>27</sup> The Sámi also historically managed salmon-eating animal populations, such as seals, otters, and mink, an invasive species, to increase salmon production, reflecting a deep understanding of the ecosystem’s balance.<sup>28</sup> However, current restrictions on hunting and fishing predators of salmon have disrupted what was once a sustainable practice, further illustrating the inadequacy of modern conservation strategies that fail to incorporate Indigenous knowledge. Against this historical background, the TRG’s argument that predators are a natural part of the ecosystem at their current levels is historically inaccurate.<sup>29</sup> In the Deatnu region, fishing rights are closely tied to private land ownership. This practice is based on an old law from 1888 with assimilative colonial origins. It required land ownership, proficiency in Norwegian, and integration into Norwegian society to gain access to fishing rights.<sup>30</sup> The collective rights of Sámi *Siida* to these waters also remaining unresolved.<sup>31</sup> Critics argue that the current conservation regimes, shaped by colonial legacies, assume that Indigenous practices require control by state-led wildlife management, thereby neglecting the Sámi’s proven sustainability practices and deep-rooted connection to the Deatnu River.<sup>32</sup>



**Rock Art of Alta, 5000 B.C.E.** Source: UNESCO, photograph by Vesna Vujic-Lugassy. CC by 3.0.

### The Deatnu River as a Cultural Bond

For the Sámi, the Deatnu is not merely a source of sustenance but a cultural symbol and a crucial component of life. The river fosters unique biodiversity and supports the Sámi communities who have resided along its nearly 300-kilometer course for millennia.<sup>33</sup> The river strengthens cultural bonds, connecting families and genealogies to the land. These relationships are manifested in the traditional knowledge and practices surrounding salmon fishing, passed down through generations.<sup>34</sup> Petroglyph carvings from 5000 BCE reveal the longstanding significance of salmon to the communities in the Finnmark region.<sup>35</sup> Using drift nets in a traditional Sámi way requires constantly adapting to changes in water levels, time of day and season, salmon behaviors, river activities, and weather conditions. Traditional practice forbids taking breeding salmon, known as *čáhppes guolli* (black fish). It's about readiness and continually monitoring the situation rather than relying on precise dates in regulations.<sup>36</sup>

Fishing with drift nets in the traditional Sámi way is not a pastime or hobby. The idea of catch-and-release sport or “playing with the fish” is morally unacceptable as it shows a lack of respect for the fish.<sup>37</sup> Instead, fishing is a serious task, integral to living and coping with a challenging environment. It must be done respectfully, with appropriate limits. The fish have no peace with tourists allowed to do most of the fishing.<sup>38</sup> Sámi ways of thinking are embedded in the Sámi language as well, where *Bivdit luosa* means “to fish salmon,” but it also means “to ask for salmon” because, in traditional Sámi culture, salmon cannot be “taken”; it must be “asked for.”<sup>39</sup> There is also a saying, “You should have enough salmon from when the river freezes until it melts again.” If you still have salmon from the previous summer when

the new fishing season starts, you will probably get *guoržžu* (bad luck). This suggests you have fished excessively, did not share enough, or asked for more than needed.<sup>40</sup>

*Árbediehtu* (TEK) or *árbemáhttu* (traditional skills) emphasized practical knowledge through application because having *diehtu* (knowledge) is different from having *máhttu* (skills).<sup>41</sup> Sámi salmon fishers base their traditional knowledge on long-term environmental observations. Hence, a critical aspect of *árbediehtu* includes recognizing the limitations of resources and practicing sustainable harvesting to avoid overexploitation since the Sámi worldview sees humans as part of a reciprocal relationship with nature, where stewardship practices such as *dikšut jávrriid* (maintaining healthy fish populations in lakes) and offerings to *sieidi* (sacred places that can include specific mountains, lakes, islands, or natural rock formations) and to ensure environmental balance these are founded on the idea “when you get something, you must also give something back.”<sup>42</sup> To ensure future catches, rules dictate how to kill, handle, and process salmon, including the order of distribution to non-humans before humans. These rules emphasize ethical behavior, respect for the kill, and humility from the hunter, recognizing the salmon's importance and its role in human lives.<sup>43</sup>

The Sámi have a longer history of observing the Deatnu than fish biologists. Their traditional practices are inherently sustainable, having become established through centuries of observation and adaptation. Climate change affects the water temperature and increases the number of solids in the water due to melting palsas (peat mounds that have a permafrost core that has been degrading with higher global temperatures).<sup>44</sup> Agriculture is the primary polluter, producing murky water that absorbs more heat than clear water, raising river temperatures. Historically, wastewater has also contributed to pollution. Eutrophication<sup>45</sup> (a process where nutrients build up in a water body, leading to a surge in microorganism growth that can reduce the water's oxygen levels) has been observed through the increased growth of willows along riverbanks.<sup>46</sup> The solids in the water cover gravel and small rocks, which are essential spawning and habitat areas for salmon parr, thus decreasing the river's production potential.<sup>47</sup> Traditional knowledge holders have noted a decline in

sand eel stocks, which are food for salmon and their predators.<sup>48</sup> They argue that regulating fishing in the river is insufficient if experts ignore the activities in the sea. Fishermen believe that the number of fish farms along the Norwegian coast of Sápmi and the extent of industrial fishing, known as *návethluossa* (barn salmon), significantly impact the salmon populations in Deatnu.<sup>49</sup>

Other impacts of salmon farming on wild salmon include genetic introgression (*transfer of genetic material between species through hybridization*), mortality due to viral diseases, eutrophication and salmon lice infections.<sup>50</sup> The Sámi knowledge aligns more with the Ecosystem Approach, which requires adaptive management and considers the broader ecological context, even if some cause-and-effect relationships are not scientifically established.<sup>51</sup> For example, it is challenging to measure precisely how an increased number of predators affects the number of returning salmon. Sámi researcher and activist Aslak Holmberg in *Bivdit Luosa (to ask for salmon)* spoke to Traditional Knowledge holders, they emphasized *luossa dárbbaša ráfi* (salmon need peace), and that tourist fishing disrupts this peace.<sup>52</sup>



**Salmon weir with two nets, 1948.** Source: Ashjorn Nesheim, *Norsk folkemuseum*, CC by 4.0.

The Sami connection with nature faces challenges from regulatory frameworks and agreements that increasingly place river resource control beyond local hands and are subject to national regulations.<sup>53</sup> Since the initial bilateral agreements in 1873, there has been a progressive shift towards external management of salmon fishing rights, eroding traditional Sámi harvesting practices and diminishing their cultural autonomy.<sup>54</sup> The first prohibitions of traditional fishing methods happened in 1873, including bans on *dubásteapmi* (a spear

and a light) and *rastábuoddu* (fishing weir) shared by up to 40 families, and *goldin* (a combination of a weir, driftnets, and seines).<sup>55</sup> With the Deatnu Agreement in 2017, fishing time was reduced to four days a year, and it is almost impossible for Sámi to teach their children traditional drift net fishing. A fluid set of skills, traditions, knowledge, and a whole way of living will vanish.<sup>56</sup> The 2017 Deatnu Agreement severely limited traditional Sámi fishing practices by disproportionately restricting their fishing rights compared to tourists. This infringement has impacted environmental management and hit the core of Sámi cultural identity, particularly affecting those Sámi not residing permanently in the Deatnu Valley, thus severing their community and cultural ties.<sup>57</sup>

### Conservation and Regulation

Addressing these issues requires thoroughly reevaluating conservation strategies and regulatory frameworks to protect the Deatnu River's ecological integrity while respecting and incorporating the Sámi's traditional knowledge and rights. Recognizing the river's cultural significance is essential for developing ecologically sustainable and culturally sensitive policies.<sup>58</sup> Many Sámi find the Working Group's findings contentious and marginalizing to Indigenous knowledge, which is seen as subjective and qualitative compared to the perceived objectivity of science.<sup>59</sup> There is an assumed hierarchy of knowledge systems, with science described as discovering objective truths and traditional knowledge as a belief system, but this perspective overlooks the fact that traditional knowledge has been verified through generations of observations and experience.<sup>60</sup>

The Deatnu Agreement also falls under international regulations, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (LOSC), which is fundamental to discussions on salmon management. LOSC Article 66 asserts that the state of origin has primary responsibility for anadromous stocks, obligating conservation through appropriate regulatory measures.<sup>61</sup> However, the Convention does not explicitly address transnational boundary rivers, leaving gaps in international law regarding shared rivers such as the Deatnu.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, Norway and Finland are parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Notably, Article 8(j) of the CBD requires respecting and maintaining Indigenous communities' traditional

knowledge and practices, such as Sámi salmon fishing.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the Convention for the Conservation of Salmon in the North Atlantic Ocean (NASCO Convention) obligates a forum for consultation and cooperation, reinforcing the need for collaborative efforts to protect the Deatnu River's salmon population.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, protecting the Deatnu River's salmon population necessitates collaborative efforts that integrate international legal obligations with the Sámi's traditional knowledge and practices.

