

**The South African Gandhi: stretcher-bearer of empire**, by Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2016, 344 pp., US\$24,95 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-8047-9717

Tourists who visit the prison on Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, South Africa, can marvel at an exhibition entitled 'Mahatma Gandhi, Prisoner of Conscience'. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the leader of the Indian independence movement, was arrested six times between 1908 and 1913 for failing to comply with South Africa's race laws. The story of his time in prison is told through photos and artefacts. The explanatory sections that accompany the panels on the walls of the prison cells celebrate his life as an activist who worked to end Apartheid, a struggle for justice he brought to India after 1914.

Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, in contrast, criticize this narrative of Gandhi as the great inventor of the new tactic and philosophy of nonviolence. Rather than a pioneer of anticolonial nationalism, both researchers portray him as someone whose 'political imagination was limited to equality within Empire' (p. 25). Gandhi did not transform into a Mahatma – a cosmopolitan anti-apartheid activist – by the time he left South Africa in 1914. Instead, he employed tactics that were shaped in crucial ways by a conservative defence of class, race and caste privilege. While the argument of *The South African Gandhi* builds upon earlier work that examined Gandhi as an imperial thinker, the persistence of Gandhi's mythology – apparent on the walls of his cell – shows the need for more critical narratives.

Why did Gandhi and other black leaders see separate futures of struggle and interest for themselves? Both researchers argue that Gandhi's strategic choices stemmed from his strong attachment to the empire. As British subjects, Indians – he believed – had the right to equal treatment before the law. While he sympathized with the Bantu's plight, he never reached out to other disadvantaged groups to form an anti-imperial coalition. 'It is true that England "wafts her sceptre" over India' and the 'Indians are not ashamed of that fact', Gandhi wrote (p. 35). Furthermore, Gandhi believed there was 'something subtle, something fine in the ideals of the British Constitution' (p. 49). Desai and Vahed draw extensively on these quotes to substantiate their claims. This study is based on Gandhi's private letters and newspapers as well as the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Four of Gandhi's key campaigns are studied closely: his involvement in the South African War, the Bhambatha Rebellion, mobilization against fingerprinting in the Transvaal, and, most importantly, the 1913 strike that resulted in Gandhi's South African stay being cast as successful. At each of these instances the researchers show how Gandhi worked to separate the struggle for Indians' rights from the battle for equality of the Africans.

This book is part of a burgeoning literature that examines the tensions within the Afro-Asian project, a phenomenon I have also encountered in my own research on the Bandung Conference of 1955. African conference observers, for instance, were annoyed by Jawaharlal Nehru's closing statement in Bandung which presented Africa as a continent of tragedy and slavery while arguing that it was up to Asia to help Africa. Desai and Vahed, however, only situate their research within the literature on Gandhi and his relation with the British Empire. Nonetheless, this book has implications that go beyond the confines of new imperial history. *The South African Gandhi* suggests that those who resisted empire in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s did not necessarily do so out of a sense of racial camaraderie, while doubts about the benefits of Afro-Asian cooperation were not merely a result of tactical differences. Many anticolonial activists, such as Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, had enjoyed an education in Europe or at missionary schools, took conservative ideas about class and race seriously and integrated those within their struggle against empire.

However, to what extent Gandhi's tactical decision to separate the Indian and African struggle corresponded with his core beliefs remains open to debate. He might have had 'little interest in

or concern with the social, economic and political circumstances of Africans in South Africa' because it was simply an unviable course of action (p. 305). The international system in which Gandhi operated was still structured along imperial lines. South Africa's premier, Jan Smuts, even sought to enshrine those structures within the newly created United Nations in 1945. Mahatma's choice to improve the lot of Indians in an incremental fashion, was the most logical and more effective choice in an era in which world wars had not yet upended the colonial logic. That rationale only changed when soldiers from the far corners of the French, British and Belgian empires marched on European battlefields to fight European wars. Activists would begin to demand economic and political rights and link their struggle more actively with other liberation movements as the 1930s went on. However, before 1914 the question of equal racial treatment was not as pressing as it would become in the 1950s. This book therefore suggests more research is needed to uncover what exactly motivated early anticolonial activists.

Finally, the extensive use of quotes, aimed at convincing sceptical readers makes it difficult at times to follow the story. Nonetheless, *The South African Gandhi* is a book that deserves a wide audience, because it forcefully and clearly dispels one of the most persistent political myths of the twentieth century. Moreover, it pushes us to craft more complex historical narratives in which colonial and anticolonial perspectives are intertwined.

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