

BOOK REVIEW

James H. Meriwether. *Tears, Fire, and Blood: The United States and the Decolonization of Africa*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 320 pp. 4 maps. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-4696-6422-4.

In a yet-to-be-topped analysis of US engagement with African decolonization, activist and intellectual Alphaeus Hunton summed up the situation of the North Atlantic powers as follows: “Equality of opportunity—the open door for American access to Africa’s raw materials—was an important part of the price paid by the European colonial powers for the postwar grants-in-aid they received from the United States.” Now, looking back long after the crucible of independence that set the scene for Hunton’s *Decision in Africa* (International Publishers, 1960) has cooled, historian James Meriwether gives us an impressive overview of US engagement with African decolonization. Rethinking the tired paradigm of US-Soviet rivalry as the defining feature of postwar global history, Meriwether proposes that anticolonial African decolonizers and anticommunist European imperialists constituted a “different bipolarity” that also organized the international politics of the time. *Tears, Fire, and Blood* tells the story of how that dynamic shaped and was shaped by the United States.

The premise of this book represents an ambitious task in its attempt to tell such a sprawling, multifaceted, and intricate story—a multitude of stories, really—but Meriwether rises to the challenge admirably. That task is not only a spatial one of covering and connecting a wide diversity of events and processes across a massive canvas; it is also a methodological one of capturing the perspective of anticolonial leaders in multiple sites of struggle, policy makers in the United States and Europe, and liberation movements on both sides of the Atlantic. *Tears* has three qualities which help bring all of this together: argument, narration, and periodization.

Meriwether’s argument has several components. Some—this being an underappreciated topic within diplomatic history, or it being time for a fuller accounting of the relationships under discussion—are to be expected. Others—that US interest in the African continent was consistent and strong, or that Washington presented itself as seeking a middle path between colonial and anticolonial forces while in reality siding with white interests time and again—give the larger discussion drive and purpose. Meriwether puts his main contentions up front, then allows his chapters to make the case. While his arguments are certainly discernible, this is not a didactically argument-driven book, which is welcome because a work of this scope needs ample space for narration.

Throughout six well-organized chapters, *Tears* moves chronologically and geographically. It begins with a view into Washington’s decided tilt toward

London and Paris when postwar conditions placed a question mark on the coloniality of the world order. Next is the Eisenhower administration's attempt to keep pace with the change that transformed Africa during the 1950s, followed by the technocratic tendencies of the Kennedy and Johnson years. The last three chapters take up the denouement of the Portuguese empire and white settler rule in Rhodesia and South Africa. In every case, Meriwether doesn't simply recount how US officials saw these events and hoped to manipulate them. He gives a good account of what was happening on the ground within various African societies and shows social movement interest and influence too. Throughout, archival findings—Nixon's diary notes from his trip around the continent in 1957, say, or the manifesto of the Congressional Black Caucus conference on South Africa in 1976—enrich the narrative portrait.

Periodization is also a strength. Stretching the overall analysis from World War II to the end of apartheid makes sense, but more significantly, Meriwether doesn't take his account of US engagement with decolonization in places like Ghana, the Congo, Algeria, or Angola much beyond the achievement of independence. This will likely leave this book's readers, as it did this one, wanting a fuller sense of how Meriwether views the neocolonial dimensions of the postcolonial condition. But *Tears* sets its scope wide enough as it is, thus this editorial decision keeps the narrative on track.

As it stands, readers are able to gain some idea of how Meriwether conceives of ongoing colonial dynamics in one thing this book does not do. There is surprisingly scant engagement here with the possibility that the United States is itself an imperial force. Colonialism is something Europeans do. The cold war, meanwhile, is what motivates US foreign policy. By overlooking the settler structure of the United States, and by repeatedly depicting its alignment with white supremacy as "prejudice," the book bypasses the structural analysis that Alphaeus Hunton put forward over half a century ago. Meriwether might dispute the interpretations of scholars who use an imperial frame to locate the US in the world. But tackling such disagreements directly would have enhanced the analysis on offer.

In any case, teachers who assign this very worthwhile book can address this and many other issues this book takes up with their students in the classroom.

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