A key principle in protecting Indigenous rights is Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), recognized in international law frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the ILO 169. FPIC requires that Indigenous peoples have the right to grant or withhold consent to activities impacting their traditional lands and waters. While ILO 169 mandates consultation and participation in decision-making, UNDRIP explicitly emphasizes the need for consent, underscoring the importance of respecting Indigenous autonomy and cultural ties to their ancestral lands. However, it is not legally binding unless a government chooses to ratify it.<sup>65</sup> UNDRIP's recognition reflects a broader understanding that Indigenous peoples hold unique rights linked to their historical and cultural connections to their ancestral territories.

Sámi legal scholar Mattias Åhrén furthers these concepts through the right to self-determination. Regarding Indigenous peoples should not be conflated with the right to consultation, which merely involves the right to participate in decision-making processes. Self-determination, conversely, means that Indigenous peoples must have a genuine ability to influence the outcomes of these processes.<sup>66</sup> The Human Rights Committee has affirmed that, in certain situations, Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and culture requires obtaining their consent, including the right to refuse.<sup>67</sup> Åhrén also emphasizes that under the right to self-determination, there must be instances where the state's will must yield to that of the Indigenous people in cases of conflict. The Deatnu case violates UNDRIP, as when it was time to make actual decisions about the fishing regulations, the local negotiators were asked to leave, leaving them with no meaningful role at the

negotiation table, and they were effectively excluded from the negotiation process.<sup>68</sup>

In response to the changes in regulations on the Deatnu River, Sámi fishers in Ohcejohka declared that the Deatnu watershed rightfully belongs to the Sámi people, who hold both the right and responsibility to manage and protect it. They asserted that the nation-states had no legitimate claims over Deatnu; thus, their authority was rejected.<sup>69</sup> On June 2017, Sámi activists set up a lávvu-tent camp on *Čearretsuolu* (Tern Island) in the Deatnu River near Ohcejohka to oppose what they viewed as “green colonialism,” when environmental discourses and policies are used as tools of dispossession.<sup>70</sup> They formed *Ellos Deatnu* (Long Live the Deatnu), declared a moratorium on Norwegian and Finnish authority over the river, and fished according to Sámi customary law rather than the 2017 regulations. The group raised the Sámi flag and displayed a *Moratorio* (Moratorium) banner, symbolizing their withdrawal of consent for colonial rule over Sámi land.<sup>71</sup> The *Ellos Deatnu* movement was created to oppose and challenge the sovereignty claims of Nordic settler colonial states, explicitly targeting the 2017 Deatnu Fishing Agreement.<sup>72</sup> The group declared that the moratorium would remain in place until the regulations were “negotiated in a proper and fair manner, with all discussions being led by local Sámi people” and “our [Sámi] traditional concepts of justice and fishing methods will be upheld.”<sup>73</sup> This movement can be seen as a response to a state governance system that neglected Sámi rights.<sup>74</sup> Their actions highlighted a strong stance against environmental policies perceived as tools of dispossession and asserted their right to self-determination and traditional practices on their ancestral lands and waters.

### **The Veahčajohka Case**

In July 2017, four Sámi individuals—three women and a teenage boy—fished for salmon in Veahčajohka, a tributary of the Deatnu River.<sup>75</sup> These women, prominent Sámi community members, asserted their right to fish in their traditional river. Despite their title-based or traditional rights, Finnish law required a daily fishing license sold by Metsähallitus.<sup>76</sup> These licenses had been sold out to tourists early in the season, leaving no access for the Sámi. The fishers deliberately violated the

fishing regulations—they fished in their home river using a rod and line without a license—and then voluntarily reported their actions to the police, creating a form of judicial review to challenge the constitutionality of the fishing regulations.<sup>77</sup>

The Sámi individuals were prosecuted for illegal fishing, but the Lapland District Court acquitted them in March 2019, recognizing their constitutional and human rights as Indigenous Sámi to fish traditionally on their home river.<sup>78</sup> The prosecutor appealed to the Supreme Court on April 13, 2022, which upheld the acquittal, citing the Sámi's constitutional right to maintain their culture.<sup>79</sup> This landmark decision by the Supreme Court in the *Veahčajohka* case recognized Sámi rights to land, territories, and natural resources. Traditionally, Finland only acknowledges usufruct rights, making this one of two significant Supreme Court rulings on Indigenous fishing in 2022. In contrast, Norway has the Finnmark Act of 2005, which applies only to Finnmark County, along with land claim settlements and court rulings that support Indigenous land rights.<sup>80</sup>

This ruling underscored the constitutional and human rights of the Sámi, marking a rare instance of the Finnish Supreme Court prioritizing the Constitution over an act of Parliament.<sup>81</sup> The Court highlighted Section 17(3) of the Constitution, which protects the Sámi's right to maintain and develop their culture. The Supreme Court found that the requirement for a separate fishing permit for salmon migration areas under the 2017 Fishing Act imposed severe restrictions on local Sámi, conflicting with their constitutionally protected rights under Section 106 of the Constitution. Consequently, the Court refused to apply the provision of the Fishing Act and dismissed the charges for a game offense.<sup>82</sup> The Sámi community continues to advocate for their traditional rights and sustainable management of the Deatnu River, integrating traditional practices.<sup>83</sup> The Supreme Court's decision reflects the constitutional significance of Sámi rights in Finland, recognizing their fishing rights on Deatnu as fundamental and internationally protected human rights.<sup>84</sup> The Supreme Court rulings referenced international human rights instruments, affirming the Sámi's right to practice their culture, including fishing, hunting, and reindeer herding.<sup>85</sup> Holmberg notes that approximately 30 Finnish laws need updating following this case.<sup>86</sup> Although Supreme Court victories offer hope,

there remains a challenge in making these victories mainstream without each community having to resort to court action. This case demonstrates the constitutional importance of Sámi rights in Finland's legal order.<sup>87</sup>

### **Restoring Traditional Rights and Practices**

The challenges the Sámi face in accessing traditional salmon fishing rights on the Deatnu River underscore significant issues within fishery management systems that prioritize tourism over Indigenous sustenance.<sup>88</sup> Historically, the Sámi had exclusive fishing rights on the Deatnu, a sustainable practice deeply woven into their cultural fabric. However, modern regulatory frameworks have increasingly marginalized these rights, favoring tourist fisheries that undermine Sámi traditional practices and contribute to the loss of cultural heritage, including specific terminologies and knowledge about salmon, critical to their cultural identity.

The 2017 Deatnu Agreement exemplifies these ongoing challenges, leading to a disproportionate reduction in salmon quotas for the Sámi. This imbalance underscores a crucial gap in implementing international obligations, such as the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO Convention 169), which Norway ratified in 1990.<sup>89</sup> ILO 169 mandates the protection of Indigenous peoples' rights to natural resources, but the Sámi Parliament questioned whether the meetings genuinely aimed to achieve agreement. If not done in good faith, they undermined Sámi rights and influence.<sup>90</sup>

In contrast, Finland has not ratified ILO Convention 169, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of 1989. Since the 1990s, discussions have been ongoing between the Sámi and Finnish parliaments about ratification. In 2014, the Finnish Government proposed accepting the Convention to enhance Sámi rights in managing state-owned lands and waters within the Sámi traditional lands.<sup>91</sup> However, in January 2019, the Finnish government withdrew the bill due to issues related to Sámi land rights.<sup>92</sup>

ILO 169 mandates the protection of Indigenous peoples' rights to natural resources. This is all in the context of a 2019 status report by the Tana Monitoring and Research Group (TMRG), identifying significant challenges in managing salmon populations in the Deatnu River, noting that seven out of fifteen evaluated stocks have less than a 40% chance of meeting spawning

targets. Even so, the TMRG report calls for revised management strategies to address ecological and cultural needs. Simulations used in the report offer a method for predicting spawning stock sizes and assessing management strategies' effectiveness. Research can be used as a tool for colonialism; thus, an integrated approach combining scientific research with traditional Sámi knowledge to sustain salmon populations and respect cultural practices should be explored.<sup>93</sup> Transformative approaches to managing the Deatnu River are necessary to address the salmon stock issues. Such approaches would involve lifting restrictions tied to land ownership for the Sámi and recognizing them as official co-managers of the river. This would ensure that management decisions are made with a genuine understanding of the ecological aspects of salmon conservation and the cultural and economic needs of the Sámi.

