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## Reviews of Ohio Short Histories of Africa

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ROBERT TRENT VINSON. *Albert Luthuli*. (Ohio Short Histories of Africa.) Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018. Pp. 192. Paper \$14.95.

Since the 1960s, historians looking to explain the South African liberation struggle through a biographical frame have almost exclusively fixed their gaze on the life story of Nelson Mandela. This deserved but perhaps disproportionate focus has produced a plethora of works—some critical and many more triumphalist—that pin the twists and turns in his life to the changing fortunes of the organization he came to lead: the African National Congress (ANC), the leading anti-apartheid organization in South Africa and eventual postapartheid ruling party. Biographers have paid less attention to the generation of leaders that preceded Mandela and who exited public life prior to his triumphant return as the first democratically elected president of South Africa. Mandela has become the biographical synecdoche of what novelist Zakes Mda termed the “middle generations,” those Black South Africans whose lives spanned the difficult years between colonial conquest and the coming of liberal democracy (Mda, *The Heart of Redness* [2003], 4). These “middle-middles” served as a historical pivot point between the first generation born into colonialism and the leaders of Mandela’s generation that defeated apartheid.

Perhaps the most important leader of the middle-middles is Chief Albert Luthuli, president of the ANC from 1952 to 1967. Robert Trent Vinson’s *Albert Luthuli* provides a competent and compact overview of the life story of this enigmatic figure. Vinson argues that Luthuli’s contemporary relevance can be found in a reconceptualization of his nonracialist political project as both “revolutionary” and “radical,” as opposed to prevailing characterizations of him as a moderate reformist. In a contemporary moment when South Africa is locked in a zero-sum renegotiation of the negotiated settlement carried out with a weaponization of race by all sides, Vinson’s book serves as a welcome reminder of the ANC’s historical commitment to nonracialism and Luthuli’s advocacy for its radically transformative potential.

Vinson begins his biography with welcome coverage of Luthuli’s early life as a teacher and chief. These formative years serve as an important baseline of comparison with the heart of the book: Luthuli’s political transformation after his induction into opposition politics in middle age. Here, Vinson provides a detailed account of Luthuli’s contributions to the ANC’s turn to mass politics in the 1950s, stopping to explore key protest campaigns, revealing his underappreciated speaking tour, and ending with his Nobel Prize speech. Mass politics gives way to his exit from politics after the turn to armed struggle effectively eclipsed nonviolent civil disobedience in favor of a heroic but doomed sabotage campaign. The book concludes with an illuminating exploration of his final years that tills much unplowed ground with new sources.

One strength of Vinson’s biography is his sensitivity to the transnational dimensions of Luthuli’s significance as well as his subject’s awareness of the anti-apartheid struggle’s place within global anticolonial solidarity campaigns and parallel fights for racial justice. This is no doubt due to Vinson’s expertise in the history of trans-Atlantic imaginings exchanged between African American activists and Black led movements in South Africa. Vinson’s coverage of Luthuli’s 1948 tour of the United States and his tantalizingly brief mention of a 1938 tour of India opens an illuminating optic onto formative transnational experiences in his political development.

Another strength of this book is that Vinson presents Luthuli’s resume as an effective leader. His long celebrated deliberative leadership style is counterposed here with new accounts of more decisive and even forceful efforts to keep the ANC together while mitigating the damage caused by unavoidable splits. The fact that the ANC endured only one major schism—the emergence of the Pan-Africanist Congress in 1959—is a clear testament not only to Luthuli’s ecumenical approach, but also his willingness to accumulate and ex-

ercise executive authority. In other words, this Luthuli is not the passive front man for firebrand former Youth Leaguers like Mandela. Rather the Luthuli presented here is an adept executive craftily outmaneuvering the many tendencies that threatened to rend a “big tent” movement.

