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Spencer Mawby. "Mr. Smith goes to Vienna: Britain's Cold War in the Caribbean 1951–1954." *Cold War History* 13:4 (December 2013): 541–561. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2012.756474. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2012.756474>

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Reviewed by **Gareth Curless**, University of Exeter

The Cold War, in combination with other issues, such as metropolitan economic decline and the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, is often cited by historians as a key factor in Britain's withdrawal from empire. However, although historians have documented how the Cold War helped to accelerate the collapse of the British empire, there have been no studies of how the process of decolonisation shaped what Spencer Mawby refers to as the "conduct of the global Cold War" (542). It is this gap in the literature that Mawby sets out to address in his excellent article "Mr Smith goes to Vienna."

Whereas much of the literature on the Cold War in the 'Global South' focuses on superpower strategies and rivalries¹, Mawby's article explores how decolonisation influenced Britain's Cold War strategy in the Anglophone Caribbean, investigating whether "decolonisation contributed to a distinctive approach to Cold Warfare among the European colonial powers" (542).

Drawing on archival research conducted in the National Archives in London, Mawby makes three key arguments. First, that Britain's anti-communist campaign required co-operation across numerous jurisdictions, which was not only difficult to co-ordinate but also contributed to tensions between officials in the metropole and in the Caribbean. Second, that the political reforms that were central to the process of decolonisation, which included the introduction of universal suffrage, the granting of self-government status, and the liberalisation of trade union law, contributed to Cold War anxieties among British officials, who feared that the relaxation of colonial control increased the

¹ Robert McMahon, *The Cold War in the Third World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Caribbean's vulnerability to communist subversion. And third, whilst British officials regarded anti-communist nationalists, such as Forbes Burnham in British Guiana, as potential bulwarks against the spread of communism, administrators were concerned that these local leaders would seek to exploit racial tensions in order to consolidate their power (542-43).

Mawby thus argues that British officials in the Caribbean found themselves in something of a quandary. On the one hand, the perceived communist threat in the Caribbean necessitated a co-ordinated and robust response. However, concerns about the reliability of anti-communist collaborators provoked concerns among British officials regarding their ability to manage the orderly transition to independence in the region (560). The dilemma faced by officials in the Caribbean, which is so clearly captured by Mawby, has strong parallels with other parts of the British empire, where scholars have increasingly sought to document the imperial authorities' struggle to control the process of decolonisation.

According to Mawby one of the catalysts for rising Cold War concerns among the colonial authorities in the Caribbean was the arrival of Ferdinand Smith in Jamaica in 1952. Smith, a veteran Jamaican communist, was deported from the United States in 1951 and from there he travelled first to Britain and then to Vienna, with the aim of enlisting the support of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in the struggle against racial and economic inequality in the Caribbean (542-543).

Smith's activities, which included multiple trips to Vienna and the instigation of labour unrest throughout the Caribbean, coincided with rising leftist activity in the region. This provoked considerable unease among both the metropolitan authorities and colonial governments in the region, who, Mawby argues, regarded the instability in the Caribbean as part of a broader international struggle against communism (543). Mawby documents how the colonial authorities, in order to contain the communist threat in the region, developed a three pronged strategy which included measures to restrict freedom of movement, the suppression of communist literature, and a campaign of counter-propaganda (545-551).

Lists of known or suspected Caribbean-based communists who were to be prevented or restricted from travelling were compiled, but this measure proved difficult to co-ordinate. Mawby relates the example of Janet Jagan, the wife of the leader of the Guianese People's Progressive Party (PPP), Cheddi Jagan, , who, although banned from entering Trinidad, was able to enter the territory on 1 February 1952 and even attend a protest on the island against her own travel ban (547). According to Mawby, the difficulties of co-ordinating travel bans across different jurisdictions were exacerbated by conflicting attitudes among colonial officials, with Hubert Rance and Hugh Foot, the respective governors of Trinidad and Jamaica, advocating tighter controls and the moderate Albert Savage, the governor of British Guiana, favouring a more permissive approach (547).

Amidst what Mawby describes as the “sinister McCarthyite atmosphere” (548), the transport ban was supported by increased surveillance of known activists, the prohibition of communist literature, and a campaign of anti-communist propaganda. The activities of figures such as Richard Hart and Cheddi Jagan, were carefully monitored, and police raids became common (548). Communist literature was either banned or confiscated, with over 7,000 items seized in 1953 alone (549). Such measures were complemented by an anti-communist propaganda campaign, with Mawby documenting how the British authorities utilised the local press to denounce communism and portray events elsewhere in the empire in a favourable light (550).