Additionally, integrating Sámi traditional ecological knowledge into the quota-setting process could lead to more sustainable and culturally appropriate management practices. Incorporating Sámi perspectives in fisheries management aligns with legal obligations under international law and fosters a management approach that respects and preserves cultural heritage. This case study of the Deatnu highlights the need for policies that are not only ecologically sustainable but also culturally sensitive, ensuring that Indigenous practices are protected and promoted.<sup>94</sup>

### **The Broader Implications: Learning from the Deatnu River**

The ongoing challenges around the Deatnu River reflect broader global issues concerning water rights, Indigenous sovereignty, and environmental justice. Even within Sápmi, the Troms and Finnmark region includes the transboundary salmon rivers Njeävdám between Norway and Finland and Vuorján between Norway and Russia. Multi-nation management regimes can pose risks to salmon stocks, particularly when domestic management practices change in these neighboring nations.<sup>95</sup> International examples include the Indigenous Nuu-chah-nulth Nation in western Canada, who have historically relied on Somass River salmon runs for sustenance and face ongoing disputes over fishing rights and conservation measures.<sup>96</sup> The Indigenous Mi'kmaq

face similar challenges with the Shubenacadie River and their role in managing and protecting this salmon river.<sup>97</sup>

The Deatnu River serves as a critical case study in the complexities of modern resource management, where Indigenous communities worldwide face policies that often marginalize their rights and knowledge in the name of conservation or economic development.<sup>98</sup> The historical and contemporary management of the Deatnu River underscores the enduring impact of colonial legacies. Regulatory frameworks frequently enforce a top-down approach that sidelines Indigenous input and undermines their capacity to sustainably manage their resources, a practice they have successfully conducted for centuries. This method overlooks the Sámi's proven stewardship and weakens the cultural bonds essential to their community cohesion and identity.<sup>99</sup>

Moreover, the Deatnu case highlights the necessity of adhering to international legal standards, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the International Labor Organization's Convention 169. These standards emphasize the need for free, prior, and informed consent in any actions affecting Indigenous lands or resources—a principle often overlooked in negotiations and policy implementations that affect the Sámi.<sup>100</sup> Moving forward, the experiences from the Deatnu River can inform global practices by illustrating the need for a more integrated and equitable approach to resource management. Recognizing Indigenous rights as fundamental to sustainable environmental governance and fostering partnerships that leverage Indigenous knowledge alongside scientific research could enhance biodiversity and ensure conservation efforts support Indigenous populations' cultural survival.

In conclusion, the situation of the Deatnu River serves as a microcosm of a global challenge, highlighting the urgent need to redefine conservation paradigms to prioritize and include Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge. The close interconnection between salmon fishing and Sámi culture—embodied in both spiritual and material practices—underscores the importance of integrating traditional ecological knowledge into conservation strategies.<sup>101</sup> As the world faces environmental crises, adopting principles of justice, equity, and inclusivity is crucial. Ensuring we learn from

cases like the Deatnu can help build a more just and sustainable future.

## Notes

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<sup>12</sup> Holmberg, *Bivdit Luosa*.

<sup>13</sup> Kuokkanen, "The Deatnu Agreement"; John Law and Solveig Joks, "Indigeneity, Science, and Difference: Notes on the Politics of How," *Science, Technology & Human Values* 44, no. 3 (2019): 424-47.

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<sup>16</sup> Kuokkanen, "The Deatnu Agreement: A Contemporary Wall of Settler Colonialism"; Saami Council. "Statement of the Saami Council at the Pre-Session of the UPR of Norway," Palais des Nations, Geneva, April 4, 2019; Holmberg, *Bivdit Luosa*.

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<sup>21</sup> Holmberg, *Bivdit Luosa*.

<sup>22</sup> Holmberg, *Bivdit Luosa*.

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<sup>39</sup> Holmberg, *Bivdit Luosa*.

<sup>40</sup> Holmberg, *Bivdit Luosa*.

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<sup>53</sup> Law and Joks, “Indigeneity, Science, and Difference: Notes on the Politics of How.”

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<sup>55</sup> Holmberg, *Bivdit Luosa*.

<sup>56</sup> Law and Joks, “Indigeneity, Science, and Difference: Notes on the Politics of How.”

<sup>57</sup> Kuokkanen, “The Deatnu Agreement.”

<sup>58</sup> Kuokkanen, “The Deatnu Agreement.”

<sup>59</sup> Law and Joks, “Indigeneity, Science, and Difference: Notes on the Politics of How.”

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<sup>88</sup> Cameron, "Fishing Management on the Deantu."

<sup>89</sup> Norwegian Government, *The ILO Convention on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

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<sup>99</sup> Kuokkanen, "The Deatnu Agreement"; Ween and Colombi, "Two Rivers."

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*World History Connected* publishes twice a year, in Spring and Fall, under the auspices of George Mason University Press.

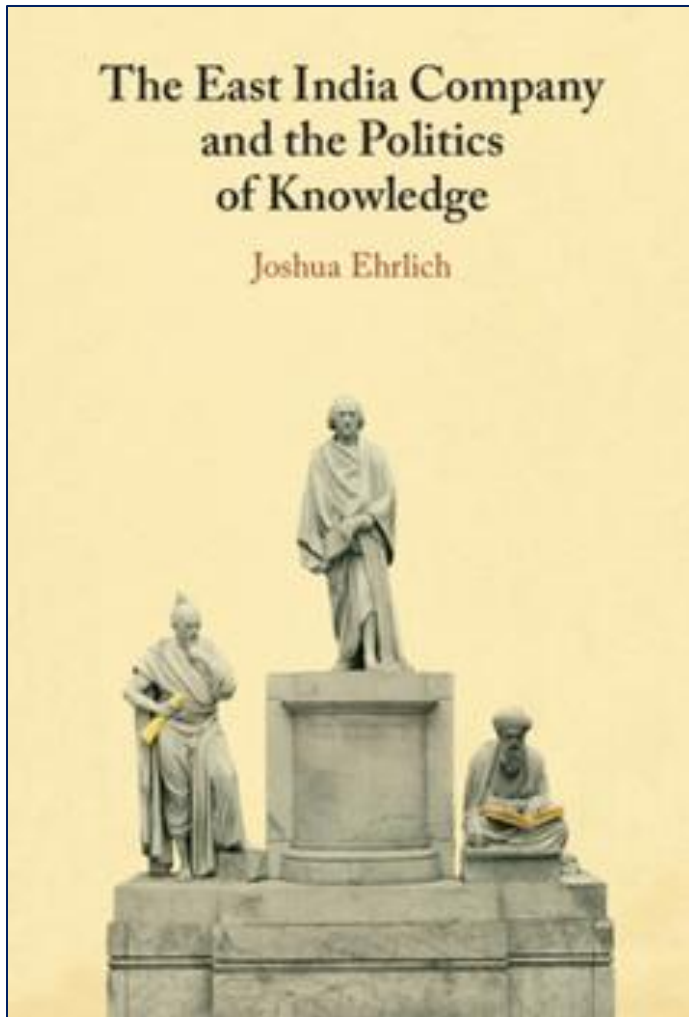
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# BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Katharine Lee, *Book Review Editor* | Southeast Missouri State University | [klee@semo.edu](mailto:klee@semo.edu)

Joshua Ehrlich, *The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). Pp. 243. ISBN: 9781009367967. Paperback \$39.99.

