

Information

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Sheila Collins has written an engaging biography of George Houser (1916–2015), an American civil rights activist and pacifist who spent much of his working life defending the cause of African freedom to American audiences. Collins' book succeeds both in convincing its readers that Houser is a figure worth knowing about and in richly describing the political, religious and ethical sites that shaped Houser's work and life.

Houser is a curious character: a man genuinely motivated by his faith without being doctrinaire; an internationalist but not a communist; a committed pacifist able to support armed liberation movements; and a white man committed to movements for racial justice in the USA and Africa. Despite Collins' meticulous research, at the end Houser remains a mystery – the question of *why* he devoted his life so thoroughly to the cause of African liberation politics may be impossible to answer. This is a theoretical and historical question, not merely a personal one. Throughout Houser's lifetime, as much scholarship has explored, competing political movements offered visions for the future of race relations and Africa's place in the world: communist, Pan-African, liberal democrat and white supremacist movements all proposed competing utopias, and during the heat of decolonization, the possibilities seemed wide open. What, in this crowded terrain of hopes, was Houser's horizon of expectation? Collins' thorough depiction tells us that he hoped for a world without racial oppression and without war. This is a vision powerfully shaped by a specific Christian conviction, one imbued with a spirit of anti-imperialism, which animated Houser from a very young age. In the rich field of research on transnational activism during the Cold War, Christian pacifist movements have received little attention. Houser's story suggests that they merit further attention.

The book's early chapters introduce Houser, his personality and faith, and his choices – particularly his decision to go to jail for refusing either to be

conscripted during World War Two or to register as a conscientious objector. Collins also describes Houser's anti-racist civil disobedience work in the 1940s, undertaken with future civil rights leaders such as Bayard Rustin. Addressing Houser's turn towards African engagements and the founding of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) in 1953, Collins offers a thoughtful discussion of Houser's and ACOA's discomfort with communism, grounding her analysis in a careful survey of literature on Black solidarity politics during the Cold War. In a climate of fervent anti-communism, ACOA formally rejected collaboration with the African American-led Council on African Affairs, which had strong links with independence movements on the continent but included communist members. As Collins notes, this decision likely saved ACOA from state harassment, but it may have damaged its ability to work with African American movements. ACOA remained closely associated with white liberals throughout its years of operation, creating episodic conflicts within the organization.

Houser is sometimes labelled a liberal. But such a label is hard to square with both his radical pacifism and his support for armed movements. Collins calls attention to the differences between a human rights approach, focused on the rights-bearing individual, and a focus on self-determination, a collective concept embraced by national liberation movements. Houser himself, Collins demonstrates, was aware of the 'creative tension' between these two ideas (p. 94); his sensitivity to this tension helped him forge meaningful relationships with militant freedom fighters, something ardent liberals hesitated to do.

The five chapters of the book that describe Houser's work in Africa offer rich insights into an often neglected period: the time of national liberation movements from the 1960s to the 1980s. Often folded into the rubric of 'decolonization', the national liberation period had a specificity that merits attention. It was characterized by small, militarized movements fighting irregular wars, inspired by specific political theories of freedom, in partnership with nations such as China, the USSR and Cuba. These movements existed uneasily within and alongside states that had decolonized via legal processes, such as Ghana, Tanzania and Zambia. Collins' book provides one of the best existing discussions of this context, thanks to her serious engagement with secondary literature and with Houser's and ACOA's rich archives. The result is a readable and comprehensive survey of the welter of political movements that sought freedom via military means.

Much recent work has focused on Tanzania, Ghana and Algeria as homelands of decolonial thought. Collins' book quietly suggests that scholars would do well to consider the importance of cities such as Brazzaville and Conakry as

revolutionary sites. Equally, while Houser may be best known for his support of the anti-apartheid movement, including his long friendships with imprisoned and exiled South African leaders, the book reminds readers of his engagement with less celebrated struggles, such as those in Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Angola, and even Western Sahara.

By and large, Collins chooses to focus on Houser's professional life. She includes a moving account of his and his wife's written romance, conducted while Houser was in jail, and discusses family decision making about Houser's work. Her research was also supported by his family members. However, the book's focus is largely on Houser's public work. This is a reasonable approach, although some readers may find themselves wondering how his long absences for African travel affected his young family. Equally, an understandable result of the biography genre is that Houser looms large in the account of ACOA's work; it could be interesting for future studies to consider ACOA beyond Houser.

Overall, this is a deeply readable book that is relevant for scholars working on transnational activism, African decolonization, American engagements on the African continent, and Africa's presence in the USA. It is accessible enough that it would work well in graduate seminars, and chapters from it could be taught in undergraduate classes on African decolonization.