

savings accounted for 62.2 per cent in 1770, 86.4 per cent in 1801, 85.9 per cent in 1811, and 65.9 per cent in 1821.<sup>2</sup>

Sharman's line of argumentation glosses over the fact that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, matters of war and peace are generally subject to sociopolitical decision-making processes and do not necessarily reflect military capabilities as such – an argument that Sharman is well aware of, but dismisses. Indeed, no power in world history has ever possessed the unprecedented military resources of the US army that is capable of erasing any nation from the surface of the earth within a few seconds. Furthermore, to argue that “Europeans didn't win in the end” ignores the fact that imperialism during the second half of the twentieth and in the twenty-first centuries does not necessarily need to invade other countries in order to benefit from unequal exchange and the super-exploitation of the Third World's labour force; the “silent compulsion of economic relations” (Marx) does its bit to tighten the grip of imperialism. Of course, the violent neo-colonial subjugation of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Mali are important exceptions to the rule. But even those invasions illustrate that the US and its European allies would hardly have been able to conquer West Asian and North African territories without undisputed military superiority. It is, furthermore, no coincidence that the West has succeeded in pursuing its socio-economic and geostrategic interests in these regions despite recurrent military and political setbacks.

In summary, the aforementioned flaws notwithstanding, *Empires of the Weak* is a valuable addition to the underrepresented topic of non-Western military history as part of the growing literature on the underlying causes of the *great divergence* from the vantage point of global military and political history.

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GITTLITZ, A.M. *I Want to Believe. Posadism, UFOs, and Apocalypse Communism*. Pluto Press, London 2020. xi, 249 pp. Ill. £75.00. (Paper: £17.99; E-book: £9.99.)

Born in 1912 in a proletarian neighbourhood of Buenos Aires as the son of Italian immigrants, Homero Cristalli was not so different from many other children of working-class families in early twentieth-century Argentina. He went on, however, to live a quite extraordinary life, which included playing football in the country's first division, participating in massive strikes as a trade union organizer, setting up the first Latin American sections of

2. Utsa Patnaik, “The Free Lunch: Transfers from the Tropical Colonies and their Role in Capital Formation in Britain during the Industrial Revolution”, in K.S. Jomo (ed.), *Globalization under Hegemony: The Changing World Economy* (New Delhi, 2006), pp. 30–70, 49–50, 58.

the Trotskyist Fourth International, and becoming the leader of a sect-like international network of political groups named after him and known for their interest in ufology and obsession with nuclear apocalypse. He ended his life in a communal house on the outskirts of Rome, surrounded by a court of followers and devising means to communicate with dolphins in order to educate his newborn daughter.

No doubt such a story deserves to be told, and it is actually quite surprising that nobody had done it before A.M. Gittlitz, an American journalist who undertakes this endeavour in a book recently published by Pluto Press. *I Want to Believe* is a fine work that will interest activists, academic historians of the left, and the general public alike, as the author skilfully manages to provide background to historical developments and avoids obscure jargon. Drawing upon a variety of sources, including secondary literature, party publications, obscure blog posts, personal interviews, and archives located in institutions throughout the world, Gittlitz provides the reader with a political biography of both Homero Cristalli and “J. Posadas”, the name coined as a collective signature for texts written by several members of his group that ended up becoming Cristalli’s alias and the brand of his very own branch of the Fourth International. Telling the story of both the man and the movement, *I Want to Believe* becomes a worth-reading exercise in political biography and social history. It also represents an important addition to the growing field of labour historiography in Argentina, although the book includes a regrettably large number of typos when it provides quotes, names, and titles in Spanish.

Cristalli became acquainted with the early Trotskyist groups in the late 1930s, when he was active in the Socialist Party’s left. Welcomed as one of the few sympathizers of working-class origin in a tiny movement dominated by intellectuals, his participation in a major strike in the province of Córdoba, in 1937, further contributed to his popularity. In the years that followed, Cristalli became the main organizer of the Grupo Cuarta Internacional (GCI), and made an effort to achieve recognition from the leadership of the Fourth International in Europe. He succeeded in 1951, when the Third World Congress recognized the GCI as the official section in Argentina and the Latin American Bureau (BLA), led by himself, as the main authority in the continent. Cristalli further aligned himself with Michel Pablo when the International split in 1953, and for the rest of that decade the BLA and its parties remained the stronghold of Pabloism in Latin America. In the early 1960s, when Pablo was incarcerated and the leaders of the International sought to reunify the groups that had split in the previous decade, Cristalli moved forward and broke with them. In April 1962, he organized a world congress and established his own Fourth International – Posadist.

The book goes on to explore the development of Posadist groups throughout Latin America, focusing on the cases of Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, and Guatemala. Although they remained small and fairly isolated, the Posadists did gain some influence, to the point that Fidel Castro himself attacked Posadas in a famous speech at the Tricontinental Congress of January 1966. Gittlitz’s account shows, however, that the group was increasingly assuming the features of a sect. Their behaviour had to follow a code of “revolutionary morality”, which prohibited the use of drugs and alcohol and insisted that non-procreative sex was a taboo – even in the case of married couples, the decision to have children had to be approved by the party. Abortion was strictly forbidden, and homosexuality was considered a capitalist degeneracy and banned completely. The personal authority of Cristalli became a sort of cult: “¡Viva Posadas!” became a mandatory phrase after each of his speeches.