Matthew J. Bowser  
Alabama A&M University



The *East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge* begins and ends with a fantastic hook to the present day: at a time when the power of multinational corporations like Alphabet, Amazon, and Meta have eclipsed, subverted, and even exceeded the power of states, Joshua Ehrlich identifies parallels with the most infamous historical corporation, the East India Company, in terms of blurring the line between company and state. The parallels are compelling because both the Company-state in South Asia and these modern corporations used the

production of knowledge as a centerpiece of their claims to legitimacy and societal impact. In this book, Ehrlich provides a fresh and incredibly insightful analysis of the East India Company's politics of knowledge during most of its tenure as a state. This expression—the politics of knowledge—is central to his thesis. The book does not just make the argument that the Company utilized knowledge-creation as a key engine for its legitimacy, but also that shifts in politics changed its ideas about knowledge over time. Ehrlich proposes studying the history of ideas about knowledge as potentially a new general approach to deploy in history. Unravelling how the Company thought about knowledge in its own terms is precisely what can provide lessons for present-day companies' deployment of the idea, helping to answer questions such as: Is knowledge a public good or a private commodity? Are the values of scholarship and business compatible? And so on (3).

In proposing this new approach to intellectual history, Ehrlich makes several important interventions into the voluminous literature already produced on the East India Company's relationship with knowledge. First, he challenges a long-standing historiographical characterization of a shift from the early "Orientalist" era of the Company-state, emphasizing the study of India on its own terms, to its later "Anglicist" era, presenting English education and England itself as the height of civilization. While such a shift does occur, Ehrlich presents an entirely new reading of it as more reflecting a political change from sponsoring elites to educating the masses in India. Second, he identifies a Whiggish streak in intellectual history – a sort of "Gutenberg to Google" narrative – that has tended to collapse the messy contingencies of history into formulaic generalizations. Finally, while acknowledging the valuable insights of the post-structuralists, he correctly identifies how reducing "colonial knowledge" to merely a "will to power" could sometimes overstate the nefarious intentions and impact of Orientalist scholarship. In all three cases, Ehrlich emphasizes how these historiographical trends have imposed retrospective categorizations, failing to speak in a language that historical actors at the time would have understood. Instead, he undertakes his history of the ideas about knowledge. He argues that these ideas adapted as the Company reacted to the changing personalities and contexts in which it found itself.

The book is concise. It consists of an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue. It traces the Company-state's politics of knowledge from the governor-generalship of Warren Hastings in the 1770s to the reforms in the 1830s. The overall shift it identifies during this period is one from a focus on the conciliation of elite collaborators while the Company was still a beachhead in Bengal and Madras to a focus on providing "good government" through mass education once the Company had achieved paramountcy in India. Although a shift from "Orientalism" to "Anglicism" is not inconsistent with this framing, Ehrlich's reading grounds his analysis in the shifting ideas and debates about knowledge and its value at the time.

The first two chapters cover Warren Hastings' development of the idea of conciliation and the differing ways in which his successors carried on this policy. Hastings' "conciliation" was a policy of patronizing Indian intellectual elites, such as pandits and maulvis, in their production of knowledge both directly and through, for example, sponsoring the foundation of a new madrasa in Calcutta, ordering the compilation and translation of Hindu and Islamic laws, and commissioning expeditions to Bhutan and Tibet. Historians have proposed explanations for Hastings' behavior from genuine Indophilia to nefarious reconnaissance of a subject country, but Ehrlich understands Hastings in the straightforward terms of an individual attempting to reconcile the role of a state to the primarily commercial entity that he served. Given Hastings' downfall, Chapter Two effectively captures the sometimes-fraught politics around either discarding or upholding his legacy. Chapter Three addresses Lord Wellesley's escalation of conciliation to a form of royal patronage, and details his power struggle with the Board of Directors in his founding of the College of Fort William. Chapter Four examines the Board's subsequent souring interest in being a patron of scholarship in India, both for British scholar-officials and for Indian scholars. Finally, Chapter Five addresses the slow-but-steady shift to a policy of mass education as the Company transitioned into its role as a government of all-India.

I have very few critiques of this project: it is sound, well-researched, and certainly achieves the interventions it sets out for itself at the start. There is a slight drawback to the ambition of founding an entire field – that of the history of the ideas of knowledge – which is that this broader objective does retreat into the background. The book spends more time as a narrative of the Company's deployment of knowledge than an analysis of its concepts of knowledge. Also, given the framing of how these historical debates could inform present-day debates on

the topic, I do wish that the Epilogue had drawn out more explicit lessons from the comparison.

I would highly recommend this book to any historian or scholar of the East India Company, of early modern South Asia, and of intellectual history. The prose is excellent and accessible and can easily be legible to undergraduate students. I believe it is a good book for world historians too: it presents a new method of doing world history – the history of ideas of knowledge – and models effectively how it could be done with a global perspective.



**Ismay Milford, *African Activists in a Decolonising World: The Making of an Anticolonial Culture, 1952-1966* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). Pp. 298. ISBN: 9781009277020. Paperback \$39.99.**

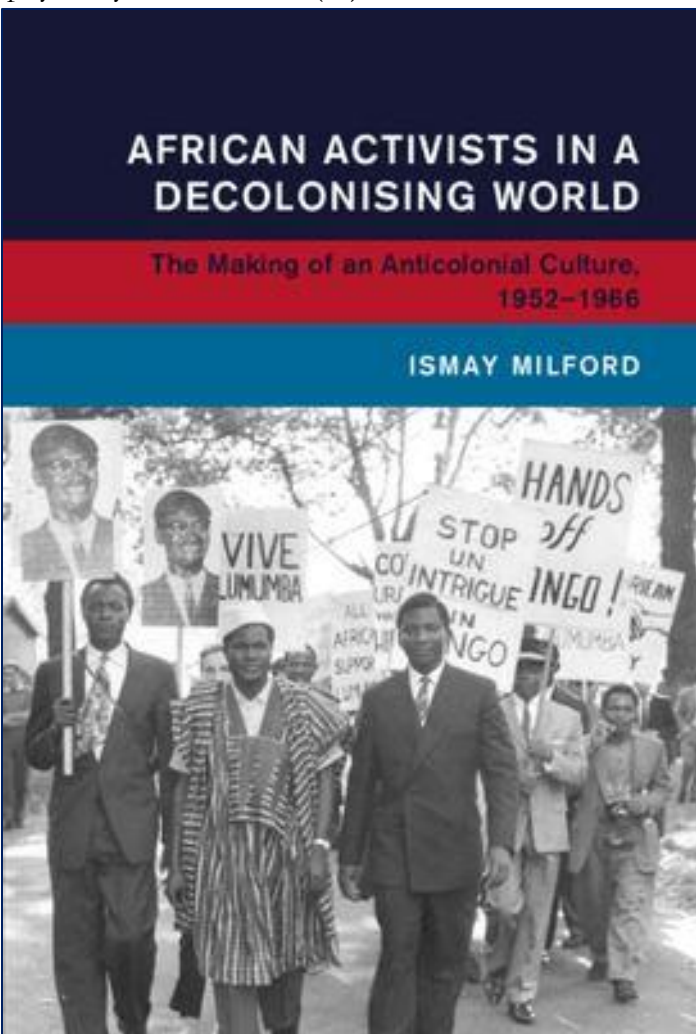
Phillip Cantrell  
Longwood University

Ismay Milford, an historian at Leipzig University, has authored a fascinating and thoroughly researched book in *African Activists in a Decolonising World: The Making of an Anticolonial Culture, 1952-1966*. Based upon her PhD dissertation at the European University Institute, the book examines the role of anti-colonial activists from East and Central Africa in shaping the transnational discourse over decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. By moving her analysis beyond Africa and into the wider context of the global anti-colonial movement, she earned inclusion in Cambridge University Press' Global and International History series, a worthy and admirable achievement for any historian's first book.