The issues and practices underpinning this covert campaign of surveillance and propaganda will certainly be familiar to historians interested in imperial methods of policing, intelligence, and counterinsurgency.² Like colonial officials elsewhere in the British Empire, administrators in the Caribbean adopted what Mawby describes as a “crude and patronising” view of colonial subjects, believing that the local population could be easily manipulated through anti-communist propaganda (550). At the same time, however, Mawby also documents how officials, plagued by insecurities and paranoia about communist subversion, were liable to regard any form of protest as a sign of impending imperial collapse or communist insurrection (560). The sense of insecurity that Mawby describes in the Caribbean was certainly evident throughout the British empire during the age decolonisation, when colonial authorities often resorted to authoritarian and violent methods to suppress episodes of anti-colonial protest.³

Given the parallels between the anti-communist campaign in the Caribbean and similar campaigns elsewhere in the British empire, the article could have perhaps benefited from reference to other examples of the imperial authorities’ efforts to contain communism and anti-colonial nationalism. In doing so, Mawby could have further explored whether the methods employed in the Caribbean were rooted in existing imperial practices for managing communist-inspired protest and anti-colonial nationalism or whether they were more profoundly shaped by the context and circumstances in the region, where the perceived unreliability of anti-communist collaborators and the circulation of activists and ideas around the islands necessitated an approach that focused on travel bans, the suppression of communist literature, and the promotion of anti-communist propaganda.

Mawby concludes by documenting how British anxieties about the communist threat in the Caribbean were heightened in the late 1940s and early 1950s following the election of Marxists to local legislative assemblies, such as Ken Hill in Jamaica and Cheddi Jagan in

² Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Rory Cormac, *Confronting the Colonies: British Intelligence and Counterinsurgency* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2013).

³ David French, *The British Way in Counterinsurgency, 1945-67* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

British Guiana, who subsequently supported the struggle for recognition of the Guiana Industrial Workers' Union(552). This mixing of party politics and industrial relations, a key concern throughout the British empire at this time⁴, resulted in what Mawby describes as "howls of outrage in both the Colonial Office and the British Labour Party and contributed to the decision to forcibly remove Jagan from office in October 1953" (553).

The removal of Jagan was certainly a dramatic step, but the British authorities were reluctant to take more drastic measures, such as a purge of the civil service or the introduction of new laws prohibiting anti-communist organisations. According to Mawby this was because the British were concerned that such powers would be abused by anti-communist collaborators, such as Alexander Bustamante in Jamaica and Forbes Burnham in British Guiana (560). In contrast to Smith, whose rhetoric focused on the importance of class struggle rather than racial and ethnic differences, leaders like Bustamante and Burnham sought to exploit racial divisions in order to consolidate their own power (555-558). Of course, as Mawby points out, this was rank hypocrisy on the part of the British authorities, who in the case of British Guiana were ruling by decree following the removal of Jagan and would later themselves stoke racial tensions in order to reduce support for the PPP among the colony's Africa-Guianese population (557).

In sum, Mawby has produced an important article that makes a significant contribution to the literature on the global Cold War. Instead of focusing on superpower rivalry or encroaching American influence in the Caribbean, Mawby provides a clear overview of British Cold War strategy in the region and its relationship to the process of decolonisation. Mawby convincingly argues that while colonial officials regarded localised episodes of communist activism in the Caribbean as part of a broader, global struggle to contain the spread of communism, it was the desire to manage an orderly transition to independence that had the most significant impact on British Cold War strategy (558).

Fears of communist insurrection in the Caribbean often proved to be greatly exaggerated but, as Mawby documents, the authorities still struggled to mount an effective campaign against this perceived threat. Covert surveillance and harassment campaigns were undermined by inadequate resources and administrative tensions, while British officials resisted more drastic methods to rid the Caribbean of communism for fear that such measures would encourage local anti-communist leaders with "authoritarian proclivities" to incite racial and class conflict (560). Confronted with these "twin threats," the colonial authorities found themselves unsure of which way to turn (560).

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⁴ Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in British and French Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

British empire, colonial counterinsurgency, colonial development and welfare, and the global Cold War.

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