Still, Gittlitz points out that “Posadism was so similar to most other Trotskyist groups [...] as his cult-of-personality, abuse of militants, rabid anti-imperialism, paranoia, extreme zig-zagging, and catastrophism were features more or less present in nearly every other

tendency” (p. 110). Things would change, however, by the mid-1960s, when Posadists embraced the question of ufology. Avoiding caricatures and mockery, Gittlitz dives into these developments and argues, quoting a former militant, that Cristalli was not interested in turning the movement into an UFO cult, but rather made a speech at the 1967 congress to close the issue that one of his acolytes, Dante Minazolli, had been pushing with so much insistence. Whatever his intentions, however, the speech was published a year later (in the spring of 1968!) under the title “Flying Saucers, The Process of Matter and Energy, Science, The Revolutionary and Working-Class Struggle and the Socialist Future of Mankind”, becoming the most famous Posadas text in its history.

1968 was also a turning point in the history of the group because the police imprisoned the whole leadership of the Posadist International, including Cristalli, during a meeting on the outskirts of Montevideo. After several attempts to be deported to Chile or Argentina, Posadas and his circle finally found asylum in Italy, thanks to the intervention of the Italian Communist Party. Cristalli spent the rest of his life in Europe: drawing upon testimonies of former militants, Gittlitz explains that he managed to raise enough money “to establish his own Coyoacán-style compound in the volcanic Alban Hills south of the city”, with his old guard living in a separate communal compound in Rome (p. 127). By the mid-1970s, Gittlitz argues, Posadism had become “an experiment in living communism in their microcosmic Villa” (p. 147).

After Cristalli’s death, in May 1981, his movement gradually dissipated. A number of sections remained active, and they eventually found a new leader in Posadas’s son, León Cristalli. An important part of this late “court” remained loyal to Posadism clandestine tradition in the years following Cristalli’s death, and refused to be interviewed by Gittlitz in the preparation of the book. Nowadays, the current is almost non-existent, apart from some obscure websites and publications. In political terms, they are openly supportive of nationalist regimes, Russia, Venezuela, and Cuba – and even Donald Trump, whose victory in 2016 was seen as a “working-class revolt against a traditional imperialist oligarchy” (p. 164).

Homero Cristalli belonged to the first generation of Trotskyists that led the movement after Trotsky’s assassination. Like Pierre Frank (born in 1905), Michael Pablo (1911), and Ted Grant (1913), he was somewhat older than the generation born in the 1920s, which included Pierre Lambert, Guillermo Lora, Ernest Mandel, Livio Maitan, and Nahuel Moreno. Cristalli stood out for some peculiar features of his biography: he started working at a young age, first as a metalworker and later as a painter, and never pursued formal education. A flamboyant and attractive personality, he developed both a talent for singing tangos and for playing football, even reaching the country’s first division, playing for *Estudiantes de la Plata* in 1928 and 1929.

In paying attention to these aspects of the life of Cristalli, Gittlitz provides important insights to understand the history of Trotskyism, a tireless movement of devoted militants that, in most cases, had to struggle with sect-like behaviours and a painful isolation from the mass of workers. The author points out that Cristalli’s working-class background, as well as his character and his football skills – both tango and football would become some sort of ritual among Posadist ranks – had a long-lasting influence in the years to come and help explain much of his appeal. “The mystique of Posadas, the International’s leaders soon found, was their best recruitment tool. [...] He was a soccer star and manual worker, tragically sidelined by industrial disfigurement and forced to a life of full-time militancy.” (p. 80) These traits of his biography and his personality also help explain how he managed to attract some of its most important cadres, such as Adolfo Gilly and Guillermo Almeyra. Gittlitz argues that, for them, “the strangeness of Posadas was worth his working-class

intuition, motivational ability, tireless organizing, and absorption of his intellectuals' positions" (p. 138).

The author also makes a significant contribution by locating Posadas's eccentricity in the broader context of the 1950s and 1960s, when both the possibility of nuclear apocalypse and interest in ufology and the space race were actually widespread. Gittlitz rightly points out that the peak of Posadas's political influence "overlapped with the more ardent period of the space race" (p. 10).

Both in the introduction and in the conclusion of his book, Gittlitz – whose first name, as with J. Posadas, remains a completely mystery to the reader – seems to suggest that there is something more than irony in the recent reappraisal of Posadism through memes and jokes, namely the appeal of apocalyptic perspectives in a time of crisis and climate catastrophe. Even if one is not willing to go that far, it is worth celebrating the idea that prompted the author to write a useful book that sheds light on the history of revolutionary ideas and movements in the twentieth century.

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GOLDFIELD, MICHAEL. *The Southern Key. Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s*. Oxford University Press, New York [etc.] 2020. ix, 416 pp. £32.99.

Michael Goldfield's new book, although thirty years or more in the making, is as timely as can be. It helps to explain why the United States fails to live up to basic human rights standards deemed normal in most of the Western capitalist world, especially as they relate to people of color and workers. American unions have suffered catastrophic setbacks since the 1960s, and *The Southern Key* explains why. The eleven former slaveholding states that seceded to form the southern Confederacy, and tangential southern states heavily influenced by Black labor exploitation and racism, remain the Achilles heel of the labor movement and also "the key" to America's failure. Failure of labor organizing in the South has undermined unions as a force in the US, created a political base for the anti-union Republican Party, and led many working-class voters into the ranks of the manipulative, racist, anti-labor, and pro-business politics of Donald Trump. The result today is readily seen both in the South and across the US: high rates of poverty, exceptional violence including police brutality, state-mandated executions and mass incarceration, and widespread educational, healthcare, and policy failures. Yet, a reactionary Republican Party and business can rely on both white middle-class and working-class votes to stay in power, while creating the worst racial-economic inequality in the Western world. Goldfield sees this failure rooted in the South, but not so much in southern white culture, as some current commentary suggests, as in the economic and political structures of power that rest on the failures of union and labor organizing. Hence, the fate of social justice in the United States "today as in the past lies in the ability of its workers to organize themselves collectively, especially across