Milford's analysis is woven around the lives and works of four young anticolonial activists: John Kale and Abu Mayanja, both Ugandan, Kanyama Chiume of Tanganyika, and Munu Sipalo from Northern Rhodesia. *African Activists*, however, is far more than a simple biographical treatise on these four men. Rather, the book is a fine work of social history about transnational activism which seeks, successfully, to explain why the work and writings of these young activists is "significant to our understanding of the connected processes of decolonization in the post-war world – processes not just legal and political, but social and intellectual too" (2). Kale, Mayanja, Chiume, and Sipalo form an exceedingly fruitful cohort to view these processes through a generational lens.

The first two chapters of the book examine the emergence of regional activism in the early 1950s, during which two events especially played pivotal roles: the Mau

Mau Rebellion in Kenya and the imposition of the Central African Federation. Focusing on Makerere University in Uganda, Milford argues in the first chapter that it “was a central node in a much broader political and educational world that is intrinsically beyond the scope of histories of nationalism” (27). In the context of the Mau Mau rebellion of 1952, students at Makerere ignited the largest strike in Uganda’s precolonial history, for which Abu Mayanja was expelled. John Kale, Kanyama Chiume, and other future activists passed through the University in these years. The experiences of the young activists at Makerere, drawn from across the region, forged a cohort which carried the “conviction that pushing the limits of their freedoms to express and protest would mean not only finding space within the colonial state but moving, physically, outside of it” (58).



In Chapter Two, Milford’s analysis shifts to the wider international world of democratic socialism, which sought to “carve out a third way in the early Cold War” and which respected the “principle of self-determination for people across the colonised world” (60). Sipalo and Mayanja interacted with the new paradigm by leaving East Africa and travelling abroad; Sipalo to India and Mayanja to Great Britain. In both cases, they interacted

with students from other parts of Africa and found a world of international solidarity in the name of anticolonialism. They thus returned home with an urgency to “make heard, circulate and win support for a vision of decolonisation that came from a new generation of educated activists from the region” (96). In Chapter Three, this young cohort attended the All-African Peoples Conference at Accra in December 1958. There they concluded that decolonization for East and Central Africa could not rely solely upon the achievements of newly independent countries like Ghana. Rather, it would require voices and critiques from within their own regions, which they were soon to give in the form of pamphlet writing.

Their efforts, like that of the Acca Conference itself, functioned against the backdrop of the Algerian War (1954-1962). With violence rising in the late 1950s to include the Nyasaland Emergency of 1959, Chiume and his peers engaged in pamphlet writing to raise public awareness of the violence of colonialism. Ismay concludes of their publicity work, covered in Chapter Four, that the “Algerian War – and the question of the necessity of violent anticolonial insurgency in the face of a violent colonial system...enabled East and Central African activists to place their stories ...into this framework” (171).

The final chapters, Five and Six, discuss the complexities faced by the activists in the 1960s as Cold War events challenged them to new ways of thinking about trans-national activism. Chapter Five discusses the pitfalls of navigating anti-colonial activism in the face of the Congo crisis. The final chapter examines the nature of how the coming of state-sponsored radio broadcasting afforded new challenges but new opportunities. In conclusion, Ismay correctly writes that “global histories sometimes have regional roots” and that by looking at the “anti-colonial world through this regional-generational cohort also has implications for an understanding of anti-colonial thought and its relationship to twentieth-century activism more broadly” (250).

Ismay Milford is to be commended for offering the profession a keen analysis about an under-addressed area of African studies and reminding readers that “revolutionaries from this region do have something specific to teach us about decolonization – at least to teach historians” (251). For any scholar concerned with a transnational approach to decolonization in a global context, *African Activists in a Decolonising World* is a challenging but productive read. Owing to the complexity of the topic and the depth of the writing, the book would be a difficult undertaking for undergraduate students but for those interested in a transnational approach to decolonization, Milford’s book should be

regarded as required reading with insights and perspectives not found elsewhere.

■

**Miranda Spieler, *Slaves in Paris: Hidden Lives and Fugitive Histories* (Harvard University Press, 2025). Pp. 256. ISBN: 9780674986541. Hardcover \$39.95.**

William Kelly  
University of Nebraska – Lincoln

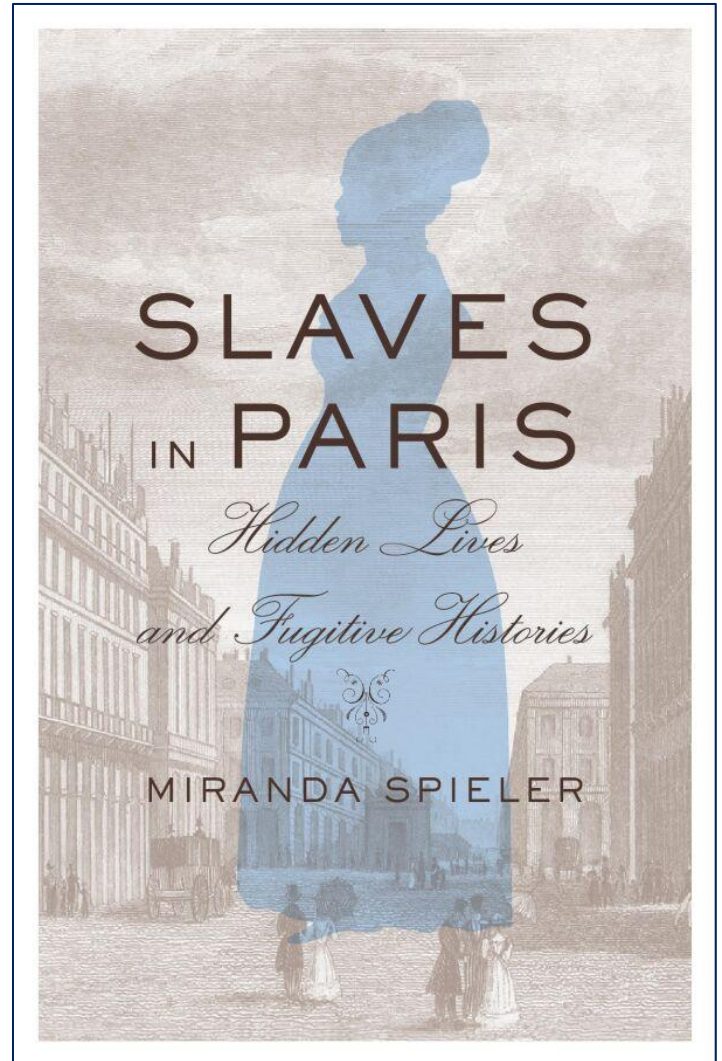
Paris, Miranda Spieler writes, constituted “a site of dangerous allurements and precarious liberations for slaves...the very lack of consensus about slave status [in Paris], and about how one became free there, patterned the lives of just about all people of color in the city” (9). Spieler grapples with the biographies of five freedom seekers in *Slaves in Paris: Hidden Lives and Fugitive History*. In addition to the biographies, Spieler pushes back against the eighteenth-century myth, “There are no slaves in France,” by illustrating how French authorities pursued Black freedom seekers in Paris at the behest of enslavers. In doing so, Spieler portrays the French capital as intimately connected with the French enslaving empire that emanated from it.

Spieler relies on a solid foundation of legal and judicial records as well as historic correspondence and, briefly, historical literature. Police files make up Spieler’s foremost evidentiary pillar. Equally important are a series of *lettres de cachet*, writs of arrest issued by the Crown at the demand of enslavers in search for fugitive slaves.

Each chapter is entitled after one freedom seeker—three men and two women—totaling five chapters sandwiched between a detailed and theoretical introduction and a brief conclusion. Instead of being guided by the chronology of each freedom seeker’s journey, Spieler utilizes their stories to touch upon a variety of topics such as French law and policing under the Old Regime, French racial attitudes, and the demographic makeup of certain French neighborhoods. Either subheadings or a more linear narrative would have aided the readers ability to follow these freedom-seeking stories.

Chapter One (“Jean”) illustrates the frequency with which enslaved people appear in Parisian high society. It dives deeply into French colonial slave law during the mid-eighteenth century and in what forms those legal systems translated to Parisian society when French colonial enslavers brought their concepts of race and property to Paris. Spieler uses Jean’s bid for freedom to discuss the history and function of Parisian policing in the aftermath of the War of Austrian Succession. She

intimates that, unlike the pursuit of freedom seekers in the United States, “slave hunts” in Paris were infused with a certain class element. From the mid-1750s onward, “the police and most of French society viewed the whole serving class as degenerate scoundrels. Through their depiction of runaways as urban contaminants, masters recast slave hunts as normal policing” (27).