Vinson also critically appraises the crafting of Luthuli’s public persona. His rise to the presidency from the rough and tumble Natal branch of the ANC is reminiscent of Tom Lodge’s superlative treatment of Mandela’s constructed persona in *Mandela: A Critical Biography* (2006). Luthuli was tapped to lead, but he nevertheless had a hand in crafting a public persona that would strengthen his presidency and advance his ideological vision. Luthuli’s agency in this regard is most revealingly on display in Vinson’s section on his speaking tours of South Africa in 1958 and 1959. Luthuli’s command of audiences stoked by his charismatic magnetism suggests that a reassessment of political celebrity in 1950s South Africa is long overdue.

Luthuli’s acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize in October 1961 marked both the peak of his international prestige and heralded the sad denouement of his public life. Here Vinson returns to the narrative frame taken by others: Luthuli’s public advocacy for peaceful trans-

formation in South Africa read against his private knowledge of the state of debates over the armed struggle. In a preceding section, Vinson conducts an exhaustive reappraisal of what Luthuli knew about the turn to armed struggle and when he knew it, which allows him to tease out hidden emphases in Luthuli’s public statements on the urgency of negotiation and the necessity of nonracialism given before, during, and after his acceptance speech in Oslo.

In the final analysis, Vinson provides a good introductory biography of a key figure in South African politics that is ready made for course syllabi. This book is suitable to any class that focuses on Black politics in a global dimension as well as surveys focused on apartheid South Africa. Certainly the brevity of this book will appeal to students whose patience for longer texts is perennially in decline. But the greatest strength of this book lies in its tacit argument for the importance of anti-apartheid leaders who preceded South Africa’s most illustrious hero of liberation. As one might say in isiZulu, *ngiyabonga kakhulu* to Vinson for providing another antidote to the inadvertently Mandela-centric history of the anti-apartheid struggle!

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PAUL BJERK, *Julius Nyerere*. (Ohio Short Histories of Africa.) Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017. Pp. 167. Paper \$14.95.

Paul Bjerk is a prominent scholar of Tanzania and one those best acquainted with the history of the country’s first generation of political leadership. His biography of Tanzania’s first president, Julius Nyerere, is therefore a welcome addition to a scholarly landscape in which work on both Nyerere and the country he led is already plentiful. While Bjerk’s book is entering a crowded field, it does so at an interesting moment for work on the early independence era in Africa. From the early 1990s through the early 2010s, scholars shaped by both postcolonial theory and history “from below” tended toward a critical stance on the postcolonial state and the continuities with colonial power that it sometimes embodied. The past five years, however, has seen a revaluing of the era as a moment perhaps more generative of alternatives, less bound by colonial or even capitalist power, than had typically been recognized. This turn has been important for many reasons. It has, for instance, been able to introduce new audiences and even whole disciplinary subfields (as in the case of Adom Getachew’s work) to a founding generation of African leaders as innovative political theorists rather than authoritarian stick figures. Alongside such strengths, though, this turn in the scholarship has been slower to cast its gaze beyond a canonical set of

“founding fathers” as the architects of these alternatives.

For a figure such as Nyerere, what all this means is that there is a relatively high bar to recovering something less recognized about him or his relationship to the worlds he inhabited. That Bjerk manages this is an achievement in itself—even if he does so in a mostly implicit manner. The Nyerere presented here is a less remembered one, in part due to the way that views of him have narrowed and coalesced around his reputation as one of postcolonial Africa’s most high profile socialists. With his effort to create an “African socialism” around the concept of *ujamaa*, a leaning to the left was undoubtedly a significant part of Nyerere’s political praxis. Yet this casting also forgets that in the early 1960s the United States saw Nyerere as a bulwark *against* more Marxist or revolutionary rivals in East Africa, and that in the late 1960s and early 1970s Tanzania’s homegrown Marxist left considered Nyerere insufficiently radical. It also forgets that Ali Mazrui, in his 1967 essay “Tanzaphilia” (*Transition*, no. 31) described Nyerere as “perhaps the most Anglicized of all Heads of State in East and Central Africa.” By this, Mazrui made clear that he was not equating “Westernized” with “pro-Western” or even with *Westerners*.