Chapter Two (“Pauline”) looks at the life of a freedom seeker in Paris during and after the Seven Years’ War. After being imprisoned via *lettre de cachet*, Pauline escaped her captors the evening before her enslaver planned to forcibly return her to the Isle of Bourbon. After months in hiding, and with the help of well-connected Black and white Parisian allies, Pauline sued for her freedom. Pauline, Spieler writes, “owed her rescue to domestics and to French people in high society who might just as well have turned her over to police” (65). As Pauline’s case showed, one did not have to be anti-slavery to be an ally of a freedom-seeking Black person in Paris.

Chapter Three (“Lucidor”) examines “what freedom meant – and did not mean – to people who managed to exit slavery in Paris” (77). Spieler tracks the movements

and profession of freedom seeker André Lucidor to connect his life to the hardening of French racial attitudes from the 1740s through the end of the Seven Years' War. She also continues her argument that the mid-eighteenth century was an era of growing connectedness between Paris and French enslaving colonies.

Chapter Four ("Julien") constitutes perhaps Spieler's strongest example of engaging narrative storytelling. The story of Julien, a lighter-skinned enslaved man from Martinique, continues Spieler's analysis of racial ideas in Paris. Like Pauline, Julien pursued legal channels to seize his freedom. Rather than claiming "there are no slaves in France," Julien's legal counsel made the freedom seeker's argument on the grounds of his skin color. His petition for freedom brought colonial discussions and concepts of race to the heart of the French empire. "Until the Julien affair," Spieler writes, "the question of who was and was not eligible for whiteness remained a colonial debate, not a matter for domestic French courts" (110-111).

Chapter Five ("Ourika") comprises the most unique chapter in the book. The first part of the chapter is a biographic study of an enslaved woman named Ourika. The second part is a literary analysis of *Ourika*, an 1823 novel written by Parisian socialite, Claire de Duras. In the first part, Spieler discusses the practice of gifting enslaved people in the French empire, the French slave trade, and French abolitionism. Ourika's life itself, however, is buried under intricate details and analyses of her enslavers' life, worldview, and love letters to his *petit amour* in Paris. The section supposedly dedicated to understanding Ourika's life eventually morphs into a literary analysis of *Ourika* the novel. While the first section focused mainly on Ourika's enslaver, the second section focuses on Claire de Duras, the novel's ill-informed author. It is an interesting analysis. However, its inclusion alongside the other four biographies of freedom seekers seems awkward.

The language with which Spieler describes enslavement and freedom seeking is peculiar. She writes of enslaved people "entering" and "exiting" enslavement, which inadvertently suggests a degree of choice about when these freedom seekers became and ceased to be enslaved. Spieler also describes freedom seekers being "rescued" by benevolent French nobles on certain occasions. Moreover, one would have enjoyed a more immersive reading experience during parts of the book. Pauline's escape to the Hôtel de Toulouse and Lucidor's refuge in Abbey Saint-Martin-des-Champs offered incredible opportunities for more engaging narrative storytelling that were, unfortunately, passed up.

In addition to the book's overall theoretical approach, Spieler's concluding remarks on agency

provide excellent discussion material for advanced undergraduate and graduate level courses on historical theory: "No one, regardless of their status and personal myth is a truly autonomous agent whose days unfold as thrusts of an unfettered will. No one is purely acted upon...An agency-centered approach to history rests on a model of the human subject that screens out the compositeness of being and omits the disquieting complexity of life...People are consubstantial with their surroundings" (168). Each historian will have their own valid perspective on agency, particularly as it relates to the study of oppressed peoples. However, it may be argued that historians can study the actions and decisions of freedom seekers within their cultural, material, and political contexts. Indeed, freedom seekers made choices, timed their escapes, built networks in relation to their contexts and conditions. There is human will within their contexts.

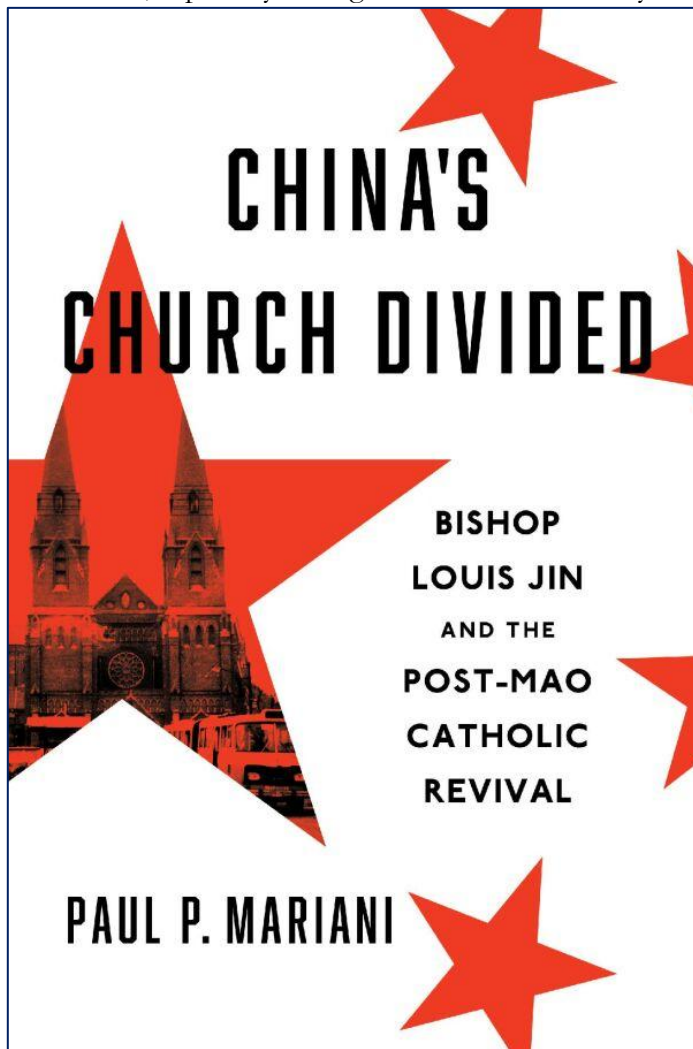


**Paul P. Mariani, *China's Church Divided: Bishop Louis Jin and the Post-Mao Catholic Revival* (Harvard University Press, 2025). Pp. 334. ISBN: 9780674297654. Hardcover \$49.95.**

David Lindenfeld  
Louisiana State University, Emeritus

This book offers a detailed, fascinating picture of the Catholic Church in China during the 1980s, focusing on Shanghai roughly between the rise of Deng Xiaoping and the Tiananmen Square massacre. Following the period of extreme repression of religion during the Cultural Revolution, which nevertheless failed to quell the devotion of the faithful, Deng was determined reach out to churches and harness their loyalty to the socialist program. In the case of Catholicism, this was not mere window-dressing: the government actively supported the training of priests and established a new seminary to do so. This project was complicated, however, by the persistence of an anti-communist underground church that originated in the Vatican's repudiation of the communist revolution in 1949. The result was, in effect, two Catholic churches, each claiming the power to appoint bishops and train priests. The underground church had been severely persecuted in the mid-50s, with many of its leaders sent to labor camps. Its enduring strength in the face of these obstacles points to a longstanding Catholic tradition in China, dating back to the seventeenth century. At the same time, for many

others, Catholicism was heavily implicated in European colonialism, especially during the nineteenth century.



The book successfully captures the conflicting loyalties and the attempts to overcome them during the 1980s, from both the Chinese government and the Vatican at the level of church leadership. The author, Paul Mariani, himself a Jesuit, had access to archival sources and interviews that enabled him to give a close-up picture of the intrigues and workings of these two hierarchies. He does not entirely ignore the grassroots dimension, however: in a chapter entitled “Miracle,” he tells of a massive pilgrimage in 1980, involving as many as 10,000 people, to the Sheshan shrine outside Shanghai to await the appearance of Virgin Mary – an indication of the desire for religious expression that had been suppressed.

Mariani’s method for bringing these disparate groups into focus is to concentrate on Jin Luxian, Bishop of Shanghai. A fellow Jesuit, he joined the order at age 22 in 1938. Following World War II, the Jesuits sent him to Europe to complete his training. There he acquired competence in French, Italian, Latin, and German. Returning to China, he joined the underground church, only to be arrested in 1955. He spent the next 25 years in

various prisons and labor camps, only to be tapped for leadership in the state church. Jin’s linguistic abilities and his familiarity with the West made him a desirable candidate in its new reform program. He was put in charge of the new seminary at Sheshan, where he was responsible for training some 400 priests. He proved to be a skillful diplomat, fundraiser, and ambassador, traveling to Hong Kong, the Philippines, West Germany, Belgium, and the United States. Although he sought reconciliation with the Vatican, he refused to recognize its authority to appoint bishops, insisting on the “independence and autonomy” of the Chinese church. He therefore continued to be regarded as illegitimate by his former underground colleagues. One paradoxical result of this situation was the continuation of the Latin rite (supposedly “colonialist”) in the state church, while the underground church promoted the ostensibly “multicultural” emphasis of Vatican II. Ironically, an agreement between the two sides was achieved in 2018, five years after Jin’s death. By that time, however, the government under Xi Jinping had returned to a more repressive stance.

All in all, Mariani’s focus on Jin is a bit misleading in terms of his narrative as a whole, for it is as much about the other actors, such as the previous bishops and rivals for power, as about Jin himself. He also gives due attention to the Polish Pope Jean Paul II, who was both identified with anti-communism and made genuine attempts to reach out to Chinese Catholics.

All of this is told at a level of detail that reflects the author’s familiarity with the sources, but makes it difficult for a reader to follow. The result is a study more suited to graduate-level work and beyond than for the general reader. For those willing to follow the twists and turns of this complicated story, however, the rewards in insight are great.



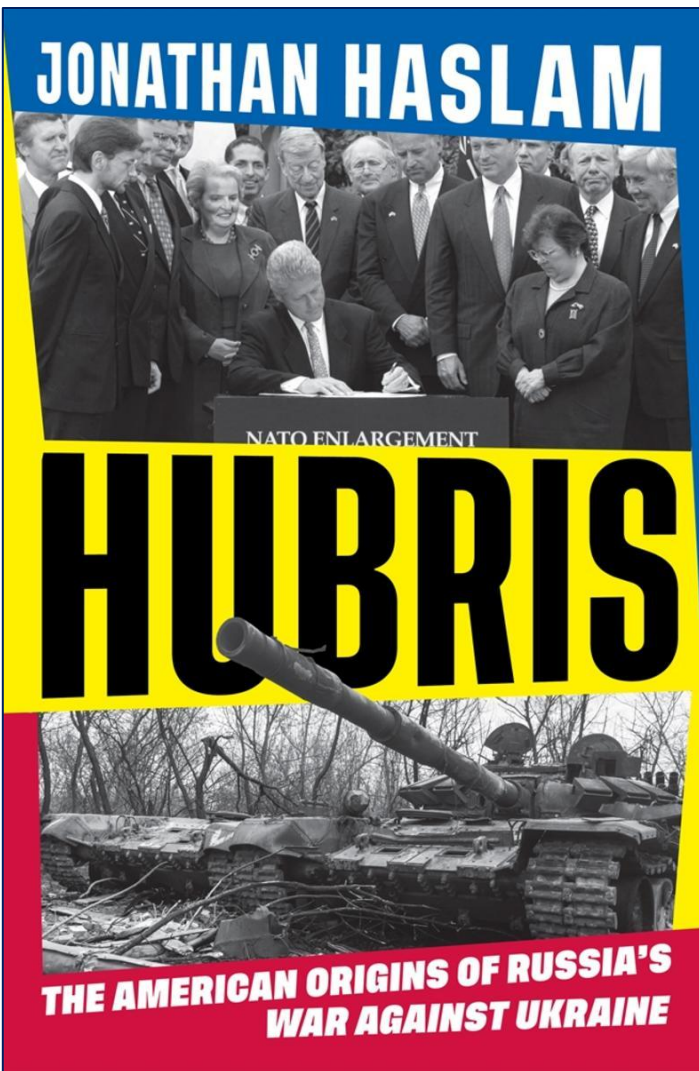
**Jonathan Haslam, *Hubris: The American Origins of Russia’s War in Ukraine* (Belknap Press, 2025). Pp. 368. ISBN: 9780674299078. Hardback \$29.95.**

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Grizzled reporter Illia Ponomarenko has hundreds of thousands of followers on social media thanks to his raw front-line analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Mick Ryan quoted him in *Futura Doctrina* on May 19, 2025: “In a certain sense, Putin is even right—to end the war in Europe, we really do need to eliminate its ‘root causes.’ It’s just that the true ‘root causes’ aren’t the existence of

Ukraine as a state and as identity, as Russian war propaganda insinuates, but rather the existence of modern Russia itself—a country where, under the complacent gaze of weak Western democracies, a fascist, oligarchic regime has flourished.”

Jonathan Haslam, a Professor Emeritus of the History of International Relations at the University of Cambridge with five decades of expertise on Soviet foreign policy, shares this assessment of American policy drift in *Hubris: The American Origins of Russia's War in Ukraine*. To it, he adds a Kremlin-sympathetic take on twenty-five years of Putin's foreign policy as largely defensive and reactive. His position is undergirded by a Trumpian belief that Russia is entitled to a sphere of influence in its “near abroad” and that Russia has been needlessly provoked by American expansion into its former backyard via NATO, views that will resonate most with MAGA intellectuals who see Putin as a potential American ally rather than a fascistic predator.



Foreign policy neophyte Bill Clinton is Haslam's first villain for letting Czech-born US ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright manipulate him into supporting NATO membership for Central European nations

Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary over the strong reservations of various internal actors such as Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot as well as the American defense and intelligence communities, and Russia-fearing foreign allies, principally Germany. Converting the Partnership for Peace from a NATO substitute to a NATO pathway effectively meant that Clinton abandoned the prospect of security accommodation with Yeltsin's Russia (65-66). NATO's 1999 air war against Serbia, over Russian objections, to prevent its forces from committing fresh war crimes in Kosovo was apparently another nail in the coffin of US-Russian rapprochement (100-07).

The Bush administration, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in particular, gets pilloried for failing to open up a dialogue of equals in the early 2000s when Putin was just getting his feet under him and claimed interest in cooperating with the West, particularly on counterterrorism in the wake of 9/11 (134-39). The Obama team then created further tension by openly supporting Ukraine's 2013-14 Maidan protesters, enraging Putin by driving his vacillating puppet, President Viktor Yanukovich, into disgraced exile (205-13). There are two short chapters on Trump-era developments that read like they were added late at the publisher's request to bring the text up to the outbreak of war in early 2022.

This is not so much a study of the origins of the Russo-Ukrainian War as one of the breakdown in Russo-US relations in the post-Cold War era. Yes, there is overlap, but many readers will feel deceived by the book's subtitle. Ukraine is strangely absent from these pages; it does not get a sustained mention until roughly one quarter of the way through the text and is really only mentioned in passing references until the later chapters. President Volodymyr Zelensky finally appears on page 265 of 270. Haslam does not appear to have used any Ukrainian primary source material for his research.

Why has Ukraine been shunted aside here? Consciously or not, Haslam frames the hopes and aspirations of the long-oppressed peoples of Central and Eastern Europe who had finally thrown off the Russian yoke as an annoying impediment to great power diplomacy between Washington and Moscow. One specific example of his indifference comes on page 76 when he implies that Russia had a legitimate claim to Crimea by using 1990s demographic statistics indicating that it was ethnically Russian without mentioning that it had got this way through Soviet-engineered starvation and forced exile of the native Crimean Tatars. The post-independence Ukrainian state tried to accommodate returning Tatars by granting political rights and then later declaring them an indigenous people, but its efforts at reconciliation were severely undermined by chauvinistic

local Russian officials before the 2014 takeover. These details do not seem to matter to Haslam.

Haslam is also willfully misleading about the Obama era when he throws out the impressive-sounding number of \$1 billion in US aid to Ukraine from 2008 to 2013, which appears in a chapter with conspiracy-minded accusations of shadowy American manipulation of the Maidan Protests (76). According to [foreignassistance.gov](http://foreignassistance.gov), in dollar terms, this American investment in Ukraine was under half that Washington made in Ethiopia and about one third of the amount for Jordan over the same period. Ukraine was one of many important places to the Obama administration, but never the most. By the end of 2013, Americans were understandably excited by something that terrified Putin: the organic expression of hundreds of thousands of freedom-seeking people who were fed up with bad government. That Russia was so desperate to prop up a hopelessly corrupt, unpopular, and utterly dependent client regime tells you everything you need to know about Putin's priorities relative to Obama's.

Anyone who cares about finding a resolution to the Russo-Ukrainian War should be willing to be provoked by new and unorthodox arguments. That said, Haslam uses *Hubris* to describe a one-sided match of tennis where every ball hit by the Americans caused irreparable damage to the bilateral relationship, whereas line items on the long list of grievous Russian offenses to American values—the Tiananmen Square-style crackdown in Lithuania in 1991, Yeltsin's military assault on the Duma in 1993, moral and political support for Serbian war criminals during the Yugoslavian Civil War, war crimes in Chechnya, war crimes in Syria, and so on—get framed in passing as a reaction to external provocations from the West. In the end, Haslam gives us a book for this particular MAGA moment that is unlikely to stand up too well over time.

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**Trevor R. Getz and Bennett Sherry, *The Long Nineteenth Century 1750-1914: Crucible of Modernity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025). Pp. 360. ISBN: 9781350355941. Paperback \$34.95.**

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As historians and teachers, we should be grateful for those who put together tertiary works that can be used as textbooks or popular histories. This is particularly true when scholars take on the entire globe. To convey

knowledge covering all countries, disparate events, and a flavor for all aspects of life is a challenge that this reviewer does not take lightly.

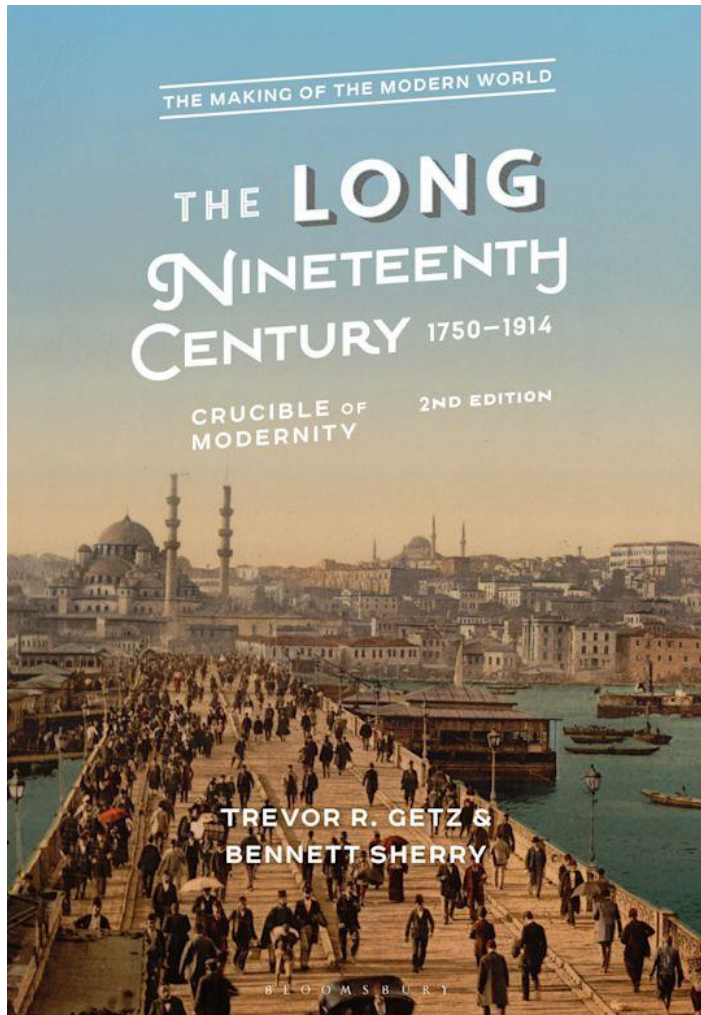
Trevor Getz and Bennett Sherry have tackled such a task for the long nineteenth century, extended back to 1750 to incorporate the British East India Company's conquest of Bengal as well as the late Enlightenment and the rise of evangelical Protestantism. Like some other global histories, this book is organized not chronologically or geographically, but thematically, with chapters showing how each theme affected the world. There are also five short sections examining an aspect of the preceding chapter to illuminate the broader theme. The authors occasionally bring in revisionist theories, which lets students see that history is still being understood.

The book opens with reflections on what constitutes modernity, using an event in Africa that appears atavistic: the start of a cattle-killing movement among the Xhosa of South Africa in 1856, describing this as the product of the disturbances of modernity in a way that can provide the basis for a productive class conversation. The first thematic chapter concerns the fact of empire and the ideology of imperialism that underlies it, situating it in the context of the early modern empires and including the impact of the Atlantic slave trade. The authors are clearly comfortable in this field, and their coverage rings true despite the enormous scope of this theme.

Religion and Enlightenment are usefully yet uncomfortably grouped together in the next chapter. Much of the coverage of religion focuses on evangelical Protestantism, an important force whose influence is here sometimes exaggerated. The chapter on nationalism and the nation-state is one of the strongest, with clear exposition of concepts that many historians find difficult to explain. The authors also cover the paradoxical connection between nationalism and empire. The insightful section on industrialization includes discussions of dependency theory and deindustrialization. Thoughtful sections on literature and art in the age of industrialization highlight the lack of similar attention in other chapters. This chapter has a timeless quality to it, underplaying the scope and degree of change over time. For example, the difficult lives of workers in industrializing societies are highlighted, but the authors do not consider the improving living standards of industrialized societies here.

Both in scale and variety, migration in this period easily merits the chapter that the authors devote to this topic. This is followed by an essential analysis of the capitalist system and the socialist movements that arose

to challenge it, with a look afterwards at how Karl Marx has been remembered.



The next chapter's title, "Explaining the World," implies it will explain how the Scientific Revolution of the early modern period continued into the long nineteenth century. However, the chapter has a tight focus on the biological sciences, and particularly the development and impact of evolutionary theory. Concurrent developments in chemistry, physics, medical science, and other fields are not discussed at all, despite their importance for economies, technology, and people's lives, and earth science is presented as a prelude to evolutionary and genetic theory. The impact of evolutionary theory is discussed primarily in terms of the pathologies that were fueled by it, such as scientific racism, social Darwinism, and eugenics, slighting its usefulness for other forms of progress in biology.

The penultimate chapter looks at the impact of the major forces of the nineteenth century on local and global environments, while also considering the first movements that emerged in reaction to environmental degradation. The final chapter brings the book's themes together to show how the First World War can be seen

as the culmination of the forces that characterize the whole period.

The book is designed to be a textbook for an undergraduate survey course, and its clarity of language and coverage are suited to that purpose. It could be supplemented by a primary source reader. In designing a course around the book, the instructor should be aware that the book effectively conveys the deleterious impacts of each of its themes, which is appropriate, while underplaying progress in the nineteenth century, such as improving living standards and the development of increasingly democratic political systems and concurrent recognition of rights. If students are to weigh the costs and benefits of these changes, additional materials should be necessary. Jurgen Osterhammel's *Transformation of the World* avoids this issue, but it is three times the length and likely too long for an undergraduate survey course at a mid-tier institution. On the other hand, many of the negative outcomes of the nineteenth century have resonance today, over a century after the end of the period.

Concerns about the book are comparatively minor. Occasionally, descriptions of phenomena are presented as if they apply to the century as a whole rather than a phase in an evolving phenomenon. As with any tertiary history, there are some errors or arguable points that can be handled in class and will perhaps be addressed in subsequent editions. In summary, this book has strengths in accessibility, its broad coverage, and its exploration of many of the dark themes of the long century, but instructors using the book will want to consider if supplemental materials would be helpful in achieving their aims for such a course.



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